



A DARK FATED-MATES ROMANCE

# FILTHY ROYAL

ALISON AIMES

**FILTHY ROYAL: A DARK  
FATED-MATES ROMANCE**

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## FILTHY ROYAL BLURB

*The first time they met was all about pleasure. Then she betrayed him. So, now he's back...to punish. And he plans to play dirty. Filthy, even.*

Meet Damien Skolov: ex-cage fighter, current family enforcer, hot-headed royal warlord. Sure, she broke his heart, but he's over it now. This time, his return is all about the mission—and revenge.

Then there's Scarlett: ex-dancer, current liar, protector of those she loves. Until Damien explodes back into her life, bringing chaos, vengeance, and the same forbidden need she's tried to suppress since he left.

Keeping her secrets from him is essential.

Except Damien Skolov never fights fair.

**Filthy Royal: A Dark Fated-Mates Romance** is the fourth book in the Ruthless Warlords series. It is a scorching HOT standalone, though it is recommended to read the series in order for greatest enjoyment.

Like all the books in the series, it includes:

A ruthless alien mafia boss

An innocent heroine growing into her power

A fated bond

Betrayal, murder, and revenge

Serious plot twists

And an epic romance that proves love will always triumph over hate.

Added bonus: Filthy Royal includes the Filthy Beginnings prequel so you can experience all the feels as these two fated-mates spiral from lovers to enemies to a connection so intense it defies death itself.

# THE ALPHAVERSE

This story takes place in Anarheim, a parallel Alphaverse galaxy in a dark future seeded with varied forms of alien life. There are two immutable constants. The first is that all inhabitants are Alpha, beta, or omega. Alphas lead, betas serve, and omegas submit. That is the way. The second is that violence is a way of life, power is essential to survival, and crime is king.

\*\*\*Oh, and since it's a question that a lot of readers ask:

A single rotation = the time it takes for the planet to spin fully around, approximately equivalent to a 24-hour day on Earth

A planetary rotation = the time it takes for the planet to rotate once around their suns, approximately equal to 365 Earth days, or one Earth year.



**PREQUEL: FILTHY BEGINNINGS:  
A DARK FATED-MATES  
ROMANCE**

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## SCARLETT

“**Y**ou getting those panties filthy wet for me, wild thing?” Damien’s whispered rasp sent gooseflesh rippling across Scarlett’s skin. “I want that lucky little toy to prime that pussy. To make you a slick, creamy mess between those gorgeous thighs. The kind I can’t wait to lick clean.”

His words were as potent as the flat clear rod vibrating between her clit and the puckered rosebud of her bottom, its pulses pure ecstasy—and pure torment.

Damien’s gift to her, held in place by gentle suction that only intensified her pleasure, was a top-of-the-line sex toy from his home planet, and her new favorite transgression.

Scarlett stifled a moan.

The Consortium had positioned her display case high on the raised stage at one end of the oval-shaped stadium, a golden stool beneath her and a glittering gold curtain at her back. While the curtain hid the sterile wall and functional doorway behind it, the other three clear walls fit with the message her handlers wished to convey: she was the ultimate prize, a trophy just out of reach, there to motivate the fighters and fuel their aggression while discouraging them from approaching.

And usually, no one dared.

Except for Damien.

He stood in the concealed doorway, hidden from the others by the curtain. Her perfect, filthy secret. Her risk and her rebellion. Her everything.

“Such a good fucking girl.” He slipped a single finger through the curtain

and trailed it down the nape of her neck.

She shivered with need, fingers curling around the edge of her stool.  
Reckless. So damned reckless.

If caught, there would be hells to pay. But, Goddess help her, she lived for his touch.

*Buzz.* The toy's pulses intensified.

Another flutter of the curtain. Another low rasp. "Press those pretty thighs together and try not to squirm, sweet Scarlett."

A purr escaped. Most called her *the prize*. Or simply referred to her as Consortium property. Each time Damien said her name, a lost part of her found its way home.

"That's right, beautiful. So good. Soon, I'm going to reward you."

She wanted that reward. Needed more of his filthy praise.

The urge to shift from her position was almost overwhelming.

But that would be an absolute disaster, and not only for her.

Scarlett's gaze flicked to her primary handler, Consortium personnel Egan Avitus, holding court on the training arena floor—his back to her, his silver hair as shiny as the coins he so loved. As pit boss, showman, tournament organizer, and director of prizes and fighters, his power was extensive. Over her, it was absolute.

Her brother, Luc, stood beside Egan. His recent promotion to high trainer had earned him a coveted spot up close to the action, but it also placed him in proximity to monsters such as Egan. Spines ramrod straight, they surveyed the rows of eager warriors from across the galaxy sparring on the floor mats.

The training facility was as well-built and extravagant as all Consortium ventures, a soaring, open space with three visible levels that narrowed toward the top. The lowest, widest ring was filled with training mats, equipment, and observation areas. The second ring was a raised fighting platform only slightly above the ground level, split into sections to accommodate at least fifty fighting matches at once. The third ring, her current level, was the smallest, filled with viewing platforms and private seating rooms for special clients.

At the moment, most of the action was taking place on the ground level, where the fighters had gathered, all stretching or sparring while waiting for the next round of matches to begin. There were Alphas with horns, wings, plates, spikes, tusks, and tails; their skin, scales, and exoskeletons in colors as varied as the stars in the Anarheim Galaxy. The one commonality: all were

huge, fierce, and determined to win the tournament.

A slew of equally diverse-looking security, trainers, investors, lower-level Consortium members, and omega groupies crowded behind the fighters, huddling as close to the action as possible, their excitement palpable.

Several Brotherhood Alphas, the final major group in the facility, sat in the exclusive cordoned-off luxury suite on the ground floor. Their membership in the galaxy's most powerful, ruthless crime organization ensured them a prime viewing spot. Most were here to cheer on the fighters they'd sponsored or get an early peek at who to bet on in the tournament's final rounds.

Thank the Goddess, all Alphas who entered the training arena were required to wear scent mufflers. Otherwise, they'd all know what a mess Damien was making of her panties.

"Fighters, to the second level." Egan Avitus's voice rang out, making her sit up straighter. "You might have survived to round four of this tournament, but if you want to make it to the main event, don't shame yourself by being eliminated here."

Fear whispered through her. "Damien—"

"You look so fuckable right now." She knew he was purposely distracting her, soothing her, even as he reminded them both to whom she already belonged. "I don't even have to see you to know you've got that slight flush on your gorgeous face, the one you get only from my touch. The one that says you're mine."

That was all she wanted. To be seen. Touched. To be his.

"Don't worry, beautiful. I've got this." There was no hesitation in his voice. No doubt. Just one hundred percent pure confidence. Like always. "No one is taking you from me. I'm going to make it through every trial, win this fucking tournament, and make you Scarlett Skolov."

Hope, painful and jagged, twisted through her, but she clutched onto it all the same.

She'd resisted for as long as she could, but there was something about Damien Skolov.

He'd barreled past all her excuses, making every obstacle appear inconsequential in the face of what flared between them.

It didn't matter that he was too young for her, or that there were hundreds of other fighters here to win the same fight, or that other warriors were bigger and more experienced, or that the Consortium had already chosen their

favorites to win.

Damien Skolov made her believe.

He made her feel alive.

To him, she wasn't some glittering virginal prize but the wild, reckless creature inside—and he welcomed it, pushing her to be as fierce and fearless and filthy as he.

“Those fuckers might not know you're mine yet, but you are.” As was so often the case, Damien's thoughts echoed her own. “In just a short time, I'm going to win this tournament, become the greatest fighter this galaxy's ever seen, and claim not just that sweet pussy, but your clever brain and brave heart too.”

A small semblance of self-preservation reared its head, cutting through her lust and raw, wild adoration. “But what if—”

*Buzz.* The vibrations increased.

She bucked, her spine arcing, her mouth opening. The pleasure inside her coiled tighter.

“D-Damien...” His name was a plea.

“You. Are. Mine.” His growl was near feral. “Fuck the Consortium and fuck their favorites. I want Scarlett of the Consortium as my omega, and she wants me. I can't lose.”

The giddiness inside her chest expanded—along with the pleasure cresting between her thighs.

With him, she didn't have to pretend to be perfect or polished or serene: a pretty, untouched trophy on display in a crystal case.

With him, she could be craven. Coarse. Carnal.

Dirty.

Her true self.

Her hunger for him was insatiable.

And it wasn't only her body that recognized him as hers. Her heart called out for him as well.

“When those fuckers tell you it's time for their little sales pitch on this stage, we both know who you'll be thinking of. Who you'll be performing for. We each have our role to play, baby. But we're a fucking team—and they won't break us. We'll have it all very soon.”

“Yes.” She barely moved her lips but she wanted him to hear every word. “Only for you. Every move I make, only for you.”

A growl of primal possession rumbled at her back.

“Meet me again tonight.”

Panic and excitement flooded through her in equal measure.

Did she dare? The more often they met, the greater the risk.

“Damien, I. . .” She could barely think straight. Her body was so close to the edge. Ready to soar. Ready to—

“Uh-uh.”

The vibrations slowed to a faint, teasing pulse. *He’d stopped her from coming.*

A growl of fury sprang unbidden from her chest.

Damien chuckled. “There’s that spirit, wild thing.”

Pride swept through her. He liked her uncensored. Liked her real. With him, submission didn’t equate to cowed docility.

“You want to come? It won’t be from a fucking toy.” The possession and jealousy in his tone made her heart take flight. “That’s just a primer. It will be on my tongue, my fingers, and *my* cock. It will be when you tell me I am yours and you’re mine.” He didn’t hesitate. “Meet me after I win my matches. Our special place. We’ll celebrate that we’re one step closer to you being mine.”

He was gone before she could protest. Or wish him luck.

Pressing her legs together, she tried to stay annoyed. But she couldn’t. Although she kept her lips in a firm line, her expression serene on the outside, a slow smile formed inside her.

She liked their games. She enjoyed the anticipation and the delayed pleasure, the certainty that he was hard and wanting—and that he wouldn’t do anything about it until they were together.

Damien was disciplined and loyal. He never once looked at the omega prostitutes or prizes-in-training forced to prance around the ring in the same flimsy outfits she was required to wear.

His focus never wavered from her.

And she loved the strength of his desire. He’d use whatever it took to push her over the edge and bring her to him.

Scarlett exhaled slowly, loosening her hold on the edge of the stool, surrendering to the heat rushing through her veins each time the toy pulsed.

It wasn’t the only surrender she’d make this rotation.

She would meet Damien Skolov at their special place and, despite her fears, she would tell him exactly what he wanted to hear.

Not because she was desperate to come—though there was that too—but

because she was desperate to be his. No matter the cost.

With a glance, Scarlett ensured Egan and the rest of his Consortium partners were still focused on the ring. Then she shifted her gaze from the stage floor to survey the throng of fighters below.

All hopeful. All determined.

All fodder for the real winner of the tournament: the Consortium itself. The company earned more from tournament ticket sales, sponsorships, and bets placed than any one fighter ever could. And all the Consortium had to do for such profits was steal the lives of so many, including her own.

But thanks to Damien, for the first time in forever, Scarlett had hope that she might get her life back and be more than a commodity. More than a pretty pet commanded to perform. More than a shiny prize to be won.

The wild thrumming in her veins and between her legs surged as Damien's beautiful red skin, curling black horns, and broad shoulders appeared in the crowd below.

Some might have noticed his absence, but they'd never suspect where he'd been. A few careful bribes to the right guards—money was everything in this town—had bought their silences and made it possible for Damien to evade the watchful eyes of the Consortium and her guards.

Just in time too.

“Prize, rise!” Egan snapped his finger, his purple cape billowing behind him as his leer burned into her exposed skin.





## SCARLETT

**T**hough every part of Scarlett rebelled at following Egan's command, she did so.

She'd learned long ago the cost of outright resistance. But that didn't mean she was playing solely by the Consortium's rules anymore.

Damien was here now, and soon everything would be different.

She needed to be patient for only a little while longer.

Gliding from her stool, she moved to the front of her crystal cage. Egan insisted on this positioning since it was the best place for the fighters below to view her—and the ideal angle for the cameras to project her image onto the massive, shuttle-size vid screens outside the fighting arena. The Consortium was serious about its advertising. Flashing screens dominated the golden skyline, hawking every type of vice and entertainment, none more lucrative than this tournament.

“We will begin the next round shortly.” Egan Avitus's voice rang out once more. “But before we do... a little incentive.”

Resignation tightened Scarlett's belly.

Head bowed, arms stretched overhead with her wrists crossed, she assumed her expected position as the lights in the arena dimmed and the stage spotlight strengthened. Her stance lifted the top of her gown, baring her midriff to everyone below.

She knew what they saw. A willowy omega with shimmering skin in a clear cage, her golden hair streaked wine-red and brushed to a sheen, falling in waves to her mid-back. Golden cuffs imprinted with the Consortium's label encircled her wrists and throat while a sheer gold and red top accented

her full breasts, and a matching skirt sat low on her hips draped almost to the floor. Every part of her was done up like a doll, posed for others' viewing pleasure.

To the Consortium, profit was everything—sex and violence the key to fueling their greed.

The stadium announcer boomed, “Warriors, you’re all aware of the extraordinary wealth that awaits the tournament victor. But remember, there is another trophy to be won. A prize that can bring an Alpha even greater pleasure.”

Below, Egan nodded.

Her signal to begin.

Music swelled from the speakers.

Wrists rotating, Scarlett slid one foot in front of the other, letting her thigh peek through the high slit in her gown, and—Damien’s face in her mind, his words held close to her heart, the toy he’d given her sending small pleasant pulses to her core—did as commanded, allowing her omega gift to rise to the surface in time with the music.

While many omegas lost their gifts by adolescence, hers had remained, saving her from a life as one of the Consortium prostitutes who worked the city bars and fighting tournaments but condemning her to an existence as one of its prizes—a pretty, performing pet.

Iridescent hues shimmered across her body, sliding sensuously over her thighs and up her stomach. They reflected off the crystal of her cage, sparkling colors that flashed and swirled in time to the music.

Murmurs rose. Waves of lust hit her from the audience. She ignored them and thought only of Damien.

Of how her gift grew brighter, warmer, more substantial each time they met at their secret place and he touched her, vivid colors dancing across the walls as he held her down and made her scream his name.

Of the future they’d soon make together.

Her sex grew wetter as she rolled her hips, the movement brushing the toy against her clit.

Priming her for Damien.

“A truly sensual delight. Untouched. Trained just for you. All Consortium prizes have a gift, but this one is especially lovely—and flexible.” The announcer droned on, but she tuned him out, letting the movements carry her away.

Taught the galactic mating dance from the moment her gift first appeared, she'd been forced to practice until her feet bled, her muscles were honed sleek as a fighter's, and she could call her gift on cue, willing it to undulate across her body to the rhythm of the music.

Failure had not been tolerated.

She'd hated every moment—until Damien arrived.

Now she danced for him.

Scarlett's hands snapped above her head once more, her wrists crossing. The music ended.

Silence.

The slight rasp of her breath was the only sound she heard.

Then a roar. Catcalls.

“That prize is mine.”

“No, mine. The rest of you don't stand a chance.” Stomping boots and boastful declarations echoed through the arena as the fighters' aggression amped up—exactly as the Consortium intended.

But she cared only for the reaction of one male.

She didn't dare look at him but she felt Damien's emotions slam into her through their bond: pride, desire, and possession. Right alongside seething frustration, rage, and determination.

He wanted to tear out the eyes of every other Alpha looking at her. Rip their tongues from their leering mouths. Bathe in their blood.

The depth of his rage frightened her.

Fighters needed to rule their emotions, not be ruled by them.

And if he lost any of his matches this rotation...

“You want this golden, virginal prize leashed and performing for you in whatever position you desire?” The announcer's taunt only amplified the fury she could sense thundering through Damien's blood. “Then you'd better do whatever it takes to win your matches this next round.”

The lights in the arena flashed back on.

“Prepare!” At Egan Avitus's sharp bark, fifty fighters hustled onto the rotating platform in the center of the arena, forming two lines on either side.

Scarlett was supposed to return to her stool.

She stayed where she was, her nose almost pressed to the crystal, unable to look away.

Scowling, a near-feral glint in his red-streaked eyes, Damien swaggered forward with the others, his movements sleek and graceful

Although younger than many of the other males, he moved with a rare, innate confidence. As if he already knew he was the best, his victory assured.

Murmurs rippled through the crowd, Damien's name a soft whisper among many. Already, he was proving a standout.

A few of the omega groupies shouted his name and waved.

The attention only made him stand taller, glow brighter, as if he soaked in the stares and used it to fuel his power.

He was rumored to be as good as the United Galactic Fighting Association's favored fighters: Kadon Stormhart and N'gal Verish. Unlike her brother, who was owned and sponsored by the Consortium, those two males were fighters like Damien, independently trained warriors bankrolled by their own families.

Unlike Damien, however, Kadon and N'gal were the eldest sons of influential Brotherhood crime families. That meant preferential treatment, better trainers, and nicer sleeping quarters.

Perhaps she was biased, but despite these advantages, she still thought Damien was better than either favorite.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw security lead several prizes-in-training into another of the Consortium's transparent cells on her level of the stadium. They were there to observe and learn, the Consortium always thinking ahead to their next source of profit.

Though fraternization among prizes-in-training was discouraged, three in the group were the closest company she had to friends: Rose, Ebony, and Amber.

She tried to catch their attention, but Rose's gaze was glued to the floor, Ebony's trained on Kadon Stormhart, and Amber's locked on her brother, Luc. A usual occurrence.

Fraternization with other Consortium personnel was even more regulated and intermingling between non-familial Consortium assets strictly forbidden. However, that didn't stop souls from longing for each other.

"Take your positions." Egan's barked command drew her gaze back to the fighting mats below.

Damien dropped into a ready stance across from his opponent, a plated Alpha with four arms and small spikes across the top of his shiny head and spine.

But her Alpha was not without weapons of his own. Damien's muscled arms rose to defend his face as his knees bent, his red skin gleaming under

the arena lights while his onyx horns snapped straight and his fangs flashed. He subtly shifted his weight, his claws lengthening as his thick, carved thighs bunched, preparing to pounce.

Her breath left her in a rush.

His body was a true work of art.

Dark bands tied around his bulging biceps and thick wrists seemed like they might split at any moment while the veins that corded along his forearms and thighs when he flexed made her want to trace each one with her tongue.

Equally appealing were his wide shoulders, powerful chest, chiseled stomach, and that mouthwatering V above the band of his low-slung leathers. Much of his visible red skin was covered in thick, scrolling skin designs and the fighting scars of a true warrior.

A drop of sweat rolled down his neck, over one flat nipple and the indentations of his stomach before disappearing into his waistband.

Her pulse quickened.

The raw, primal way he moved his body—*used* his body—devastated her senses and stole her common sense.

Every mouthwatering inch of him screamed of power and steady strength, making the gentleness he showed her when they were alone even more astonishing.

Because that's what he was with her: gentle and adoring. Dominant, yes. But never cruel like so many Alphas.

She already knew too that the substantial bulge between her fighter's thighs could grow huge and hard, with ridges swirling from base to top that rubbed her clit just right.

He hadn't claimed her fully.

A torment to them both.

But it was essential.

Each morning, an unsmiling Consortium beta medical officer inspected her to confirm there was no trace of Alpha sperm in her vagina or anus.

If that changed, they'd punish her with the lash, revoke her prize status, and immediately exile her to one of the lesser outer-rim brothels to work off the money her transgression would cost the Consortium.

That alone kept her and Damien in line.

But that hadn't stopped them from bending the rules. Taking risks.

Damien was a master at both—and she was learning. And relishing every new lesson.

His endurance and focus as a fighter made him an extraordinary lover. She couldn't wait to see how it felt to have him inside her, his knot stretching her wide as it locked them together.

It would be a revelation for them both.

He'd told her he'd been with no other.

She believed him.

Unlike everyone else she knew, Damien was no liar.

"Begin!" Egan Avitus's shout rang out and Damien leaped before the rest.

His reflexes were astounding.

He'd told her it came from being the runt, the fourth and youngest brother in his family, and a greedy bastard who wanted as many sweets as he could get.

While framed it as a joke, she'd sensed the truth in his words. The need to prove himself, to be the best, was a driving part of who he was—and why he'd come here.

And why they remained, even though running away together had crossed their minds. But that brief freedom would have come at a terrible cost, their families paying the price.

No one tangled with the Consortium without losing a pound of flesh or a part of their soul.

The slap of bodies echoed through the space.

She held her breath.

Damien had already made it through the first three match rotations with ease, winning every bout.

If he performed well this rotation, he would move on to the final event.

The Consortium drew out the tournament over five long rotations to build interest and anticipation, but it was driving her to near madness.

One-to-one fighting matches occurred in the first four rotations, with opponents assigned at random and the loser of each fight eliminated from the tournament. Those who tapped out during this stage lost their pride and the chance of winning any prize, but kept their lives.

By the end of the fourth rotations, only a hundred fighters would remain to take part in the premier cage-fighting event.

The fifth rotation of the tournament, called the Elite 100, was different.

Unlike the earlier rounds, the main event took place in a separate coliseum with enough seating for hundreds of thousands of ticket buyers and

vid access for those willing to pay top universal chits to have the action beamed into their homes across the galaxy. Nicknamed “The Cage,” the stadium contained a pit in the center with laser bars on the sides and ceiling.

The Elite 100 was a free-for-all brawl with no rules and no boundaries, where all combatants fought at once, whittling down their numbers however they could until only one Alpha remained standing.

Those who made it to the final sixteen fighters won a little money. The final eight a pittance more. But only the fighter brave and skilled enough to be the last combatant conscious in the ring would win her, fame, and enough money to make him as rich as a planetary king.

*Crash.*

The sound of a body striking the mats jerked Scarlett from her thoughts.

Damien’s opponent lay on the ground, trapped in a figure-four leg choke. One of his four palms slapped the mat in submission. Damien had won.

Relief thudded through her.

The fury she felt inside him pulsed as hot as ever, but it hadn’t weakened him. His focus was unwavering.

All the other fighters were still grappling to win their match, including Stormhart and Verish.

Her gaze darted to her brother, who stood tense, watching the favored Kadon Stormhart fight. Luc’s hands fisted at his sides, his arms twitching ever so slightly, as if he wanted to be out there himself.

But the Consortium refused to allow her brother to participate in the bigger tournaments.

Egan said it was because they needed his help with training, but they all knew the truth: the Consortium had no intention of letting such a valuable commodity win enough prize money to bribe or buy his way to freedom.

Despite his tremendous strength, skills as a trainer, and recent promotion, Luc was still a pawn and a puppet like all Consortium-owned commodities. Just like her.

“Next.” Egan’s command had another opponent hustling onto the mat.

Damien resumed his fighting stance in one fluid motion—and took down that male in the blink of an eye.

He really was going to win it all.

Pride rushed through her. Hope too—until her gaze darted to Egan Avitus and she noticed him staring up at her, a calculating smirk on his face.

Her stomach clenched.



She'd seen that same look on his face the rotation she met Damien.



## SCARLETT

**F**ive rotations before the start of the tournament. . .

“Take your look, then move on.” Nars, the head of her security team, shouted into the voice amplifier as he strutted down the line of bodies in front of the training stadium entrance, the golden lights from the dome and the arena’s shining tinsel facade turning his green skin and matching tusks an even more putrid color. “Want more time with the prize? Win the tournament.”

Scarlett kept her head down, her arms stretched overhead, her hips undulating as colors flickered across her body and onto the crystal barricade of her display case, each hulking form that trudged past to stare at her little more than a blur.

The start of the tournament was nerve-wracking—and she suspected it would only get more intense with each passing rotation.

Visitors always crowded the streets beneath the Golden Dome, known galaxy-wide as the city that never went dark, taking advantage of the casinos, fighting arenas, and pleasure houses open all rotation long. But the Consortium-sponsored United Galactic Fighting Association’s tournament was the greatest draw of all, bringing in hundreds of thousands of extra tourists and more fighters than usual.

It felt as if they’d all come to gawk at her at once.

Of course, that was the point—and why the Consortium had placed her display case on a small dais directly in front of the arena entrance and ordered her to dance.

She’d been at it since right after her first meal.

Already her body was sore, her mind exhausted from maintaining her gift continuously, making her feel far older than her twenty-one planetary rotations.

And worse, just a few moments ago, a strange itch had rolled across her skin, leaving her restless and out of sorts.

It didn't matter.

If Egan Avitus ordered her to perform as the fighters disembarked from the shuttles and made their way into the fighting stadium, she did.

“More turns. Show them that ass—and brighten those gift colors. More flash.” Egan's command piped into her crystal cage. Even from the observation deck, a story above her display case, he saw everything. “We want these fighters willing to do whatever it takes to get the chance to bend you over and rut.”

Scarlett did as ordered.

She always did.

The Consortium ruled everything inside the dome and owned most of it too. The planet on which the dome rested was nothing much. Just endless, unrelenting mountains of sand scorched by four hot suns that rose and fell in near-perfect harmony and that had, before the Consortium, made it impossible for life to flourish on the surface.

But her mother's kind had survived in small underground villages for generations. Until the Consortium bought the planet from someone with no right to sell it, and overnight, everything changed.

They'd slapped an enormous dome over the old villages and built their golden skyscrapers on the surface. A huge coliseum in the center square was the main attraction. They created a seemingly glittering paradise, each building's facade lit up with vid screens broadcasting every vice available to those with universal chits to burn.

But it had been no paradise for her mother's kind, most of whom were killed or enslaved. Her mother had once been a prize. Then, a brothel whore. Then, she'd died.

Scarlett had been a Consortium-owned omega all her life, trained early on for her fate. Her brother had been similarly molded into a Consortium warrior.

She'd watched him bleed and almost break to become what they demanded.

They'd forced her to twist herself into what they required too.

But she hadn't shattered and she didn't intend to end up like her mother. Her dreams remained her own, and soon she'd escape the dome and gain control of her fate.

She'd made plans to run away before, but something always came up.

This time, she refused to let anything distract her.

"Break time." Nars's shout jolted her from her thoughts as the lights inside her cage dimmed and the music shut off. "Next shuttle arrives in five."

Scarlett took her first full breath and leaned against the rough curtain concealing the door behind it, rolling her neck from side to side. No stool for this. It ruined the optics. And sitting on the floor? Forbidden.

She wasn't too sure she could have sat anyway. A strange restlessness tugged at her, her skin hot and prickly.

Scarlett pushed off the wall. Was she getting sick?

A soft tap from the other side of the curtain distracted her.

She recognized the source easily. No one else asked. They just barged in.

Steeling herself, she pulled aside the curtain and knocked back. Then she moved to the side to make room.

There was no handle to open the door from the inside.

The panel slid along its track to create an opening. Her brother Luc's broad shoulders filled the space. Expression concerned, he loosened the straps of his scent muffler and let one dangle from his ear, a defiance of the usual rules—only tolerated because they were related and he was a high-level trainer. "They said it was okay if I brought you a drink." Luc held out a gleaming, gold canister. "It's an infused *rالي* energy drink."

"Thank you." Scarlett smiled wide. Took the canister and choked it down. The liquid was too bitter for her, but it was what the Consortium served their fighters and, therefore, everyone else by extension.

"Good, right?" He shifted on his feet.

"Delicious." Her chest tightened. Five planetary rotations older than her, Luc always looked out for her as best he could.

Though he was more than twice her size, their familial connection was unmistakable. They had the same nose and hair color, though he kept his shorn close to his head so no one could use it against him during a fight.

But on the inside, they were so different. Luc might make his living as a warrior, but he chose not to fight outside the ring. He could have broken a hundred Consortium necks with his hands alone, but then he'd be dead. As would she. So, instead, he embraced his work as a trainer, accepted his lot as

Consortium property, and asked for nothing more.

Which was why she never felt more alone than when spending time with him.

Scarlett returned the drained canister. “Thank you again.”

An uneasy silence filled the space.

Worse, the burn beneath her skin intensified. She fiddled with the cuff on her wrist. Her throat and wrists bothered her the most. She had no idea why.

Her brother broke the quiet at last. “How are you?”

She forced a bright smile and gave her usual response: “Fine.”

Usually, unless the lights were on her, her handlers paid her little attention. As if they couldn’t fathom that she had agency when they weren’t looking at her or she wasn’t following their commands. Still, it was smart not to take chances, and the truth would only hurt Luc anyway.

As if reading her thoughts, her brother leaned in close, his big body curling over hers as his breath whispered across her cheek. “I know this isn’t what we planned. I thought I’d have more time to gather funds—”

Scarlett brushed his words aside with the flick of the wrist. “It will be fine.”

When they were younger, he’d told her he’d become a great fighter and win enough prize money to buy her from the Consortium.

Even early on, she’d known it was a pipe dream.

Consortium fighters were never allowed to earn such riches. It made them too independent. Plus, the Consortium had invested too much to let either of them go. Ever. The one-time, lump sum Luc might have mustered to buy her would never equal what the company could earn from her over the long term as a prize attraction and brothel whore.

But she’d let Luc think she believed in his rosy future.

After all, what was one more lie between them?

“Whatever you’re planning, don’t.” His voice dropped even lower. “I’m already working on which fighters can be bribed. It won’t take much work to ensure Kadon Stormhart is the winner of the tournament.”

“Don’t. It’s too dangerous.”

“So is ending up with the wrong kind of Alpha.”

“It will be fine.” Again, she smiled wide.

They both understood the usual fate of tournament prizes. Most were claimed for only a short time by the Alpha who won the event. He used his untouched, virginal trophy until the shine wore off, then tossed her aside—

right back into the Consortium's clutches—where she was reabsorbed into the company. The prize was then quietly reassigned to a seedy second-tier pleasure house on the outer planets. Desolate places said to cater to every fetish, where even the most down-on-his-luck gambler could spend a few coins and rule like a king. Or a losing fighter could feel like a victor against someone half his size.

Scarlett shivered. It was a hellish fate.

And not one she intended to experience.

But Luc had a different means of escape in mind for her than she did. “No one will suspect tampering.” He pretended to fix the strap of her dress so he could lean in close once more. “Stormhart is expected to win anyway.”

Big brothers. They always believed they knew best. “It's too early to tell and too chancy to count on.”

“And running isn't? Remember what happened last time.”

She looked away, the memory wrapping around her throat like a meaty hand.

But she was careful to steady her voice by the time she beckoned her brother closer. Nars and the rest of security might be off sneaking an unsanctioned break while Egan dealt with other Consortium business, but they could return at any time. “This guard's more reliable and willing to wait for payment until I'm settled. He said he could get hold of a tracker remover. He can also sneak me into a storage container on a shipping shuttle scheduled to depart from the dome during the main tournament.”

“Too unsafe and too good to be true. I can't be with you this time. They'll have me at the tournament. You need to accept that my plan is best.”

He wasn't wrong. The last time she'd attempted escape, she'd been with Rose, Ebony, and Amber and the guard had brought along two friends. They'd taken Luc's money. Then, they'd brought out the tasers and blackmail, insisting Scarlett and her friends comply with their plan to sample the goods and sell them to a brothel, or they'd suffer a worse fate when returned to the Consortium as runaways. Only Luc's emergence from his hiding place had saved them. Those guards' bones now lay outside the dome, scorching in the suns, but she, her friends, and Luc had been lucky not to get caught.

Which was why this time, she would take the risk alone—and find safe passage for her friends *if* she was successful.

It was a gamble, yes, but if she stayed, if she let fear rule, if she allowed

the Consortium to win, she would never escape her mother's fate.

"Kadon Stormhart is a good male." Luc's growled words brought her back from her dark thoughts.

"I know."

"You could do far worse."

"I know that too." She grabbed her brother's hand. "But I don't want him. He's not right for me."

His jaw clenched in warning. "Scarlett—"

"Don't." They'd gone over this so many times before.

But Luc was almost as stubborn as she. "I spoke with him. He'll take you not just as a prize but as his prime omega. You'll have security. Protection. He's the only one I trust to keep his word."

Her brother and Kadon had fought each other in tournaments since they were old enough to walk. They'd started out as enemies: a scrappy Consortium-owned attack dog and a privileged Brotherhood heir who were consistently one another's top competition. In the end, though, respect, and even trust, developed between them.

The vise around her chest tightened. "Kadon doesn't want me as his prime omega."

"He'd be lucky to have you."

"He loves another."

A beat of silence. "Love has no place in Anarcheim. We make our choices for survival. You know that." Luc spoke from experience.

"Maybe," she conceded. "But as you've told me many times, eldest sons like Kadon Stormhart make prime omega contracts with other powerful Brotherhood families with impeccable bloodlines. In this, he has no more choice than we have. His path's already laid out for him. His father will not allow it."

"That was before you went from being a prize-in-training to the prize for this tournament. You know Kadon considers you a friend too, Scarlett. He's happy to do this, even if his father opposes it. He wants you safe."

"At his own expense? Because we both know that even if he somehow convinced his father to let him take me as his prime omega rather than as a short-term prize to be rutted and tossed aside, such a sacrifice would only place Kadon more under his father's thumb. I don't want that for him or any of us."

"Damned it, Scarlet." Luc's voice rose, anger sharpening his tone. "There



is no other choice. There never was.”

Her heart squeezed again. She knew how hard this was for her brother.

He was always looking out for her.

She wanted to do the same for him.

To give him what he needed.

But she was as helpless to do that for him as he was for her.

All the power lay in the hands of others who pulled their strings and made them dance.

So here she and her brother stood, suffocating under the Consortium’s rules and demands, trapped in cages even harder to escape than the one they had her in now.

“Stormhart is a good male, and I consider him a friend as well.” Luc wasn’t giving up. “You need to be practical.”

It wasn’t the first time he’d told her that.

“It’s a good plan.” Luc’s big hand gripped hers. “Plus, Stormhart’s father might not be as against the match as you believe. Apparently, he’s been pushing for Kadon to take a position within the Consortium to better manage their family’s interests—and Brotherhood crime bosses usually get what they want.”

“Even more reason to resist. Anything involving the Brotherhood is perilous, and staying connected to the Consortium is the last thing I want. This company has already taken too much from us both.”

Luc swallowed hard, his expression almost pleading. “But if we plot to have Stormhart win, he could stay and work for the Consortium. You wouldn’t be taken away. We could see each other. Stay a family.”

The vise around her chest tightened even further.

Was Luc right? Should she agree to this plan? Settle, and be content within the Consortium’s rules and its cage, just as her brother appeared willing to be?

Should she take surviving as a win and decide that was enough?

Everything inside her rebelled at the thought.

But maybe that was the recklessness of youth.

She had the ability to give Luc something he needed after all.

*We could see each other. Stay a family.*

All she had to do was sacrifice her dreams and let the Consortium win, using her as they wanted.

“Let me think on it.” She still had time. The guard she planned to bribe

wasn't going anywhere. "I can't promise, but—"

"Time's up! Back to it!" Nars's shout made her jump. One of the more aggressive guards, he was always more than happy to throw his weight around.

But this time, Scarlett was almost relieved to have her brother go, and not just because she was worn down after their conversation.

She rubbed at the skin beneath her collar. Talking with Luc had momentarily distracted her, but now those odd sensations were back, stronger than before.

Her throat and wrists throbbed, hot to the touch. Her skin strangely sensitive, every muscle in her body alert, as if waiting for something monumental.

"Right." Luc backed toward the exit, the flare of hope in his gaze making her stomach churn. "I'll check in with you soon. They're waiting for me to return to the arena."

She suspected it wasn't only the fighters who were waiting. A slew of omega groupies followed her brother everywhere and more than a few prizes-in-training cast him longing looks. He was an obvious favorite among the females, though he only had eyes for only one.

On impulse, she reached out and seized his hand. "I know how hard this is for you, and I don't want you to think I'm ungrateful. Or that I don't see how much you're willing to sacrifice. I-I know..." She hesitated. They'd never before spoken aloud about all he was giving up, about how he continued to pine in vain for a mate and a life outside the Consortium that could never be. "I know that if things were different for you—"

"I'm fine." His gaze snapped to hers. Now it was his turn to smile wide. To lie. "I'm a fighter. A warrior. That's enough for me."

"Right." Scarlett squeezed his hand and let it fall.

What was one more lie between them?

Luc secured his scent muffler back into place, a concealer all of its own.

The spotlight in her display case flashed on, its glare sending her brother hustling out before he got them both in trouble, but she suspected he'd been more than ready to leave.

Scarlett pulled the curtain closed and fought to bring her body back under control.

Swiveling, she raised her arms above her head and swayed her hips as the music swelled and another line formed, blurred figure after blurred figure

tromping by once more.

It should have been the same old, same old.

But there was a flush across her skin, that odd sense of anticipation, the folds of her sex swelling so that each subtle movement sent pleasure rippling to her core.

She fought it.

Whatever was wrong with her, it needed to stop.

She had to stay focused and decide her path: stay and hope that her brother's plan went as expected or run.

It crushed her to think of deserting her brother, but she knew he would never leave. From her crystal display, she'd had the chance to watch him plenty. It was easy to see how much he loved the training, the fighting, and the camaraderie.

Plus, his heart was here.

He'd made his choice. Now, she had to make hers.

*Slam.*

Despite her training, Scarlett froze.

*Slam.*

Her chin snapped up, her gaze locking with rut-red eyes under heavy dark brows.

A red-skinned Alpha with huge black horns pressed himself so violently against the crystal that his big forehead, wide nose, and broad chest were nearly flat.

Thanks to the dais on which her display case rested, she was almost eye-to-eye with the enormous male. He looked only a few planetary rotations younger than her.

His massive palm struck the crystal, his lips easy enough to read: *Mine.*

Her heart skittered inside her chest.

He wasn't the first fighter to throw himself against the crystal or make such a claim, but none had ever done so with such intensity.

Even more astounding was her reaction.

She wanted to mouth the word right back.

To throw herself against the crystal until it shattered and she was in his arms. Pinned against him, her nose buried against his skin as she breathed him in. Her smaller body undulating in time with his big one, the iridescent colors of her gift flickering across his skin as his large hands grasped her hips—and his cock thrust deep inside her.

Panting, she pressed her thighs together.

And could barely stop her hand from drifting down to touch herself while he watched.

She wanted to dance just for him. Present just for him. Exist just for him.

“Hands off the crystal!” Nars hustled toward the front of the line, fangs flashing. “Move it along.”

Her dark-haired Alpha stayed right where he was. His gaze locked on her.

“Fucking fighter filth.” Egan’s curse echoed through the private comms. “Shut that idiot down. Now!”

“Did you hear what I said?” Nars’s taser flared bright green. “Keep moving.”

The younger Alpha batted the security guard aside like a ball of fluff. His weapon clattered to the ground.

Nars’s body struck a fellow Alpha farther down the line. That male roared and tossed the guard into another fighter, who swung back. Soon, ignited by the aggression, a brawl erupted in the middle of the street, only a few paces from the arena entrance.

The rest of security came running.

But even as chaos erupted around him, the huge, horned-Alpha with the red skin and swirling skin designs stayed right where he was, his stare on her.

*Slam.* The Alpha’s palm hit the crystal again, his square jaw tight, his forehead furrowed.

A smaller male with orange skin, plaited hair, and a tail ducked under a flying body, then tapped her Alpha on the shoulder.

He didn’t budge.

Unable to help herself, she shuffled forward, the pull toward this male overriding all sense.

Meeting his demand was as essential as her next breath.

She pressed her palm against the crystal, right in the center of his larger hand.

A wave of triumph roared through her. Possession and need followed in quick succession.

*Hers? His?* She wasn’t sure, but the force of it left her dizzy.

And, for the first time in a long while, she felt truly seen, her purpose revealed.

Then security reached him.

Burly forms launched themselves at the male from both sides. They

ripped his hands from the crystal. One guard spun him around, fist cocked to strike.

Faster than she would have thought possible, her Alpha dodged the punch, grabbed another guard's taser, stunned the first, then swung that guard into the rest, sending them all spilling to the ground.

He sent the next wave of security flying too.

A spurt of satisfaction bubbled up through her. A righteous sense of victory she hadn't felt in forever.

Bullies were getting their due.

But her delight was short-lived.

More security arrived. Tasers flared. They dragged away the others involved in the brawl. They'd eventually bring him down too.

The Consortium had unlimited resources, weapons, and power.

There was no way this Alpha—as impressive a fighter as he was—could win this battle.

A mass of security encircled him from three sides. With her crystal display blocking his only other exit route, the Alpha had nowhere to go.

They shoved aside the orange-skinned male who'd tried to help.

As if she were his anchor, the mesmerizing Alpha's gaze locked with hers once more.

Then, he disappeared under a sea of bodies.

Limbs flew as fists struck and boots found their target.

Scarlett flinched, pain lancing through her as if it was her body under siege.

She staggered under the force of it, both palms landing on the crystal—and noticed the wall in front of her was no longer flickering with the colors of the rainbow, but only a violent black. In the next heartbeat, the area where her hands rested grew hot and warped in on itself. Almost melting.

She lurched backward, but the ribbons of black emanating from her palms remained, a shadow of darkness that rippled through the air.

That had never happened before.

Startled, she fisted her hands and tucked them behind her back.

Just as security pulled the Alpha to his feet, his arms shackled behind him, his face bloodied, veins popping in his neck as he thrashed and bucked.

But he was in better shape than most of the guards.

The Consortium would not be pleased. Terror lanced through her.

She didn't even know the male, but every cell inside her shrieked in

protest at the thought of his death.

She pressed closer to the crystal.

The shackles at his wrists broke. The guards holding him flew back.

He flattened himself against the crystal. “Didn’t mean... to scare you. I’ll do... better.” Even through the thick barrier, the rasp of his voice slid down her spine like a caress.

The guards surged toward him yet again.

This time, however, his hands went up. He spun slowly to face them, the sculpted muscles in his back bunching. “All good. Just a misunderstanding. I’ll save the rest for the ring.”

They jumped him anyway.

The Alpha let them, not even flinching as they got in a few hits before dragging him toward the security cells.

She clenched her hands into tight fists and locked her knees to keep from throwing herself at the crystal.

She didn’t want him to go.

Fear for him welled alongside the growing conviction that she was losing something precious she’d never even had the chance to have.

Until he looked over his shoulder and winked at her. Mouthed: *See you soon.*

Astonishment whispered through her. The absolute arrogance and outrageousness... She loved it.

She hid a smile.

It was the first one she could remember—and it felt like an extraordinary gift.

Until she looked up and saw Egan watching her from the observation deck, a calculating smirk spreading across his face.



DAMIEN

“Get the fuck off me.” Damien twisted in the security guard’s hold. Now that he was out of the omega’s sight and didn’t have to worry about upsetting her, he was done with going quietly.

“Shut the hells up.” The bastard he’d taken down shoved a taser into his kidney.

Hurt like a bitch.

But nothing compared to what it cost him to let security drag him away from her.

“Faster, troublemaker.” The guard struck him again before dragging him through a heavy metal door and down a long corridor lined with cells.

Damien’s lip curled as he stared over his shoulder at the security guard who was all brawn and no technique. “You think a show of power now will make up for everyone seeing me toss you aside like a youngling’s doll? News flash, it won’t.”

Another snarl. Another charge.

But if these fuckers thought a little electric surge would break him, they were in for a surprise.

He’d been hit by his mother’s *Alpha friends* more often than he cared to remember.

He’d grown up in the ice caves of Abzal, enduring frigid winds that struck with such force and brutality they made a taser’s charge seem like a lover’s caress.

He’d trained and bled and broken so many bones in his eighteen planetary rotations that pain was a constant part in his daily life.



Plus, he had three older badass Alpha brothers who did not coddle.  
So, yeah, he was tough.

And these fuckers? They had no idea who they were messing with.

“In here, space trash.” They tossed him into one of the cells, his skin sizzling as he passed through the dimmed laser bars—since no one had bothered to turn the power fully off.

Still, he kept his footing and stayed upright as the buzz of the laser bars signaled their return to full power.

Victory. With only a slight charring on top.

Damien took stock. They’d packed each cell with fighters, and his was no exception. Big scowling brutes with bloody lips and ripped clothes squared off around the cell, aggression oozing from their pores, the rush of the recent brawl still thrumming through their veins.

Fangs flashing, he scowled back.

The three guys closest to him shuffled out of his way.

As expected. He knew how to handle himself. For better or worse, he’d seen the inside of more than a few holding cells over the course of his young but eventful life.

Could be due to his charm.

Or his trouble following the rules.

“In you go.” The shout from outside the bars had Damien turning around, just in time to see the laser bars dim again as security tossed an orange blur inside the holding cell—straight into the belly of another fighter.

Damien sidestepped the fray as they crashed to the ground.

“Hells, that hurt.” The new guy rolled over and stared up at the ceiling, blinking hard. The bitter odor of singed hair wafted through the space.

The other downed fighter shoved to his knees, his scales turning a dangerous red. “You knocked me down.” He cocked a fist.

The orange guy whipped out a vicious-looking barbed tail with barbs and slashed it in front of the other male’s beak-like nose. “Don’t even try it.”

The other male backed off, grumbling to himself as he shuffled to the opposite side of the cell.

Damien studied Tail Guy. He looked vaguely familiar. He was smaller than Damien, but still muscled, with pointed ears and long plaits that hung down his back.

“Wonderful.” The orange-skinned male pushed to standing and adjusted his shirt, fingering the laser burn holes as if he was going to make them

magically disappear. “I chose the wrong guy to stand in line behind, apparently.”

Ah, right. The fighter next to him when he’d been trying to talk with the omega. The one who’d warned him security was about to taser his ass.

There were no allies in a place like this where only one could be the ultimate fighter, but Damien appreciated the guy’s warning.

Plus, while the guy’s stance was alert enough to mark him as a solid fighter and his tail was clearly a formidable weapon, his expression was kind.

He was no killer.

Damien calculated that the orange-skinned Alpha would last two rounds max without help.

Which was why he gave the fighter a rare chin nod—his arms were busy, anyway, still manacled behind his back—and said, “When they come back, I’ll make sure they know you had nothing to do with that.”

The guy’s eyes went round, his tail twitching. “Thanks.” He stopped fiddling with his shirt. “I definitely did not expect to end up here before I even made it in the training arena.”

*Join the fucking club.*

Damien hid a grimace.

Two heartbeats in and he’d already fucked up.

“I mean, it’s not as if I’m expecting to win the main prize.” Tail Guy gave a nervous laugh, his lopsided grin reminding Damien of his sister Anya.

“Good, because I am.”

A few other fighters in the cell grumbled. Orange-skinned guy, however, appeared unfazed.

“Oh yeah? The whole tournament? Wow. Good for you.” The other male was chatty. “My goal is to make it to at least the last sixteen fighters in the main event so I can win the consolation prize money. If I make it further, great, but that’s the bare minimum. I’m from Lezera, have six omega sisters, and no damned funds to get them prime omega contracts. Goddess only knows I can’t keep ‘em—but I want the best for them.” Genuine affection coated his words, but he was fumbling with the holes in his shirt, his tone strained. “We calculated that with even a small prize money, I’ll be able to get them some sort of contracts. *If I get there.*”

Damien grunted.

Looked like he’d be helping Tail Guy, after all—because any guy who was out to take care of his six omega sisters was okay in Damien’s view.

“So I’m talking to the future champion, huh?” His new friend sized him up.

“No question.”

“Then, ah, what the hells happened out there with the prize then? Was that part of your plan to win it all?”

Damien tensed.

Fuck if he knew.

*She* had definitely not been part of the plan.

One moment he’d been striding down the gangplank, eyeing the competition while going over what nutrients he still needed to consume to reach his proper intake, and calculating how soon he could get away from the distracting welcome hoopla and head to the training center, when an itch rolled across his skin. In the next heartbeat, aggression poured through him and he’d jerked forward like his body was on the end of a tether. Sounds had amplified. Colors too.

He’d shoved his way through the throngs—and seen her.

The most beautiful female he’d ever laid eyes on in his life.

His cock had hardened to stone. His wrists burned as if dipped in fire.

And everything inside him, usually so jumbled and seething and wild, had just... settled.

Her body moved in sync with his racing heart, stunning colors shimmering across her golden skin, exactly the same as the hues that glittered across the ice on his home planet when the suns hit just right.

There she was: his purpose.

His to claim. To rut. To knot.

Need and excitement thundering through him, he’d taken a step toward her—only to notice the crystal walls imprisoning her, the lines of exhaustion on her captivating face. All the fuckers leering at her.

After that, things got a little blurry.

Every cell inside consumed with the primal need to seize the omega and take her some place where he could bury his dick inside her and breed her until his young was in there too.

But then he’d gotten shocked, and the worst of the rut lifted. He’d gained enough control to realize his initial instinct was neither smart nor possible.

She might be his, but she was also a Consortium prize. That meant she was a valuable asset, one protected by full-time security and, he suspected, a tracker inside her bloodstream.

Of course, he had enough connections to get his hands on a black-market tracker remover, but even if he removed it, the Consortium would not let her go so easily. Too many fighters had come to win her.

They'd hunt for her—and whoever had taken her.

If it was only to make an example of them both.

The Consortium did not take kindly to anyone messing with their property.

And once they found out who he was—which they would since he'd given his real name when he bought into the tournament—his brothers would bear the brunt of the Consortium's anger.

Rather than prove his family could count on him, he'd leave them worse off than before.

That he could not allow.

The Skolov family had already suffered enough. Been hunted enough. Hustled enough.

The whole reason he'd entered the tournament was to secure the kind of mind-boggling prize money that would enable his family to buy a seat at the Brotherhood table.

Membership in the most powerful crime organization in the galaxy didn't come cheap, but it had been his brothers' goal for as long as Damien could remember. Because if you couldn't beat 'em, best to join 'em. And, as his eldest brother, Nikolai, liked to remind him, it was smart to keep your friends close, and your enemies closer.

But it would never happen if some hot-headed idiot in the Skolov family stole a Consortium omega and went to ground.

So, no, seizing the eye-catching omega and running wasn't an option.

Nor was buying her outright since he didn't yet have that kind of ready cash flow.

Which left Damien with only one path: do what he'd come here to do. Win the tournament.

Because there was one fact he knew for sure: he was not leaving this planet without her.

Even now, rage, possession, and need twisted through him, a primal drumbeat in his blood.

He was one hundred percent certain that if he peered beneath the thick leather cuffs at his wrists, he'd see the dark black lines that signaled a rare fated-mates connection.

She was fucking his and his body knew it.

“You think they’ll kick us out?” Tail Guy, talking again.

“No.” He wouldn’t allow it.

“Gotta love your confidence.”

“Get used to it.” Especially since Damien had already decided to help the guy make it through to the final sixteen.

Another laugh. “Gladly. Maybe it’ll rub off. I’m Crex, by the way.”

“Damien—”

“Skolov.” A sneering voice from outside the laser bars took over Damien’s introduction. “Fourth of the notorious Skolov brothers. Outer-planetary ice vermin. Wanted by the Federation for petty theft, racketeering, illegal fighting, and a slew of other charges.”

Damien grinned. His reputation preceded him, per usual.

Turning toward the speaker, he stared down at the silver-haired space worm on the other side of the bars. Egan Avitus, the face of the tournament and a higher-up lackey in the Consortium bureaucracy.

The same fucker who’d watched the omega dance from the observation deck.

“Nothing to say for yourself?” Clad in a flashy dressing gown, cape, and too many rings, not a slicked silver hair out of place, the bastard oozed smug. A wall of hulking security guards stood right behind him, including the green skinned, tusked Alphahole who’d shocked him repeatedly.

Damien stepped closer to the bright laser bars at the front of the cell. “I’ve plenty to say. But I prefer to let my fists do the talking.”

Egan lost some of his poise. “Typical thug.”

“And you’re not?” Damien thought of the female. The cage, the hot lights, the hopelessness he’d sensed from her. When he’d signed up for the tournament, he’d been so focused on the money that he hadn’t considered the rest of the bounty he’d gain once he won. He was now.

The desire he’d sensed in her was as beautiful, rich, and vivid as the colors sparkling across the crystal cage and her skin.

She was extraordinary—and his.

No one else would touch her.

And all the fuckers who’d kept her penned up would experience an excruciating death.

“I’m an entrepreneur.” Unaware his fate had already been decided, Egan kept on talking. “I make the Consortium and the Brotherhood money, and

I'm good at it."

Damien followed his instincts. "Which is why you're going to open the pen, let me out, and send me to the barracks so I can prepare for the fighting trials."

Egan's lips thinned. "What would make you think that?" He ran his spindly, jewel-covered hands down the length of his purple cape as if he could smooth his frustrations as easily.

"Because winners sell more tickets, and more tickets means more profits and visibility, and if you know who I am, you already know I'll make you plenty of money."

"Cocky bastard."

"With reason."

"I can smell trouble from a star system away," the Consortium lackey snarled, "and you, Damien Skolov, have trouble written all over you."

*True enough.*

"But you're going to let me stay anyway." Because he might not be a genius like his brother Maxheim or a charmer like Alexi, or even a leader like their eldest Nikolai, but Damien had read enough telegraphed punches in his time to interpret Egan's body language: the guy wanted to bury Damien in a small ditch behind the stadium, but he wasn't going to.

Not yet anyway.

Which meant someone else—someone even Egan couldn't defy—was allowing Damien to remain, despite the trouble he'd caused.

*Interesting.*

"You'd better not give me any more problems. You might be in this cell for fighting, but we both know what preceded it. Prizes are off limits until won." Egan prattled on. "Any fighter found to have sullied Consortium merchandise without permission will be banned from the tournament."

Damien pictured choking the guy out—repeatedly. *All in good time.*

"You will follow the rules or you will not remain. No matter what anyone else says." Threats delivered, Egan nodded to a nearby goon and the manacles encircling Damien's wrists unlocked and clattered to the ground. Next, the laser bars dimmed—but they didn't blink out.

"You are free to go." Smirk in place, Egan gestured to the metal exit door down the corridor. "For now."

Fuckers would not let him out without a little more payback.

Bracing himself, Damien started forward and then stopped. "If I go, he

goes.” He jerked his head toward Crex, who was watching the exchange with a wide-eyed, nervous expression.

Egan’s spine snapped ruler-straight. “That’s not your decision to make.”

“I think it might be.” Damien studied Egan, wondering just who had made the call to keep him in the tournament.

His brothers had no clue where he was. Yet. He’d told them he was going to his usual training retreat. But even if they’d figured out where he was, they didn’t have the pull to keep Egan from kicking him out of the tournament.

That lack of influence was half the reason Damien had come to the tournament.

To show his older brothers that he could be the male they needed him to be.

No more a runt. No more a youngling. No more a burden.

He was eighteen planetary rotations old now. All grown up and ready to step up.

Ready to be another badass like them. Maybe even badder: the fighter they needed to watch their backs.

Now he had another objective too: her.

With such high stakes, it made him uneasy not knowing who’d countermanded Egan’s desire to kick him out or what was behind the decision. He’d found that most Alphas in the galaxy weren’t motivated by the goodness of their hearts.

But he’d make it work. He always did.

“Fine.” Disgust sharpened Egan’s voice. Anger too. “You can both go.”

But again, no one lowered the laser bars’ power. A few of the guards snickered.

Damien marched through the painful-as-fuck bars without hesitation—and kept right on walking toward the building’s exit.

A curse from Crex indicated he was close behind.

Damien let the guards have their fun. He’d find them after the tournament was over. They wouldn’t be laughing then.

But he had more important matters to tend to first.

Like finding out the name of his omega, and how he could make a better impression the next time around.

Just as his palm hit the metal door, Egan spoke. “You won’t win.” Glee thickened his voice. “A non-Consortium, non-Brotherhood fighter has never won this tournament and that will never change. You think you’re something,

but you're not. You and your family are space trash and you always will be. I run a gambling enterprise. I only bet on sure things and I'd wager my fortune that neither the money nor the prize herself will ever be yours."

Damien read the underlying message loud and clear: Egan and his Consortium had already chosen their tournament winners, and they were going to do whatever it took to protect those interests.

But Damien had always known the contest was rigged. He just didn't care.

The more odds stacked against him, the better he liked it.

"I'll take that bet, Alphahole." He shoved open the door and strode out.

Because nothing would keep him from her.





## SCARLETT

**T**hat evening, Scarlett stood beside her narrow bed while security checked beneath it and Egan Avitus circled around her, his polished black boots clacking on the bare tiled floor, his scent muffler making each of his exhales sound like a menacing rumble.

He'd had guards watching her more diligently than usual since they'd dragged the fearless Alpha away.

But no one had mentioned him since—and she was not stupid enough to ask.

Yet a hundred questions about the Alpha burned raw and desperate on her tongue like the sharpest spice.

And that restless need that had flared inside her since his appearance had not abated.

It pulsed within her, a hot, searing flame between her thighs—and it would not go away, no matter how much she willed it otherwise.

Thank the Goddess for the cuffs and collar at her wrists and throat, because she'd peeked under one while she was in the washroom and noticed thin, curved lines snaking across her skin—marks that she suspected would make Egan even more watchful.

“What do you know of the fighter who attacked security?” Egan barked the question as two beta servants finished brushing her hair and tying the straps of her sleeping gown.

“Nothing, Alpha Lord.”

“You've never had contact with Damien Skolov before?”

Prizes were allowed little privacy. There were even guards outside her

bath. Egan's questions were ridiculous, his only purpose to rile her.

But his words had the opposite effect. Finally, she had a name.

"No, Alpha Lord." *Damien Skolov*. She turned the name over in her mind, shivers rippling down her spine. She liked it. Strong. Wild. Just like him.

Goddess, she hoped he was okay.

"You will do nothing to encourage him."

Her heart beat faster. Did that mean he was still alive?

Every fiber of her being screamed yes.

Otherwise, why was her skin still itchy? Her core swollen? Her body reaching for his, as if the Alpha held a magnet and drew her to him even now?

He had to be alive.

"Did you hear what I said, prize, or do I need to get the strap?" Egan was more of a businessman than a fighter, but that had never stopped him from doling out a beating.

Scarlett forced herself to focus. "I am listening, Alpha Lord."

"You'd better be." He nodded to security to check the closet. "Fighters like Damien Skolov care for glory and gold, and the younger they are, the dumber, and the more they have to prove. They want their prizes—but only while the shine holds and their blood is fired by competition. Once that ends, they're on to the next trophy. Don't be stupid enough to think you're anything more to him than a few wet holes and another short-lived victory."

"Yes, Alpha-Lord." Pretending, always pretending. When what she really wanted to do was to leap forward and claw out Egan's eyes.

He wasn't warning her out of concern, but to protect the Consortium's interests.

At Egan's order, one guard marched to her window and peered out, though her view was the dome wall and a hundred-foot drop to the ground below.

While visitors to the dome stayed in top-of-the-line guest quarters offering the latest amenities, all Consortium-owned personnel lived in sterile, gray-tiled housing just outside the sight lines of the golden coliseum and tourist streets.

Her room was a small space that housed a narrow bed, a thin blanket and pillow, and a closet large enough to contain the sheer scraps of fabric chosen for her to wear by the Consortium.

The only other item in her room were the restraints.

“Next time you perform, pay special attention to N’gal Verish and Kadon Stormhart, not some gutter-trash Skolov whose family is not even a part of the Brotherhood. Do I make myself clear?”

“Yes, Alpha Lord.”

She’d seen N’gal Verish at several fights while training to be a prize and didn’t like the cruel glint in his stare, or the way his antennae and wings twitched whenever she was near. Nor his reputation as a sore loser in the ring.

As for Kadon Stormhart, he was not the Alpha for her either.

Admittedly, she’d had a teeny crush on him as a youngling. He’d fought in lesser training tournaments alongside her brother and, since one of her tasks as a prize-in-training was to greet the fighters as they entered the ring, she’d seen him often. Golden-haired and square-jawed with a body honed by battle, thick black horns and silver skin, she’d sighed right alongside her friends as he fought. But she’d never once imagined a future with Kadon—and now that she knew the truth about him, that certainly hadn’t changed.

Plus, she’d never reacted to him like she had to Damien Skolov.

Security finished their checks. “All clear.”

“I want two guards outside this door tonight.” Egan’s gaze flickered to her. “And tie her to the bed. I will tolerate no more complications on her account.”

A cry of alarm escaped Scarlett before she could muffle it. “I’ve done nothing wrong.”

The restraints were usually only used for punishment.

“Silence.” Egan nodded to Nars. “Do it.” He paused. “But don’t make the binds too tight. Skin paint will only cover so much.”

“I-I can get on the bed myself.” Panic slid through her, unbidden colors flashing across her skin, including the same violent pink as earlier and a sudden jagged burst of black, accompanied by a rush of heat in her closed palms.

She had never liked Nars or the others touching her, but since seeing the red-skinned Alpha, it felt like a desecration.

Nars ignored her, grabbing her upper arm and yanking her toward the bed. Hard.

However, in the next heartbeat, he groaned, his grip dropping away as he doubled over.

Hand pressed to the red mark left behind on her skin, Scarlett slid out of

reach.

Egan backed up as well.

“What’s wrong with you, guard?” Egan’s hand clamped over his scent muffler like a shield. “Are you sick? Contagious? I just said I can’t afford for anything to go wrong.”

Scarlett hoped he was really, really sick and that Egan caught it too.

“No, I…” Nars’s eyes sank shut, drool dripping off one tusk.

“Get out of here.” Egan waved toward the door. “Go to the med center. Don’t come back until you’re cleared.”

“But—”

“Go!”

Nars shuffled out.

Egan’s narrowed gaze returned to her, every pent-up frustration from this lunar rotation burning in his stare.

Menace thickened the air.

The three security guards at his back growled low, excited by their leader’s aggression.

A flash of magenta shimmered across her skin, followed by a thicker line of black, its essence dark and violent. Just like earlier, when the guards hurt the handsome Alpha and when Nars hurt her.

But there was no time to wonder what was happening with her gift.

“On the bed this instant.” Egan’s voice shook the room. “Unless you want all four limbs tied spread-eagled, with guards inside the room, watching your little light show up close and personal all night.”

The guards’ snickers dulled her colors, including the ribbon of black, before they disappeared altogether.

Left with no better option, Scarlett followed orders, slipping into bed and raising her arms above her head.

“You better not give me any more trouble, prize.” Egan snapped the bed restraint to one wrist cuff and then the other. “I’ve got enough to worry about with this new investor. I will not have you or that space-trash Damien Skolov bring me down. He has his own plans for that cocky bastard, and I have no intention of pissing him off.” His fetid breath washed across her cheek. “You best remember, nothing breaks as easily as a colorful, flimsy toy.”

His words sent an ominous chill through her.

But before she could figure out what he meant and who this new investor might be, Egan strode away, the security guards close on his heels.

The lights went out.

Darkness flooded the room.

*Slam.* The door shut and locked.

She was alone. Finally. The restraints kept her tied to the bed, but had enough length to allow her some movement, so she slid her arms down as far as she could and, for the first time all rotation, let loose.

Furious reds and vibrant pinks flashed across the walls. Followed by vengeful yellows and rebellious oranges. None of the colors meshed prettily, and all swirled with bold, jarring ribbons of black that pulsed with aggression.

Those black strips grew thicker with every heartbeat, consuming the other colors with a monstrous hunger that felt almost insatiable, the heat inside her near-blistering.

*Scrape.* A noise issued from somewhere close by. Could it be a guard reopening the door? If so, this was no sanctioned visit.

Stiffening, Scarlett sucked the sensations into herself, smothering her colors and leaving only the inky blackness of the room behind. “Who’s there?”

She cocked her head, listening.

*Scrape.* The faint noise came again.

She shifted, trying to pinpoint the sound, her wrists straining against the ties.

A hulking form appeared at the side of her bed.

Instinct kicked in. Fear, too.

A bright yellow cloud of color erupted from her skin in a sudden flare of blinding light.

“What the—”

As darkness returned, she remembered her brother’s instructions, her leg sweeping out to hook around her ambusher’s vulnerable knee.

He pitched forward.

She balled her hand into a fist and struck out as far as her restraint allowed—only to notice the fire searing her skin, the now familiar throbbing at her wrists and throat.

*It was him.*

“Whoa, there.” Damien Skolov’s hand caught hers before she could connect. “I’m not here to hurt you, beautiful.”

As her brain caught up, her terror slid away. Replaced by new, equally

tumultuous sensations.

“I only want to make you feel good.” He landed on top of her, his hips pinning her to the mattress while he guided her arms back over her head. The lower half of his heavy body rested between her spread thighs, something huge and thick pressing against her core.

A core that was instantly wet, and desperate for him.

New colors flashed across her skin, dancing over him like a caress: carnal, vivid crimson and violet chased by deep, harmonious blue, painting them both in sensual hues that pierced the shadows and outlined the rugged face and square jaw a fingerbreadth from hers.

“Stunning.” His voice was a sinful rumble as he rocked against her. “Like the rest... of you.” He dipped his head, his nose skimming along her throat, his voice deepening as his sentences fragmented and the haze of his deepening rut scented the air. “So... fucking... sweet.” The tip of his tongue curled around her earlobe. “I’d scale... any height for a taste of you.”

Lost to the haze of the omega heat, Scarlett moaned low, her eyelids fluttering closed. His scent was mouthwatering, the sharp bite of leather, ice, and power flooding her lungs.

“I knew... you were... the one.” He held himself above her with one arm, the muscles bunching and flexing in a captivating display. The other slipped beneath her sleeping gown, sliding up her leg, the rough heat of his palm against her skin making her wild.

Lifting her hips, she ground against him, the thick firmness of his leathers the perfect friction against her core.

He groaned low. “Fuuuck. So... damned good. Going to mark you... rut you... breed you.”

A faint voice inside Scarlett called out a warning to slow down, but the roar of lust thundering through her veins easily drowned it out. The swirl of stunning colors blinding her to anything but the beauty of this moment. Of him.

She’d been waiting for this male her whole life.

“Damien.” She whispered his name, the sinful sweetness of saying it aloud making her rub against him faster. If only she could hold him to her, but this... this would have to do.

“Yes. Say... my name... until it’s time... to scream it.” He slid his hand down to grip her bottom, working her body up and down his shaft as if reading her mind. “Don’t worry... about the guards. I... paid them off.

You're... all... mine."

"Yes." Her back bowed, her breasts aching as everything inside her coiled tight.

"Touch... me, Scarlett. I want..." His movements stilled.

"No, please." She was so close. "Don't stop."

"Egan tied you to the fucking bed?" He rocketed off her.

Her haze of lust cleared enough for her to register the murderous look on Damien's face—and the sheer recklessness of what she'd just done.

He whirled toward the door. "I will fucking kill him."





SCARLETT

“**W**ait. No.” Surging upright as far as the restraints would allow, she tried to catch his arm—and missed. “Don’t. Please.”

Already at the door, he stilled, the muscles in his forearm flexing as his fists clenched.

She spoke fast. “You can’t kill him. Or be seen leaving my room. I’ll be punished. You’ll be banned from the tournament. Please. Think this through.”

Low, feral growls rumbled through the room.

Panic pooled at the back of her throat. “Please. I’m fine.”

“You’re not.” Gaze hot and angry, the Alpha turned, rubbing at his sternum. “I can feel it. Here. You’re not fine. Not at all.”

She sucked down a breath, her spine flattening against the flimsy headboard.

He was right. She wasn’t. But it wasn’t the restraints. She was used to those.

It was her.

She had never been so reckless before, so driven by lust that she forgot everything else, even her survival.

Even now, the urge to slide down the bed and beg Damien Skolov to pick up where he’d left off thundered through her blood, a drumbeat of filthy, raw need she could barely leash.

“You need to go.” Her gaze flickered toward the door. It was a miracle they hadn’t been discovered.

At least they were both back to speaking in full sentences now—and he’d

stopped before he marked or rutted her.

Damien's scowl deepened. "I'm not going anywhere."

"The guards—"

"I paid them enough not to hear anything at all. Right now, they're down the hall, being entertained by a couple of omegas who've also been paid handsomely to keep them distracted."

Oh. Right. She had vaguely heard him mention that when he'd been grinding on top of her.

No wonder no one had come. Bribes were a way of life in the dome, but with no money of her own, she had no way of taking advantage.

Apparently, Damien Skolov did not have the same problem.

He stalked toward the bed.

Tugging at the restraints, she curled her spine into the headboard, yellow splashing across her skin. "What are you doing? I know it might seem from my willing behavior before—"

His jaw went tight. "I would never fucking hurt you. Or force you."

And yet, he kept coming.

Even the muscles in his neck bulged as he loomed above, arms outstretched.

She held her breath.

But those massive arms only extended past her, lifting her and the mattress with minimal effort, his big hand sweeping beneath. "There."

The restraints holding her to the bed sagged.

He dropped the mattress but didn't step back. She landed with a bounce, flat on her back, his big body above hers.

"Better." He wasn't asking. Instead, he stared down at her with a look of satisfaction. For the first time, amber edged out the red in his gaze, and she glimpsed his natural eye color outside the throes of rut.

It was almost as disorienting as the realization that he'd unclipped the restraints from beneath the bed.

For such a brawny guy, he was proving to have a resourceful mind as well.

"Thank you." Sitting up, she rubbed at her wrists, the long end of the restraints dangling against her thighs. It was nice to move freely, but even without the ties, her skin beneath the cuffs burned. Just like her throat.

Just like the throbbing, swollen area between her thighs.

All because of this Alpha.

“I never want to do anything that would cause you harm.” His deep, earnest rumble snapped her gaze back to him.

Her chest pinched tight. She felt the same.

Literally. As if faint, invisible tendrils stretched from him to her and back again, telegraphing the chaos of his emotions—protectiveness, lust, need, frustration, and fury—as if they were her own.

And maybe they were.

All she wanted was to beg him to touch her again.

But that could not happen. He was a fighter. She was a prize. If caught, there would be no end to her suffering and his.

“I-I appreciate you freeing me. But I need you to put the restraints back on.”

His amber eyes—streaked with red—flashed with defiance. “No.”

She kept talking. “Then you need to go. This was...” she forced the words out, “a mistake.”

He snarled low. “No mistake.” He slapped the flat of his palm against his chest. “I feel you here. All those vibrant colors, sinking beneath my skin, staining every cell so I’ll never look at anything the same ever again.”

A soft sigh escaped. No one had ever said anything so lovely to her before.

“You feel it too, Scarlett. I know it.” His tone deepened to a coaxing rasp. “You and I are what happens when everything is just right.”

Her body responded to his disarming statement, slick pooling between her folds.

She did feel it.

But she had to be smart, to think of her own survival. And his. Hadn’t her brother warned her against letting lust and love rule her choices?

“You need to stay away from me. *This*,”—she gestured between them—“won’t end well. It’s forbidden to touch a prize before a champion is decided.”

“Good thing it’s already decided.” His voice pitched to a low, teasing rumble, his mood shifting from intense to playful as easily as a fighter executing a feint and jab.

Scarlett got the sense she’d miscalculated, that Damien Skolov lived for a challenge, and she’d handed him one.

“There’s no chance in hells I’m not winning this tournament.” The determination in his voice confirmed her suspicion. “Especially now that I’ve

met you.”

“Such a big head. It’s dangerous to be too cocky.”

“Omega, I can promise you, when I’m between those pretty thighs, and you’re screaming my name, *both* my big heads will only grow bigger.”

Her laughter caught her by surprise. “You’re outrageous.”

The rough pad of his thumb stroked her upturned lips. “Try to tame me. I dare you.”

Wanton need mixed with the colors inside her, sparking and swirling like a windstorm.

A few escaped, flashing outward.

He groaned, his gaze tracking the splashes of color as they slid across his skin. “It feels like the lightest of touches. I can’t wait to feel your hands on me.”

She started. No one had ever felt her colors before.

“You should know, Scarlett.” He leaned over the mattress and tucked a stray hair behind her ear. “I have fought for everything I’ve ever gotten. I have no problem fighting for you too.”

Her heart fluttered inside her chest. “You’re too young for me.”

“Why don’t you try me out and see?” His thick thighs pressed into the edge of the bed, that cocky grin playing at the corners of his full lips. “You had no complaints before.”

Goddess help her, she hadn’t.

She’d never been as needy and wet as Damien Skolov made her with just a few rubs of her clit against that enormous bulge stretching his leathers.

“That was…” She shrugged. “I lost myself for a moment.”

“Same. I meant to at least introduce myself before climbing on top of you.” He shook his head, running a hand down his jaw. “My brothers would have my ass for that. But it doesn’t change the fact that you’re mine. And I can’t wait to give you so much pleasure that all the colors of the galaxy dance behind your eyes as you come screaming my name.”

Scarlett pressed her thighs together, finding it hard to catch her breath, much less keep from squirming. The picture he painted was all she could see.

She craved more of his sweet words. Hungered for his teasing and intense declarations.

Most of all, she wanted him to touch her like before.

And it didn’t matter that this was too fast or too reckless. There was something about Damien Skolov that had her running headlong toward the

edge. Something about him that made her believe he'd catch her, no matter what.

Which was why her voice shook as she said, "I'm inspected every sun's rise. If we do this, you can't come inside me. If we're discovered, it will cost us both. They'll punish me and ban you from the tournament."

"Ah, sweet Scarlett." He traced the cuff at her wrist, as if he knew what lay beneath, his touch sending shivers down her spine. "Hurting you is the last thing I want. I will control myself from here on out. I promise." His fingertip feathered across her brows and down her jaw. "There's no rush, anyway. You and I are going to have all the time in the galaxy for fucking and knotting."

"What does that mean?" Her heart slammed against her ribs as foolish hope sparked.

"It means, beautiful"—he gripped her chin and guided her to her knees on the bed, tilting her gaze up to lock with his—"that this is not a short-term thing."

"But Egan—"

"Fuck Egan." Damien's grip tightened. "I'm not just fighting for a prize. I'm fighting for my female. For our future. You're going to be my prime omega, Scarlett Skolov, and I won't let anyone get in the way of that."

His prime omega.

Her heart turned over in her chest.

Not just some short-term trophy.

His forever. Just as he'd be hers.

An offer made because of a genuine connection, not an obligatory favor done out of pity and care for her brother.

Never in a thousand planetary rotations would she have imagined that fate was possible for a Consortium prize.

Now she wanted it more than anything.

"I mean it, Scarlett. I might not currently have the reputation some of these other fighters have, but I'll be well-known some rotation soon. Maybe one of the greatest champions to grace these rings. I can promise you that."

The tension in his tone made her realize he'd taken her silence as doubt rather than surprise.

"I believe you." Her hand curled around as much of his wrist as she could hold in her grip.

"Yeah?" He let out a slow breath, his shoulders loosening.

“Absolutely.”

“Good.” He slid his hand down so their palms touched, threading his fingers with hers. “And you’ll be by my side, sharing the glory. My greatest prize, and so much more. You’re my inspiration. My mate.” He raised their intertwined hands and kissed each of her knuckles. “They might call my name in the ring, but I know exactly whose name I’ll be calling out with every beat of my heart.”

Her soul took flight.

She could never have imagined Damien Skolov.

Being with him was forbidden... reckless... stupid.

She was doing it anyway.

Scarlett took his hand and fell back onto her elbows. Tugging him to her, she spread her legs and looked up at him, a slow trilling sound she’d never made before emerging from her throat. “Show me our future, Alpha.”



Damien

Damien let her pull him off-center, following her onto the bed. Why not? He’d been knocked off balance since he’d first seen her.

And that purr... It called to every fiber of his being.

Plus, she took him exactly where he wanted to be: elbows braced against the mattress to take the worst of his weight while his legs rested between her pretty thighs, his skin pressed so close to hers that he could feel her heart beating as if it were his own.

Damien had never considered himself a fortunate male. Everything he had, he’d gained through sweat, blood, and broken bones.

But as he stared down at Scarlett, the strands of her gorgeous gold and red hair falling onto the pillow, her eyes full of challenge and heat as those rich colors coiled across her skin like a sensuous caress, he realized he was the luckiest fucking bastard in the galaxy.

He was going to do whatever it took to prove himself worthy of her trust.

Unable to wait any longer, he claimed her mouth—and groaned aloud when she met his claim with equal fervor. Their tongues tangled in a wild mating as her purr and his growl vibrated in unison, a cataclysmic tremor he felt to his soul.

Fuck. She tasted so good.

He could do this forever.

Except then she squirmed against him, her nipples stiff peaks against his chest while her thighs shifted restlessly against his, her sleeping gown rucking up higher and higher. He didn't need to be an expert to know his female was needy and aching, and that it was his place to do something about it.

Heart beating fast, his cock already hard, pre-cum leaking onto the inside of his leathers, he forced himself to break the kiss.

She whimpered.

“Don't think I'm done kissing you, Omega.” He pressed his lips to each corner of her mouth, then to her closed eyes. Cherishing. Worshiping. “Not even close.” He slid downward, lightly dragging his fangs across her throat and belly. “I just want to kiss you somewhere else.”

“I've never done that.”

“Me either.”

Her gorgeous eyes grew comically wide. “Really?”

“I don't lie, baby.”

Her lips tilted upward. “I like that.” Her cheeks flushed once more. “I like everything about you.”

“I'm glad.” He nipped at the inside of her thigh, then laved it with his tongue. “You tell me if I do anything you don't like.”

She smiled down at him, each grin a little more open, a match to the increasingly vivid, carnal reds and pinks flashing across her skin. “I've loved everything so far.”

He sensed no shyness. Only excitement—and a wild recklessness that complemented his own.

He trailed his fangs along the curve of her thigh, inhaling the mouthwatering musky scent of her, his gums throbbing as the instinct to mark her became almost impossible to resist.

Before he did anything stupid, he pushed the hem of her sleeping gown the rest of the way up, baring her to his gaze.

His breath left him in a rush.

She was a feast for the senses. Perfect, handful-sized tits topped with stiff, dark red nipples, a narrow waist, and lush hips. And right in front of his face, a juicy, shiny cunt that was the prettiest thing he'd ever seen.

“Damien?” Nerves strained her voice.



Probably because he'd frozen like an idiot. "You are so fucking beautiful."

She peered down at him, a sweet, shy smile on her face. "I think you are too."

Everything about her was soft, exquisite, addictive.

His mouth trailed over her core, his tongue delving between the slippery folds and holy fucking Goddess, he'd tasted nothing better.

And when she clamped those gorgeous thighs around the sides of his face and lifted her bottom, he felt like more of a champion than he'd ever felt winning a fight. His chest puffed wide, his reason for being now perfectly fucking clear.

Following her cues—and those sensual little sighs—he used the flat of his tongue to work the area just beneath her clit as he built her pleasure.

With a brother like Alexi, he'd learned a thing or two about pleasing a female in the abstract.

But practice makes perfect, and he planned to practice a lot from here on out.

"Yes. Oh, Damien. Yes."

He would never get enough of hearing her say his name like that.

Or the soft, sexy vibrations issuing from her throat: his omega's purr. His soul responded, rumbling back to create a song that was uniquely theirs.

He took his time, holding her hips down when she got too squirmy, feasting, relishing, calling on every bit of his discipline.

Because every time she rolled her hips and made that sweet purring sound, his shaft only grew harder, his knot more swollen.

His dick didn't seem to get the message that release wouldn't be happening any time soon.

No, it kept urging him to thrust inside her. Or jerk off all over her and rub his essence into her skin. Or sink his fangs deep into her throat.

The instinct to claim her with his fangs, cum, and cock a primal drumbeat he could barely keep from answering.

Except the instant he did, it would be game over.

No tournament. No prize money. No Scarlett.

And that was unacceptable.

So, he'd keep his leathers on, his dick tucked inside, and pour all his need, all his hunger, into making his female scream his name.

Many times.

Starting now.

Pressing her hips down—he noticed she got even louder when he restrained her—he skimmed his tongue over her swollen clit.

She went ballistic. Legs spread wide. Hips lifting.

He fucking loved it—and rewarded her by pinning her down harder, lapping at her clit faster.

Until she shattered, her gorgeous tits heaving as her body twitched beneath his palms and her essence spilled onto his tongue.

He'd never tasted anything sweeter.

When she tried to wiggle away, her fingers tugging at his hair, he grabbed the ends of the restraints and took control of her arms, wrapping the ties around each thigh to pin her wrists to her legs. "Again."

She went fucking wild after that.



## SCARLETT

Scarlett awoke on her back, moaning, Damien's head between her thighs. Again.

"Oh, Goddess, that feels so good. But..." She threaded her fingers through his hair and tugged halfheartedly—even as her hips lifted to meet the slow stroke of his tongue. "Shouldn't you...?" Awash with pleasure, overcome with exhaustion, it was hard to think. "The guards..."

"Mmm." Following his own agenda, he worked the flat of his tongue over her clit. "Once... more. For... me."

He'd brought her to climax so many times already.

"I-I can't."

He pulled back, nuzzling one thigh, then the other. "One more taste, sweet Scarlett."

She was becoming a glutton. And had already given up on trying to convince him to let her touch him too.

He'd said it was too risky this time, but that he'd figure out a safer place where they could experiment more next time they were together.

She couldn't wait.

In the meantime... Scarlett spread her legs wider.

His growled approval vibrated against her core. "You see? We younglings have our advantages." He nipped at the curve of her thigh, his eyes teasing as he looked up at her. "All this tireless energy and staying power... and it's all for you."

She giggled. He hadn't forgotten her comment that he was too young for her. "You're only three planetary rotations younger than me, smartass."

“A smart-ass you can’t get enough of.” He surprised her by rolling her over and gently scraping his fangs against her bottom. “But I prefer my female’s sweet behind.”

Another laugh emerged. She’d no idea having fun could be this filthy.

But with Damien, anything felt possible.

“Then again”—his fangs dragged along the curve of her ass and toward her inner thigh—“all of you is sweet.”

Her laughter turned to a soft, keening whimper as his tongue delved into the split of her bottom.

She shivered.

“Sensitive, huh?”

“Mmm.”

“It’s gonna feel so fucking good when I put my cock in that tight hole.”

She stilled. Then, pushed up on an elbow to stare at him over her shoulder. “You’re too big.”

He chuckled. “Music to my fucking Alpha ears.” The flat of his palm slid between her thighs to cup her core. “But don’t worry, baby. When I put my cock inside your ass, you’ll be ready.” He tapped her clit with two firm fingers. “Aching.” He did it again. “Begging.”

She panted, her bottom rocking in time with each gentle slap of her clit.

“I’ll make it feel so good, you’ll beg me to do it again and again.” Another firm tap. “And I will, because you’ll be mine and we’ll have all the time in the galaxy to do whatever we like.”

She came apart, her head buried in her pillow, muffling her scream.

It took her a while to catch her breath—and find the strength to move her sated muscles.

But she finally did, turning over to find Damien propped up on one elbow, staring down at her, a satisfied smile on his face. “I could watch you forever.” His grin disappeared. “But I can’t. Not yet, anyway.” He pressed a kiss to her forehead. “I have to be at the arena soon for the start of the tournament and my first matches, and I definitely need to clean up before I do.”

“Of course.” Much as she wanted to stay cuddled up next to him forever, it couldn’t happen. Guilt and worry crashed over her. They’d been up for much of the night. “Are you tired?”

“No.” He winked at her. “Energized.” His expression sobered. “I’ve got this. Don’t worry.”

Right. He didn't need to carry her fears as well. So she did what she always did. She forced a smile and found the courage to endure. To pretend that she wasn't terrified this would blow up in their faces.

Rising to her elbow, doing her best to lock down the swirling rush of nervous gold, yellow and gray hues that wanted to flash across her skin, she pressed a kiss to his nose. Then, flattened her palms against his chest, attempting to push him from the bed. "Go."

He didn't budge. Only growled.

It warmed her to know he was reluctant to leave. "The sooner you go, the sooner you can return to me."

Scowl still in place, he blew out a breath as his fist hit the bed. "You're right."

"Get used to it."

With a bark of laughter, he unfurled from the bed, stretching as he stood—and she almost whimpered aloud.

Damien's muscled chest beneath her hands was a heady experience, but seeing him shirtless in all his glory was almost too much to bear.

The male's body was truly spectacular, a chiseled masterpiece.

He scanned the room, striding over to the window he'd opened in the night. He shut it easily, his body so sculpted she saw every muscle in his back working as he moved.

She stifled another sigh.

"I want to make sure I don't leave anything behind that will get you in trouble." The worry in his voice snapped her from her lustful daze.

"Everything looks good." She lay back on the mattress and placed her arms above her head. "I just need you to hook the restraints back under the bed."



Damien

Damien stilled, his best intentions crumbling. "Not sure I can do that."

The thought of leaving her already made him edgy.

Now the reminder that he'd need to tie her back up was enough to have his fangs punching at his gums and his body shaking with the urge to rip off the heads of every Alpha in the vicinity, gouging out their leering eyes for

good measure.

“You have to.” Scarlett glared up at him as if she could make him move if he didn’t want to. It was fucking adorable.

Less adorable? The thought of Egan and the other fighters. He didn’t want them fucking near her, but he couldn’t exactly take care of them like he had her security.

One brief conversation let them know they had two choices: accept his bribe and keep their tongues, eyes and fingers by never touching his female again, or lose it all.

They’d smartly chosen the former.

But now...

“I’ll be fine.”

He hated when she said that.

“Go, please. If you get caught, you can’t win the tournament—or me.”

It was the only thing that pulled him back from the edge. “You’re right. Eyes on the prize.”

“Don’t call me that.”

“How about I just call you mine?” Damien leaped to the bed and scooped her up, his arm sliding beneath her legs while the other banded around her back, so he could hold her close, claiming her sweet mouth, relishing the way she melted against him, her soft tits pressing against his chest as their tongues tangled and he saw everything he wanted within reach.

Then, with a sigh, he ended the kiss too soon and tossed her easily into the air—and caught her once more, enjoying the way she laughed and threw her arms around his neck. She was light as a feather.

Holding her was almost as good as burying his face in her sweet cunt.

And her laughter eased the tightness in his chest.

Which was why he then placed her gently on the center of the bed and followed her down, pressing kisses to her mouth, her jaw, and her temple in hopes he could erase some of the shadows she was trying so hard to hide. “I could stay like this forever.”

She blinked up at him, her smile still in place. “Soon.”

Throat tight, he nodded. “Soon.” He realized she was a hell of a lot better at faking being tough than he’d ever be.

“Do it.”

With a curse, he grabbed the long ends of the restraints and shoved them beneath the mattress, his body hovering over hers. “One rotation, I’m gonna

let you tie me up like this too.”

Her pupils dilated. “Oh yeah?”

“Yeah.” He’d been joking—his attempt at another distraction. However, given her reaction, he was now one hundred percent serious. “You’ll tie me up, and when you have me at your mercy, you’ll climb on top and bounce that gorgeous body up and down on my cock.”

She shivered beneath him. “I won’t stop until you groan and growl and flood my pussy with your cum, and your knot swells so wide we’re locked together. Forever.”

Fuck. He was getting hard again. *Click*. He hooked the restraints back into place.

Then, before he could lose it—or stay too long and screw things up—he pulled away.

“It’s a date.” He pressed one final kiss to her forehead. “This... this is only temporary. Once I win the tournament, I’ll never leave your bed again. In my mind, you’re already mine.”

Then he spun and strode away, refusing to look back.

Soon enough, he promised himself, he’d win the tournament, and she’d be his forever. Nothing would ever separate them again.





SCARLETT

**R**otation one of the tournament

“Keep those eyes shut.” Damien accompanied his command with a gentle slap to her ass, then a slow caress.

Scarlett pushed her bottom back into his hand and wiggled. “How about my legs? Should those stay open or shut?”

His grip firmed. “Now, that’s just not fair.”

She giggled. Actually giggled.

“I like that sound. I waited impatiently all rotation to hear it again.” With a low growl, he corralled her forward, one palm clamped over her eyes while the other refused to leave her ass. He used his big body to guide her while keeping her safe in his arms, her back against his chest. “Now, I will admit, Crex helped me with this. But only a little.”

“I can’t wait to meet this new friend of yours.”

He squeezed her tighter, possession deepening his tone. “*After* we’re mated.”

She smiled to herself. She had no idea where they were going or what his surprise was, but he’d come for her soon after Egan and the guards left her room for the night, and she’d been smiling ever since.

Even when he’d pulled her into the hallway and rushed her into a small storage closet—not giving her no time to sympathize over the bruise on his cheek or the state of his swollen knuckles—before he shoved aside a dirty, heavy grate and leaped down, demanding she jump next.

He’d promised to catch her.

She hadn’t hesitated.

Safe in the warmth of his arms, she had never felt more sheltered or happy—or lustful.

She'd waited all rotation to touch him again.

Nervous for the morning medical examination, she'd carefully washed away any trace of Damien's scent and saliva before her appointment. But since there was no seed found on her and she's explained away the faint irritation between her thighs as a product of her dancing, she'd passed the inspection without any trouble.

It helped, too, that Egan was distracted with other tournament business, his attention more divided than usual.

Even better, his preoccupied state had allowed her more chances to sneak glances at Damien during the first official rotation of the tournament. Silently, she'd cheered him on while he fought and won each of his matches as she sat in her crystal cage above, the prize to be won.

All rotation long, she'd pressed her thighs tight as his beautiful body flexed and bunched, moving and dodging as he wiped the mat with his opponents.

All rotation long, she'd ached for him. Craved his skin against hers, his calloused hands gripping her hips, the taste of him on her tongue.

If anyone had told her only a few rotations past that she could feel this kind of giddy happiness and raw, reckless hunger—even while still in the dome, Egan's beady eyes on her whenever she was in her cage, still a prize for the Consortium—she would have said they were mad.

But here she was, her steps light, her blood thrumming hot and wild and free.

All because of Damien.

He'd busted into her life and changed everything.

"You can look now." His hand fell away.

She blinked, taking in the softly lit space. "What is this place?"

"I bribed a few of the guards to set it up for me. Apparently, it used to be part of the old underground city. Now it's storage. Or... as I like to think of it, our tunnel love den." He laughed his smartass laugh, but there was another layer. "What do you think?"

Vulnerability. That's what she detected in his voice. He'd done something special for her, and he had no idea if she'd like it or not.

The organ inside her chest tingled.

Damien was cocky. He might be younger than her, but he was more

worldly and confident. Plus, he was such a gigantic wall of brawn, a mountain of strength and power. At least on the outside.

So it comforted her to know he had his moments too. That inside, beneath all that corded flesh, he was as vulnerable as she was to the bond deepening between them.

Their bodies and souls might have recognized each other instantly, but there was still so much to learn about their connection. Still so much trust to forge.

The reminder made her feel all the more protective. He was clearly physically stronger, but she needed to take care of him as well.

“What I think,”—she spun in his hold and threw her arms around his chest—“is that I can’t believe you did this for me. I love it.”

He held her tight. “I would do anything for you, Scarlett.”

She was coming to believe him.

“I would do anything for you too, Damien Skolov.” She pressed a kiss above his heart. “Anything.”

An ominous foreboding rolled through her, stealing her lighthearted mood.

She’d been on her best behavior whenever Egan was around. He’d even praised her after her first performance of the rotation, remarking how vibrant her colors had become. A comment that made her nervous—since she knew the new richness resulted from her connection to Damien—but Egan had done nothing else out of the ordinary.

Nor had he mentioned this mysterious investor with special plans for Damien, though she’d kept her eyes and ears open.

Thankfully, Damien was staying alert too.

She’d told him about Egan’s reference to this mysterious male as soon as he came for her. In return, he’d told her about Olan Lundin, a family enemy who’d been hunting him and his siblings since they were younglings.

He suspected this might be who was after him—and he’d promised to be on guard.

She was still concerned.

“Scarlett?” Damien’s deep rasp rumbled by her ear, and she realized she’d gotten lost in her worries.

This was supposed to be a happy, stolen moment together.

“Let me look.” After placing another quick peck to his chest—she couldn’t resist—she pushed her palms against his torso and spun.

“So bossy.” He laughed but let her go.

Throat tightening, she took it all in.

There’d been an attempt to clear away the cobwebs and stack most of the crumbling rocks to the side.

Candles flickered in strategic locations, adding a warm, romantic glow to a space already softly lit by crystals imbedded in the ceiling and walls. A space now separated into two sections.

Her gaze bounced from one area to the next, the purr she made only when he was near vibrating through her.

In one corner, he’d arranged two chairs. She was almost certain she’d seen trainers sitting in similar ones in the arena earlier. Between the chairs was a stack of crates covered by a thin, emerald green blanket. A make-shift table with a platter of food rested on top.

In the other section, a mattress lay on the floor, several colorful blankets draped across it.

“Damien, I... I can’t believe you did all this.” Her voice trembled. “It’s... incredible.”

No one had ever done anything like this for her before.

And it wasn’t just the sweetness of the gesture itself.

She’d never realized how easily she’d accepted the crumbs the Consortium gave her, how passively she allowed them to keep her prisoner. But Damien had taken from them—raiding their supplies—to make something special for her. She’d been so focused on escaping the dome that she’d failed to see all the small ways she could push back and be free even while still here.

He was opening her eyes to a multitude of ways to fight back. There was a whole city, bequeathed to her by her mother’s kind, that she’d never dared explore.

It was yet another gift, and no matter what happened next, she’d always have it.

“I’m glad you like it.” Damien’s arms banded around her, the steady heat of him seeping into her as he drew her against him. “I wanted to give you a place that could be just yours. Away from the Consortium. Where you could be free to let your colors loose.”

With those words, she tumbled head over heels into love.

Wild, reckless, foolish, beautiful love.

There was no part of her now that didn’t breathe and move and exist for

this male—and she always would.

“It’s perfect.” She covered the big hands gripping her hips with her own. “And best of all, it’s not just mine. It’s ours.”

“Mmm.” His jaw nuzzled her temple while the bulge in his leathers prodded the small of her back. “I thought of you all rotation. Of coming here. Of all the things we could do together... in our secret hideaway. No need to be quiet. Few use the tunnels and I picked a sanctuary in the deepest part of the old city—and set a few traps to let me know long in advance if anyone does accidentally come our way. So, unless we hear those, there’s no need to worry about anyone finding us here. It’s just you and me... and all our secret fantasies.”

Need whispered through her, her body heating as her nipples went tight.

“I have so many.” She rocked back against him, her arms reaching behind her to grip his thighs and hold him to her. “You’re in trouble now. And that youthful endurance you’re so proud of? I only hope it’s going to be enough.”

He chuckled low and deep. “You know I like a challenge.”

“Then let’s get started.” Spinning in his hold, she pushed against his chest and broke free. Then, stepped back and crooked her finger his way. “I have so many plans.”

But really, she wanted to know what he wanted. To touch him everywhere, kiss away every bruise, hold his cock in her hands, and watch as he came apart under her tongue.

Because he’d made her come more times than she could count, but he’d refused to let her touch him. Or even take off his leathers.

She appreciated his thoughtfulness. She was, frankly, awed by his discipline, but enough was enough.

Her top fantasy? Watch the muscles in his body strain, the veins in his thick forearms and thighs flexing as his legs shook and her mouth bobbed up and down his shaft—until he poured his cum down her throat, his cock thrusting deep.

And before they left this room, that was what she’d have.

Crimson and violet, turquoise and emerald-green, smoky silver and vibrant orange splashed across the walls, a perfect portrait of all the need, tenderness, love, and filthy determination swirling inside her.

“I know exactly where to start.” She reached for the laces of his leathers while moving to kneel on the ground.

“Soon. But first...” He caught her before her knees hit, scooping her up

without warning. One arm under her legs, one at her back, he carried her toward the chairs. “I’ve plans of my own.”



Damien

The edginess running through Damien’s veins settled slightly as he held Scarlett in his arms, striding toward the makeshift table made from “borrowed” crates he’d snatched from the kitchens near the fighting arena.

He’d been on edge all rotation.

He fucking hated leaving her. Hated seeing her on display in that crystal cage. Hated hearing Egan bark out the word *prize*, snap his spindly fingers, and command her to perform. Hated the fighters who watched her with hungry eyes. Hated the worried look he occasionally caught in her stare and the tight smiles she sometimes threw his way. Hated every wasted heartbeat he wasn’t making her laugh or moan.

Fact was, he hated every fucking moment she wasn’t in his arms.

Once he reached the chairs, he placed her gently on her feet.

“Ah, I see.” She shoved him into a chair—and he let her—smiling a cheeky smile. “You want me to dance for you?” Those sexy hips of hers rocked from side to side. “A private showing?”

“Yes. Definitely.” Head bobbing up and down, he adjusted the bulge in his leathers. His dick was absolutely on board with that idea, but the greedy fucker would just have to wait. “But not before you eat.”

She stilled. “What?”

His hands fisted against his thighs. “You really want to know what I want more than anything right now?”

She raised an eyebrow. “Yes. Tell me.”

“I want you to come over here, sit on my lap, and let me... feed you.”

“You don’t have to do that.” She pressed a hand to her stomach, the colors on her skin and the walls dimming.

“I want to.”

Her lips pressed into a thin line, making the angles of her cheekbones all the easier to see. “I’m fine.”

He fucking hated that word from her.

He leaned forward. “You’re more than fine. You’re a warrior. You think

I'm gonna forget how you almost dropped me on my ass when I first snuck into your room—with all that yellow color flashing and that clever leg sweep?"

Her lips curved upward. "You'd better not."

"I won't. But you don't forget that we're a team." He barely resisted the urge to grab her and force her onto his lap. "But all warriors need to eat, and I know that fucker Egan's only feeding you once in the morning and again at night, while the Consortium has round-the-clock food piled high on long tables, available for its tournament fighters. So"—he patted his thigh and tried not to sound like the hothead he was—"I'd really like it if you came here and let me feed you." Then he brought out the big guns, flexing the muscles in his chest as he dropped his voice the way he knew she liked—and winked. "Plus, after you eat, I'll eat you."

Her burst of laughter cut through the tension. "Well, when you put it like that. I am starving." She leaped.

He rose from his chair and caught her, curving her legs around his hips, so that she straddled him as he sat back down.

Pure perfection.

Her skin pressed to his, her colors bright, her hot pussy rubbing against his leathers.

And when he took a doughy treat and slid it between her lips, her tongue coiling around his fingers, he got so hard he was sure his cock was about to break through his laces.

He forced himself to breathe deep—and keep it together.

Feeding her definitely eased the edginess.

But it didn't wipe it away altogether. Not by a long shot.

"Here." He offered her one of the Consortium's energy drinks. "You've got to be thirsty too."

"Thank you." She took it, a wide smile stretching her face as she raised it to her lips.

"Hold up." He slid his hand between her soft lips and the top of the canister.

She drew back. "What's wrong?"

He studied her—noticing how the colors on her skin had dimmed. "Do you like the energy drink, Scarlett?"

She flushed. "I really appreciate you getting it for me."

"That's not what I asked." He let some of his dominant Alpha command



roll into his voice. "I want the truth."

She shifted on his lap. Inhaled a deep breath. "No. It's too bitter."

She remained perfectly still, as if wary of what he would do next.

Which is why he forced himself to smile when what he really wanted to do was rip out the throats of every Consortium bastard who'd made her afraid to say what she wanted. "Got it. No more energy drinks." He placed the canister back on the table and grabbed his water bottle instead. "Better?"

"Much."

It was strange how she could be so bold about sex yet so shy when it came to the rest of her wants, but he suspected he understood the contradiction. They'd trained her to be a fetching, carnal prize. She hadn't yet fully learned she could be anything else.

He brought the container to her lips.

She grabbed his wrist, stopping him just before the bottle reached her mouth. "Thank you."

He understood. "You don't need to thank me. I should thank you for trusting me enough to tell me the truth. Too many fuckers haven't listened to a word you say. Not me. You tell me what you want. I do it. That's how we operate from here on out. That's my vow to you."

She studied him, the shimmering colors on her skin flashing faster than before. "Okay."

Through their invisible bond, he sensed her hope and her nerves.

"We'll practice this. It will get easier." He picked up a Verishian meat pie. Fighters were supplied delicacies from across the galaxy during the tournament. "You like this one?" He held it close to her lips.

She wrinkled her nose.

He laughed. "No, huh? I'm not a fan either." He tossed it back onto the tray and chose a sweeter plant dish from his homeland, *svalketh*. "How about this one?"

"Yes."

"See, we got this." He slid a small morsel between her lips and muffled a groan.

He'd never truly understood what it was he truly needed in his life. Now he did.

It was this. It was her.

He relished every moment spent slipping food between her perfect lips, but as they neared the end of the meal, he could contain his question no

longer.

“So, what did Kadon Stormhart say to you?” He fed her another choice bit of *svalketh*.

It took way too long for her to chew and swallow. “What?”

“I was in the thick of my matches, but I saw Egan take you to speak with Kadon’s father and the Golden Boy himself.”

“Yes, it’s part of my duties as a prize. Kadon’s father, Andor Stormhart, is a Brotherhood member and a major investor in the Consortium tournaments. Big investors like him are always offered a special look at the prize.” There was a wariness to her voice Damien didn’t like and that same tight smile he’d hoped to never see again.

“That better be all he did.”

“Of course, even an Alpha as powerful as Andor Stormhart can’t touch a prize.”

“What did Kadon say?” He noticed she hadn’t yet given him an answer.

It looked like they’d need a lot more practice to get her comfortable opening up.

She shrugged. “Not much. We exchanged a few words. He asked if he could fetch me a drink. Egan told him I was fine.”

So the fucker was thoughtful as well as handsome. Great.

There wasn’t a soul alive who didn’t know Stormhart’s father was a bigwig in the Brotherhood who’d made his fortune through raiding. He’d put a lot of time and money into his son’s training and it showed. His heir, Kadon, was an excellent fighter.

But Damien was sure he was better.

Scarlett’s hand wrapped around his wrist, pulling him from his thoughts. “I’m done eating—and talking.”

He was still deciding about her sudden shift in mood, and whether he should push a little more, when she scooted backwards and climbed off his lap.

With no more warning, she dropped to her knees between his spread thighs, her mouth inches from the bulge pushing against his leathers. “I’m hungry for something else.” Her tongue flicked out, leaving a shiny spot on his pants—and almost making him come on the spot. “And you told me I should tell you what I want.”

“I did, didn’t I?” He tangled his fingers in her silky hair as his other hand tugged at his laces. “Then let me feed you.”

He undid his laces faster than he ever had in his life.

His hand slipped into his leathers and pulled out his dick, fisting it as her hungry gaze locked on his movements.

He'd never been more aware of the thick veins that snaked along his shaft, from his balls to its mushroom top. Or the ridges that banded his cock at regular intervals.

"Big." The word left her in a whispered huff.

He winked. "Just like the rest of me."

"I want to lick it." She leaned closer, her breath skimming his thigh, that soft, sweet purr vibrating against his skin.

His dick twitched in his palm, a drop of liquid spilling from the tip.

He wanted to thrust it between her pretty red lips so bad, then flip her over and fuck her as he sank his fangs into her throat and planted a youngling in her belly... But then the Consortium would know, and she'd be in danger.

So he locked down the impulse and focused instead on how much he liked the way she looked at him.

Not as if he was a bruiser, but a champion.

It humbled him.

And gave him the strength to sound almost in control as he rasped, "I'd like that, baby. I'd like you to lick it very much."

Her red lips formed a welcoming O.

With a grunt, he slid his hips forward on the chair, eyes rolling back when she tongued his slit. "Fuck, yes."

"You taste so good." Her tongue coiled around his shaft as a purr vibrated from her throat, traveling straight to his dick.

His vision turned red. He dug one set of claws into the metal seat to keep his ass planted right where it was.

"You're shaking." One small hand came to rest on his thigh.

Another reminder. Scarlett was so much smaller than him. More delicate. He could hurt her so easily.

But he never would.

"It's your touch." He played with her hair, letting it sift through his fingers as he fought to bring himself under control. "It fucking shatters me, and I've... I've done a lot of brutal things with my hands. I'm not a gentle guy. But I want to be gentle with you. I want to get it right."

"You are." She pressed her cheek to his thigh. Trilled her tongue along his shaft. "I love the way you touch me. The way you look at me and talk to

me. Like I'm not just some prize but a real, flesh-and-blood creature."

"Really?" He smiled down at her. "Because sometimes I can't believe you are."

"Does this help?" She slid her mouth down over the head of his cock and sucked hard.

"Fuck, yeah. That helps. A lot."



## DAMIEN

### **R**otation two of the tournament

Damien was still riding high the next rotation when he took a break from training to grab a drink, maneuvering past all the bodies still grunting, sweating, and slamming into one another on the mats.

He'd made it through another round of one-on-one matches with ease, shown Crex a few moves on the mats, and was now marking down the moments until he could see Scarlett again.

As if Egan knew it would piss him off, the bastard hadn't put her inside the training arena this rotation. Apparently, she'd been placed outside to drum up more interest in the event.

Damien fucking hated it.

But at least he knew she was safe. There was no getting through that crystal barrier. It hadn't even cracked when he'd slammed against it.

Soon she'd be back in his arms. He missed her already.

Didn't help that he was reminded of her every time a particular trainer barked out a correction to one of the Consortium fighters. Though the large Alpha looked nothing like his dainty Scarlett, he had eerily similar gold hair with red streaks. Also, there was just something about the way the male held himself that reminded Damien of a certain omega.

It made Damien wonder if the guy had some connection to Scarlett. She'd mentioned a brother, Luc, and spoken of him fondly. Actually, she'd made it sound like the guy shit space gems from his ass, so he really hoped the trainer wasn't him.

Especially since the Alphahole wouldn't stop glaring at him.

To be contrary, Damien gave him a chin nod.

Despite the scent muffler, Damien was one hundred percent certain the guy didn't smile back.

He did, however, saunter over. His shoulder knocked into Damien's as he reached for one of the Consortium's energy drinks. "Stormhart is the best choice to win this tournament and Scarlett."

Damien instantly bristled. "Fuck that."

The trainer turned, raising the canister to the slit in his mask as he pretended to drink, but Damien still heard him loud and clear. "I'm her brother. I know what's best."

Mystery solved. "Not this time."

They eyed each other, challenge thickening the air.

Luc broke their staring match. "Kadon Stormhart is Brotherhood. He's respected, well-liked within the Consortium, and a good male."

"But he isn't me." Here he was again, having to prove himself.

"Exactly," the other male scoffed. "He's promised he'll keep her safe and out of the Consortium's clutches. He'll make her his prime omega."

"So will I."

A beat of silence. Damien had surprised him. Good.

But even that didn't shut the Consortium Alpha up for long. "You're too young to know what you want. Or to make such promises. Does your family even know you're here?"

Damien hated that Luc's shot in the dark hit home. "I'm old enough." He was getting awfully tired of having to defend his age. "Old enough to satisfy all of Scarlett's needs." He smirked, then felt like an asshole, so he added, "We're in love."

"You fool. It's been only two rotations since you pulled your little stunt and pissed off the Consortium. You don't even know her."

"Sometimes, you just know." At least the jerk had no idea he and Scarlett were spending time together.

Luc studied him. Blew out a breath. "Fine. I'll grant you that. Sometimes"—a muscle pulsed in his jaw—"the connection is just there, and you know. But it's not enough. You think love matters in the end?" The canister crumpled in his hand. "It doesn't once survival is on the line."

"Hells. Cynical much." Damien tossed his own drink aside. "You nursing a broken heart?"

Scarlett's brother snarled at him, getting in his face. "You know nothing."

Damien was not one to back down. Chest puffing wide, he snarled right back. “I know I can make Scarlett happy. I know I can protect her. Keep her safe.”

“You aren’t even Brotherhood. Even if you win, do you really think you can give her what Stormhart can?”

Damien’s fangs punched against his gums, the urge to strike back intense. But this was Scarlett’s brother. And it would be a lot easier for them all if the Alphahole liked him.

He took a breath. Stepped back. “Did Scarlett say she wanted Stormhart?”

Luc’s gaze slid away. “No.”

Relief slammed through Damien. “Well then, there’s your answer.”

“Not even close.” Luc’s voice was still low, but it carried a new strain of urgency. “Don’t let your ego get in the way. You may have something to prove—hells, we all do—but don’t chase it at Scarlett’s expense. We all sacrifice for the ones we love. You want to prove you’re really the kind of Alpha she can count on? Let Stormhart win.”

The male stormed off.

But his words remained, echoing in Damien’s head.

*We all sacrifice for the ones we love. You want to prove you’re really the kind of Alpha she can count on? Let Stormhart win.*

Fuck that.

Striking out, he swept his forearm across the table and sent a row of lined-up containers flying off the table.

A couple of nearby fighters cursed. A few more jumped out of the way as the canisters clattered to the floor. All gave him dirty looks.

He didn’t give a shit.

Luc’s words pricked at him. Did Scarlett have reservations like her brother? Was there some part of her that wondered if Stormhart would make a better match? There was no denying the benefits of being the prime omega of an Alpha from an established Brotherhood family—and he could promise until he was blue in the face that his family would be Brotherhood one rotation soon, but they weren’t now.

His claws burst from his skin, another wave of aggression roiling through him.

Through intense force of will, he forced his claws to retract before any of the other fighters noticed and thought he was issuing a challenge. He could only imagine what Scarlett’s brother or Egan would say if he got into another



brawl now.

He had to play it cool.

Trouble was, he'd heard enough about fated mates to know that they were rare and that most Alphas avoided such pairings because it was said to lead to out-of-control behavior, bad choices, and even mental instability.

A description that fit his current mood way too well.

But screw that.

That wasn't what was happening here. He was just a little on edge because the stakes were so high.

Being with Scarlett was everything good, and he was going to do right by her.

He could protect her. Better than anyone.

He would prove her brother wrong. Just like he'd show his family he could be counted on.

Rolling his shoulders back, he shook off the weight of Luc's words—and signaled to Crex to rejoin him on the training mats for another round.

Fighters couldn't second-guess. Or allow doubt to creep in. It screwed with response times. Threw off your whole rhythm. Which left you open to mistakes. Then you found yourself in trouble, and before you knew it, you were hit with a sucker punch you never saw coming.

That would not be him.

He and Scarlett had this.



THAT NIGHT, Damien was pacing the storage room by her sleeping quarters when he finally heard Egan leave and the guards lock her in for the night.

She darted straight into his arms the instant he freed her from the restraints. "Sorry it's so late." She pressed kisses to his chest and squeezed him tight. "I missed you."

He didn't bother speaking. He wasn't sure he was calm enough. Instead, he just swooped her up and carried her to another closet he'd discovered that contained a grate with easier access to their secret place.

He'd used the time between the matches and seeing Scarlett to explore—a far smarter expenditure of his time than the fucking and drinking with which most of the other fighters filled their leisure hours.

His heartbeat had almost returned to normal by the time he reached their destination.

He was even able to set her down, though he kept her in his arms, rubbing his chin against the top of her silky head.

Her brother had really pissed him off.

Damien tried to reel himself in. “You had me worried. What happened?”

There was a moment’s hesitation, making his stomach clenched.

“Egan kept me for a private performance with some of the main investors.”

His hands fisted against her back.

“Damien?” She wiggled in his hold.

He loosened his grip. Blew out a breath. “I’m sorry. You okay?” He pulled his shit together enough to avoid being a galaxy-class jerk. He might have been worried, but she’d been forced to dance for those fuckers. “Want me to sneak back to the kitchens and get you some food?”

“No.” She clutched him tighter. “I just want you to hold me.”

“With pleasure.” He reminded himself there were only a few more rotations. But still, he couldn’t help but ask, “Who was there?”

Another hesitation.

This time, he answered for her: “Kadon Stormhart and his family.”

She nodded, her cheek rubbing against his chest. “And N’gal Verish and his.”

The tournament favorites, though, after the way he’d been winning, cutting through his opponents like they were dark matter, the odds were shifting.

Egan couldn’t be happy about that. Nor was Scarlett’s brother, apparently. Asking around, he’d learned the Consortium Alpha was respected and well-liked.

A fact that only made Luc’s preference for Stormhart all the harder to swallow.

But there was little either Egan or Luc could do about it outright.

Damien made sure to eat only the same food as the other fighters and drink from the same water sources. He also had his new friend, Crex, watching his back. In return, Damien doled out fighting tips and extra training.

As long as he stayed sharp, there was little chance of Egan or Luc orchestrating a sneak attack that could take him out during the tournament.

Fuckers might not like it, but Damien was here to stay.

The problem was, he didn't know how to stop the edginess growing inside him every time a fighter boasted about winning the prize money—and the prize herself.

It didn't help that the urge to fuck and knot Scarlett—to mark her and breed her—had grown from a shout to a deafening roar inside his brain. And the longer he held out, the edgier he got. The harder it became to curb his aggression.

“Damien?” Wide, worried eyes peered up at him. “Are you sure you're okay?”

“I'm... good. Just a little on edge. I don't like those fuckers around you.”

“Me either.”

He couldn't help himself. He knew he shouldn't ask. He did it anyway. “So, what's the real story with Stormhart?”

“What do you mean?” Her expression blanked. In the next instant, she pulled away from him, her lips tilting upward into a tight smile.

He told himself it was nothing. “Well, your brother sure has a hard-on for him.”

She stilled. “What are you talking about?”

“He's obsessed with the idea of Stormhart winning the tournament and you. I thought it was just Egan who was jockeying for one of the Brotherhood-connected favorites to win, but clearly that's not the case. Your brother wants him for you too.”

She studied him. “Luc spoke with you?”

“Yes.”

Her lush lips flattened into a tight line. “I'm sorry. Ignore him. Luc and Stormhart have fought one another since they were young. They respect one another.”

*Must be nice.*

Damien shook off the sting.

“You know Stormhart well too?” He aimed for casual. But judging by the wariness that entered her gorgeous eyes, he was pretty sure he failed.

“Well enough. I've watched him fight since I was young. As a prize-in-training, I was required to attend a lot of the smaller tournaments, though they mostly had us stand around and smile, to add some sparkle to the event.”

He hated that he hadn't been there to protect her from that.

But the ugly truth was he wouldn't have been able to do much. While she

was being carted to different tournaments, he'd been hiding out in ice caves on his home planet, a scrawny, angry youngling who'd lost his mother and baby brother and sister in one go. While she was perfecting her fake smile, he'd been freezing his balls off, combing through trash cans and space dumps, trying to look older and scarier, talking shit to anyone who looked at him sideways or attempted to take his stuff, fighting to stay alive, and pretending to his younger sister Anya that he wasn't afraid, so she wouldn't be.

He'd been so useless back then. Weak and rudderless. But he wasn't now. And he was going to make things better for them all, including Scarlett.

"Stormhart was often at the same tournaments." His omega's words pulled him from his memories and reminded him that something still made him afraid. "Luc too. I think, in the end, Stormhart matched my brother in his number of tournament wins—though neither has competed in a tournament of this scale before."

"But what do *you* think of him?"

She shrugged, but her gaze never quite met his. "He's a strong fighter and a good male."

Now it was his turn for tense shoulders. "Good enough for you to want him to win the tournament?"

"No." Genuine distress sharpened her expression. "Luc thinks he knows what's best for me. He doesn't."

Damien breathed easier for the first time since his run-in with her brother. "Family." He tried to make a joke of it. "They complicate everything. My sister Anya is always climbing in the vents. Eavesdropping."

Scarlett's pupils expanded. "Does she get in a lot of trouble?" He could only imagine how shocking such actions would be to an omega forced to conform to Consortium rules her whole life.

"Nah, she gets away with a lot, but she's also left out of a lot of family stuff because she's the youngest and an omega and I, well, I know a bit of how that feels so... I should tell, but I don't."

"Yes." She threw herself into his arms, the pleased look on her face making his chest puff wide. "Because protecting her is important. I feel the same way about my brother. He's done so much for me. More than I could ever repay."

"My brothers have done everything for me too." Damien stroked a hand down her spine. "They kept me alive when it would have been much easier to

dump me and focus on saving themselves. That's why I'm here. To finally give back."

"I admire that."

"We do whatever we can for family."

"Right." She blinked up at him, the tender expression in her eyes stealing his breath. He wanted to see that look forever. "I think, Alpha Damien Skolov, that under all that toughness, you're a softy."

He pulled back, pretending to scowl. "You calling me soft, Omega?" He took her hand and slid it down the planes of his stomach to the hard bulge that was always present whenever he was with her. "Want to consider rephrasing that?"

She laughed—and his heart tripped over itself.

He'd always thought his value lay in his fists, but when she made that sweet sound and gazed up at him with that mix of fire, mischief, and joy in her eyes, it felt like his greatest achievement yet.

"Hmmm." The stroke of her thumb over his balls was pure invitation, especially when she backed it up with that sweet soft purr that drove him wild. "How about hard in all the right places and soft in the one place that matters the most?"

He leaned down until his mouth was inches from hers. "I can live with that."



## SCARLETT

### **R**otation three of the tournament

The next evening, Scarlett waited impatiently for Damien to come get her.

It seemed to take Egan forever to finish his lecture and inspect the room. Then, for the two guards Damien had bribed to convince the other two on duty to slip down the hall and have a party of their own.

But only a few heartbeats after the guards' heavy footfalls faded, the lock on her door turned, and there he was.

Like the night before, Damien untied her from the bed without a word, scooped her up, and held her to him as if they'd been apart forever.

She held him just as tightly, her arms twining around his neck as he carried her bridal style through the tunnel, the crystals lighting their way.

She wasn't sure how he was faring, but it was getting harder for her to be without his touch, and the tournament felt as if it were dragging on forever, winding her nerves tighter.

"You've eaten?" His gaze roamed every inch of her.

"Yes." She wasn't hungry for food. Not after spending all rotation watching him fight and aching for his touch.

"Good. I've got plans." There was an excitement in his tone, an anticipation in his touch, that fueled her own.

Once inside their special room, he carried her straight to the mattress piled high with soft, worn blankets.

Damien sank to his knees and he placed her in the middle of the bedding.

Smiling, she stared up at him. "So what's this big plan?"

“First—he pulled at the laces of her sleeping gown—“I need you naked.”

“I like this plan.” She tugged the flimsy fabric over her head.

“Gorgeous.” His low growl rippled straight to her core.

She never felt more beautiful than when she was with him.

“Turn over. On your belly.”

Her heart skipped a beat. This was new.

She clutched the top blanket to her chest.

“Don’t be nervous.” He jerked his chin toward a tray by the bed. “I told you. I have plans.”

She’d been so lost in him that she hadn’t noticed the tray or the items on it. “What are those?”

“Full-service caretaking.” He watched her carefully. “You in?”

“I... I don’t know. I am not even sure what it all is.”

“The best illicit items I could bribe someone into getting for me.” He pointed to each item in turn. “A glass of the finest Sartin spirits. I hate to admit it, but those guys make a good drink. Top-of-the line massage oil from Abzal—because anything related to pleasure’s something we do well on my home planet.” He winked at her. “And a standard hairbrush from the Golden Dome fighters’ commissary.”

It awed her to think of all the effort he’d made. For her. No one had ever done anything like this for her before.

“This... this is amazing.” She swallowed hard. “But you didn’t need to go to all this trouble.”

“I wanted to.” His gaze shifted away as he rubbed a hand down his jaw. Then he took a deep breath, as if bracing himself, and turned back to her. “It’s all I want to do.”

He sounded like he was confessing a secret. Or a sin.

“I don’t understand.”

He ran a hand down his thighs. “I don’t want to scare you off or freak you out, but the truth is it makes me fucking hard as hells just thinking about using every single thing on that tray on you, in every way I want, and you trusting me enough to let me.”

Scarlett stilled. “Really?” A tiny thrill pulsed through her.

“Yes. More than I even want to admit. I know it’s not typical Alpha behavior.”

She surveyed the items on the tray. “It’s better.”

“Really?” He looked relieved, reminding her that he was as new to all of



this as she.

He was so confident and cocky that she sometimes forgot they were stumbling through all this together. Figuring out their likes and needs together.

“Really.” All her life, she’d felt alone. Not anymore.

His smile was pure temptation—and wild, raw hunger as if her words had released something inside him. “Good. ‘Cause I’ve got a filthy mind, and fighting only keeps me so busy. I’ve had a lot of time to... fantasize.”

He lifted the glass and pressed it to her lips. “Drink.”

She did, the splash of sweetness followed by an even sweeter burn. Damien took the glass, and placing his lips where hers had been, drank too.

Another shiver whispered through her.

“I want to try every one of those items.” She dropped the blanket, letting it pool around her hips. “I want to explore everything with you, Damien.”

They were such a perfect match, the wild recklessness in him calling to her soul while the gentleness at his core soothed her as nothing had before.

He was just like her colors, a mesmerizing mix of soft and vivid, wild and bright, swirling through her with a power that stunned her.

She’d never met anyone like him, and now she knew why. There was no one else in the galaxy like Damien.

And he was all hers.

Soft shades of pink and orange melded with vibrant red, glowing from her skin and skipping across the wall as she rolled onto her belly, excitement and nerves washing through her in equal measure.

“Trust me, Scarlett.” His breath fluttered against her ear.

Then, there was a slight tug on her scalp as his big hands gathered her hair in one fist and he slid the hairbrush through the heavy mass.

Pure heaven. She sighed, relishing each stroke of the brush through her curls and corresponding ripple of pleasure down her spine.

“I love the colors of your hair.” His voice had dropped to a husky rumble, his slow strokes never ceasing. “I like knowing I’m getting it so pretty and perfect—so in a little while, I can wrap it around my wrist, mess it up, and use it to pump that sweet mouth up and down my cock.”

She whimpered, squirming on the blankets as slick pooled on her folds.

He continued brushing her hair. “You like that idea?”

“Yes.” She was desperate and needy for him already.

“Good.” He set down the brush.

Excitement whispered through her as she raised her head, already picturing herself on her knees, pleasing him just as he'd said.

"Not so fast." He kept her pinned in place. "I am nowhere near done with you yet."

Her throaty whine surprised her.

He chuckled in response. "You must be sore from all that dancing." His big hands slid to her shoulders, kneading muscles she hadn't even realized were aching.

"That... feels... so... amazing." She melted beneath his touch.

"I think so too." Warm liquid splashed onto her back. His hands traveled through the oil, spreading liquid heat over her back as the rough pads of his fingers dug in, hitting each muscle just right. "I know this might be hard for you to believe, sweet Scarlet, but the truth is I fucking love this." He ran his fingers along the line of each rib. Worked his thumbs into the tight muscles of her lower back. "Taking care of you like this, having you under me, all soft and pliable, is the best feeling in the galaxy."

Each sweet word sent her deeper into a haze of bliss.

She purred in sheer contentment and melted even more when he answered with his own low rumble, every stroke of his palms making her clit throb, intensifying her need.

"I have plenty of fantasies about all the ways I plan to rut and knot you." His large hands kneaded her bottom. "But that's not all. I've got just as many that play out like this." He ran his hands along her thighs, his fingers massaging her overworked leg muscles. "With me making you cry out from all the different ways I can wring pleasure from you."

"Mmm." Her flesh tingled as his palms ran the length of her legs, over her buttocks, and up her spine once more. She floated on a cloud, soaring above the tunnels and the Golden Dome, to a place where it was just her and Damien. To a place where there was no tournament or Consortium. Where she was more than just a prize and they were both free.

"How do you feel, baby?" His touch lighter this time, he spanned the width of her back. "Relaxed? Horny?"

"Yes. Yes. So good." Despite her best efforts, the words emerged slurred.

He grunted: the sound filled with pride—and a little awe. "I'm glad. I spend so much time causing pain with these fists. Here, in this room, all I want to do is bring us both pleasure."

Her heart squeezed. Just when she thought she couldn't feel any more

intensely for this male, he surprised her. He was so much more than some big, cocky bruiser.

He was thoughtful and wonderful, and more than she had ever expected could be hers.

His hands explored every inch of her, his warmth and care seeping beneath her flesh. Until she was certain his touch burned into her soul.

“Did you enjoy the oil massage?”

She somehow found the strength to speak. “Yes.”

“How about the hair brushing?”

“Mmm.”

“I’ll take that as a yes too.” One hand lifted away. “You know, that’s not the only way I can use a hairbrush to give you pleasure.”

Her haze receded. “I-I don’t understand.”

“You will.” He chuckled. That dark, mesmerizing sound that drove her wild. That made her willing to risk all to hear it again. “You trust me, right?”

“I do.” She didn’t even hesitate.

“Good.”

In the next heartbeat, the bristles of the brush skimmed her back and over the rise of her bottom. It was the faintest of touches, like claws dragging gently across her skin.

Goosebumps erupted, pleasure rippling through her.

The head of the brush prodded between her thighs. Its soft plastic handle—coated in the same oil he’d used on her back—foreign, taboo, and unbelievably erotic.

She parted her legs.

“Good girl.” His voice was a dark rasp as he rewarded her, the round handle gliding between the cheeks of her bottom to roll over her puckered rosebud. “Can’t neglect this sweet, soft part of you. Just like that tempting pussy, I’ve got to get you ready for me here.”

“Yes.” Her hips lifted, the sensation decadent and delicious.

“That’s my girl. My wild thing. Ready to let me take care of you, just like we both need.”

The mattress shifted as he settled between her legs and used his knees to spread her wider, the tip of the handle probing.

“Relax.” His gruff command thrummed through her. “Push down.”

He’d prepared her well. Let her body limp, open to whatever he wanted.

She did as told, groaning as the small, round tip slid less than an inch into

her ass, awakening new nerve endings, bringing pleasure and the sweetest bite of pain.

All she could do was moan.

Especially as his other hand slid beneath her hips to cup her sex, the pad of his thumb working her clit. Sensation bombarded her. Her bottom rising and falling in time with the shallow thrusts of the handle and the strong fingers toying with her slick, swollen pussy. Stretching her. Pleasuring her. Training her so she would be ready for him.

It was sinful. It was filthy. It was perfect.

“More. Please.” Her legs spread wider, chasing the pleasure only he could give her.

“That’s right, Omega. This is what you need. And soon, it’ll be my cock here. Claiming every inch of you.”

She came apart screaming his name, her climax more intense than any she’d ever experienced.

Colors burst behind her eyes, bright and beautiful, power surging through her.

She came back to herself in stages, her breath coming in pants, her body pliant and flushed.

“Stay just like that.” Damien rolled her easily onto her back. “’Cause I am not done with you yet. Not by a long shot.”

His mouth claimed her sex, his tongue working the sensitive bundle of nerves as his hands gripped her thighs and spread her wide.

“Damien!” Again, she soared, her body so relaxed that she rolled instantly into the next climax, its dark energy cresting over her and pulling her under with each exquisite flick of his tongue.

Then, he was above her, his expression fierce, the veins in his neck and forearms bulging as he jerked the laces of his leathers apart and grabbed his cock, his fist moving faster and faster over the ridges of his shaft as he grunted her name.

Unwilling to miss out, she shifted to her knees, her hand covering his, sliding her palm in tandem as she fit her mouth around as much of the fat head of his cock as she could, hollowing her cheeks and sucking hard.

“Fuck, yes. Take what you can, baby.” He rocked his hips, shallow thrusts that spilled precum into her mouth. “Because soon, I’ll be coming inside you. My cock filling you as my knot swells so big and thick it locks me to you and not a single drop spills as I feed that pussy what it needs.

Breed you, like I need.”

She moaned low, her head bobbing eagerly.

That was all it took.

He came down her throat, whispering her name, his muscles rigid, his veins corded, his body so beautiful that it stole her breath.

He was so raw and masculine and filthy. And all hers.

She'd never been so happy.

She only hoped it would last.



## DAMIEN

**R**otation four of the tournament

Damien stared down at Scarlett, watching the rise and fall of her chest, the soft colors playing across her skin as she dreamed.

It was fucking official. He was a total creeper. And totally gone for this omega.

He'd never realized before she came into his life, but he had a serious fixation with taking care of his omega. Hearing her make those soft, sweet sounds, seeing the trust in her gaze as he pushed her limits and made her cry out his name, satisfied something deep inside him.

After so much time spent breaking bones and doling out pain, it was pure fucking joy to hold something so delicate and beautiful in his hands and bring pleasure instead.

He planned to spend the rest of his life doing exactly that—once he won the tournament.

His palm trailed along the curve of her shoulder. “Time to wake up, gorgeous.” He hated to do it, but he needed to get her back to her room before the guards changed and someone less bribable came on shift.

She woke slowly, a dreamy smile on her face. “Damien?”

“Right here.” He tucked a strand of red-streaked hair behind her ear. “Sorry, beautiful, but I need to get to the mats early. This is the last round before the main event. I want to make sure I’m limbered up and ready to go.”

Scarlett sat up fast. “Of course.” In the next heartbeat, she was up and pulling on her sleeping gown, her movements absent of their usual grace.

He stepped in front of her and tipped her chin to meet his gaze. “Just a

little longer, beautiful, and we'll never have to leave each other again."

"Right." That forced smile was back.

"You okay?"

Without warning, she threw herself against him, her arms squeezing tight. "Let's not wait. Let's run now."

He stiffened. "Run? Skolovs don't run."

"But each rotation we stay is a risk."

He wrapped his arms around her. "But we can't turn tail now. If we tough it out for one more rotation, I'm going to win this and have it all."

She stiffened, and he internally cursed his fumbling. He'd gotten the words all wrong. He was just on edge; the stakes had never been higher. And sometimes... sometimes it was starting to feel like he really was just a too-cocky, eighteen-planetary-rotation-old youngling with no idea how the galaxy really worked.

But fuck that.

Scarlett was counting on him.

He had this.

Cupping her face in his hands, he tried again. "What I meant to say is, this money is for us, so I can take care of you and our family forever. The reputation is so I can ensure I'm big and bad enough that everyone we care for will be safe. Best of all, winning legitimately means we won't have to be hunted from one end of the galaxy to the other by the Consortium, fearing they'll take you from me." He traced the delicate lines of her cheekbones. "We can live with my family for good—and your brother can visit whenever he likes. You'll be mine by right. And I'll be yours."

She relaxed against him. "That will be nice."

"It will be perfect."

"Okay." She nodded in his hold and forced one of those smiles he was coming to hate. "There's just a single rotation, right? We've got this."

"Yes." He cleared his throat and did something he'd never done before, what a fighter was never supposed to do. He revealed his weak spot. "I need you to believe in me, Scarlett. I need it more than anything."

She stared up at him, her solemn gaze suggesting she truly understood the significance of his words. "I do, Damien. I always will."

The last of his doubts floated away. "Good. Now, tell me what you need from me, Scarlett. Tell me what I can say to make you feel as good as you've made me feel."



“I’m not sure. Even believing in you, I’m-I’m still scared.” Her gaze shifted from his. “These next trials determine who makes it to the main event. Are you nervous?”

“No.”

She nodded. “What do you think of when you fight?”

“I zone out. Let instinct take over. What do you think of when you dance?”

She smiled, and this one wasn’t forced at all. It was pure, wicked temptation. “You.”

Just like that, he was hard. “Yeah?”

“Yeah.” She swayed against him. “I think about how good it feels when you touch me.”

He ran his palm down the length of her spine and over the curve of her ass. “Soon, I’ll be touching you all the time.”

“And I’ll touch you right back. No crystal pane between us. No one to tell us we can’t.”

He gripped her ass and lifted her, so she had no choice but to wrap her thighs around his waist and meet his gaze head-on. “That’s what will happen. I’m certain—and I want you to be certain too.”

She swallowed hard. “I know... I just... there’s so much that could go wrong. I-I don’t doubt you, but Egan and the Consortium are treacherous.”

“I can handle them.”

“I know, but...”

He read her easily. “You’ll perform again later, this time on the main stage, and you’re worried about me. About whether I can keep my cool. And maybe even about what I’ll think of you.”

She shifted in his hold. “I like the way you look at me now. I don’t want you to see me as their prize.”

His arms flexed around her ass. “You’re not their fucking anything. You’re mine and I’m yours.”

“Right.”

He took a deep breath for courage. “I fucking love you, Scarlett.”

She drew back. “You do?”

“I do. With every part of my filthy, screwed-up, cocky soul.”

She cupped his cheek. “I love you too. So much.”

Relief rushed through him. Lust was one thing. The fated-mate bond another powerful force. But, love? This wild, ferocious sensation that had

parked inside his chest that only grew stronger with every moment spent with her was an even more unpredictable beast: protective, possessive, and strangely selfless.

It was the reason he was content just to hold her and watch her smile and why he watched her when she slept, counting his lucky stars.

It was a feeling as bright and beautiful as any of her colors, and it was deep, infinite, and forever. As boundless, and enduring as the Anarheim galaxy itself.

And he was so damned glad to hear she felt it too.

“Tell me again,” he growled.

“I. Love. You.”

He kissed her lips. Each eyelid. Then her mouth again. He couldn't get enough. “So now you know I mean it when I say nothing you do could ever change how I feel about you.”

She stilled. “You promise?”

“I promise to love you until my last fucking breath. Until I'm so old that gray hairs grow on my balls, and my horns droop.”

She shoved at his chest. “Such a romantic.”

He held her fast. “Got you to smile, though, didn't it?”

She nodded. “Yes.”

“Bet I can get you to feel good even during this rotation's performance and trials.”

She bit her lip. “I don't think that's possible. Even for you.”

“Did you just issue me a challenge?”

“Maybe.” Her lips tilted upward.

His heart rolled over.

He leaned in close and brushed his lips against her ear. “I'll take that bet.” He set her down on her feet and made sure she was steady before lifting his hands. “Stay right there.” He was across the room, digging through the crates, and back in a flash.

She eyed the item in his hand. “What's that?”

“The way I'm going to win the bet. And prove you should never doubt me.” He ripped open the packaging.

She stepped closer to study the translucent rod in his hand, its length shorter than his pinkie. “What is it?”

“A little care package from home. From my sister.” Anya was the only one who knew where he actually was, though as word spread about his

fighting wins, his brothers would hear soon enough. “She’s always giving me shit about my lack of experience and sending me crap like this. Says it’s her way of helping out her future sister-in-law.”

“I can’t wait to meet this female.”

He wrapped one arm around Scarlett and hugged her close. “I can’t wait for that either.”

He could already picture his return home: finally enough money in his pocket to help his brothers, his reputation as a formidable fighter established, and Scarlett by his side. Everything he’d ever wanted.

But for now, that meant keeping his cool—and his female happy.

“In the meantime,”—he rolled the device between his fingers, warming it up—“let’s take advantage of Anya’s outrageousness, never say her name in relation to this item ever again, and have some fun.”

Scarlett laughed. “Deal... but I still don’t know what it is.”

As a prize, she really had been sheltered from so much fun.

“A toy. For you.” He pressed a button, and the small oblong rod sprang to life, vibrating against his palm. “For your pleasure.” He turned over his other hand to reveal a small metal sphere. “And this is the remote. For my pleasure.”

She shivered, her eyes growing glassy. “Show me more.”

He fucking loved it.

He pressed the toy to her shoulder, stroking it against her skin, allowing her time to acclimatize.

“Mmm.” That purr he lived for vibrated softly from her throat. “That feels good.”

“You like that? Just wait.” He moved it to her other shoulder.

And smiled wider when she moaned again.

“Fuck. The sounds you make. But wait, it gets better.” He slid the flat rod down her belly.

She stilled, a kaleidoscope of colors dancing across her skin—even brighter than before.

“So fucking beautiful.” He was learning what the different shades meant, the splashes of crimson and violet a definite go-light.

He rolled the device over her mound—and it sped up.

He checked his finger on the remote. “Holy shit. I didn’t do that.” He stared at the colors flashing brighter and faster across her gorgeous flesh. “Do you think... is it possible your body did that on its own? When your colors

glide across my skin, it sometimes feels like an actual caress. I wonder if your colors can have substance. Colors are refracted light, after all, and light can be a powerful force.”

“Mmm, maybe.” She rolled her hips in time with the toy, and he realized she was far more focused on how the device in his hand made her feel.

As she should be.

Hadn't he wanted her free of worry and focused only on pleasure?

“You like that, baby?” He shifted the angle. “You like the way I show my love?”

“Yes.” She rose to her tiptoes, thighs parting slightly. “Show me more.” She took his hand, and together, they slid his palm between her legs. “Show me everything.”

Heart slamming against his ribs, he rocked the toy gently against her slippery folds. “I'm going to fucking show you the galaxy, wild thing.”



SCARLETT

The tiny toy pulsed against Scarlett's clit as she stood at the edge of her display case, watching the fighting below.

She fought a smile, along with the urge to squirm.

It was hard to be terrified about Damien's next fighting match when her body was awash with ripples of pleasure that rolled from her core to her nipples.

Which, she realized, was exactly why Damien was doing it.

His care for her left her breathless and disbelieving.

And he'd said he loved her.

Loved *her*.

Everything was going well. She only needed to hold on a little longer.

She'd finished performing her dance.

Damien had won every match of the rotation: his focus impressive, his endurance extraordinary. And he loved her.

Things were progressing better than she ever could have imagined.

So, why did Egan's smug look still raise gooseflesh on her arms?

Pressing her palms to her stomach, she forced herself to breathe slow. To let the pleasure toy melt away her worries and loosen her limbs.

Now was not the time to let fear win.

A roar below drew her gaze to the mats. Kadon Stormhart looked strong as ever, easily winning his match. Damien's friend, Crex, an orange-skinned male with a long tail that resembled a lash, had also eked out a victory as well. Unfortunately, so had N'gal Verish.

As always, her gaze drifted back to Damien—until, out of the corner of

her eye, a figure on the main level captured her attention.

He stood among the crowd of observers and trainers, scrutinizing Damien. That wasn't odd in itself. The spectators often focused on Damien.

But Damien wasn't fighting now. He'd already finished his latest match. Yet this male's focus was absolute, his fingers rubbing absently at the smooth spot behind his ear where an Alpha's horn would normally be.

A shiver ran through her.

Something about the male and the circumstances sent a wave of dread racing up her spine.

"Next!" Egan's shout snapped her gaze back to the mats.

Damien was up again. Another fighter scrambled onto the mats to face him.

Her stomach sank.

This time, Damien's opponent was N'gal Verish.

Scarlett didn't know if the assignment was random or bad luck, but it made her nervous.

N'gal's family and trainers crowded as close to the platform as possible, shouting advice and encouragement. Damien had no one.

While there were other matches set to take place simultaneously, this one drew all the attention.

Always one to play to the crowd, N'gal turned toward her, his wings rubbing the air in the deliberate mating ritual of his kind, his antennae twitching as he flexed his arms and snapped his pincers in the air. "Take notes, pretty prize." He raised his voice to ensure she could hear even from her higher vantage point. "Because after I pin this cocky Skolov space trash, I'm going to win the main event, then pin you beneath my wings and rut that trophy cunt like a true champion."

Crude laughter echoed through the arena.

Somehow, she still heard Damien's menacing growl above it all.

She held her breath. But Egan didn't censure the Verish fighter as he might have so many other fighters.

Instead, he merely called out, "Begin!"

The two Alphas clashed, the clap of their bodies vicious and loud.

Damien's movements weren't as elegant or swift as usual. Emotion drove him. Fury, too.

Verish sank a pincer into Damien's chest.

Scarlett's heart hammered against her ribs, the urge to bang against the

crystal and unleash her fury almost impossible to contain. Black tendrils flashed from her palms. A small crack appeared in the crystal cage.

Startled, she curled her fingers into fists and forced herself to calm down.

She needed to soothe Damien through their bond, not add to his aggression.

A roar rose among the fighters.

Relief almost sent her to her knees.

Blood poured from a wound at Damien's chest, but it was the Verish fighter who was in trouble, his wing hanging at an odd angle as he flailed in Damien's chokehold, her Alpha's powerful arm and thigh trapping N'gal on the mat.

One heartbeat passed... then two... N'gal attempted an escape roll.

Damien countered, retaining his hold.

Three heartbeats... four... N'gal's clawed hand hit the mats.

He'd tapped out.

Roars shook the stadium: some of outrage, some of joy.

Damien had done it. He'd unseated a favorite. A Brotherhood-sponsored warrior, no less.

It was a huge triumph.

He should have been celebrating.

Except he hadn't let go of his hold.

N'gal Verish's green skin mottled yellow as Damien's arm flexed around his throat, denying the fighter breath. He pressed his mouth to the gasping male's ear and whispered something, both of their gazes locking on her.

Ice skittered through her veins.

What had Damien said? What was he doing?

The crowds' murmurs turned to rumbles.

Damien needed to let the other Alpha go. Now.

She willed him to calm down. To regain control. But the same recklessness and ferocity in him that thrilled her worked against them now.

He was about to ruin everything.

Worse, Egan Avitus was letting him.

By now, Egan should have intervened. Fighters and trainers muttered among themselves. Called for action.

But Egan did nothing. That familiar calculating smirk in his stare as he simply watched her Alpha strangle the other male.

Because once Damien crossed the line and broke protocol by choking an



opponent who'd tapped out, the Consortium would have the excuse it needed to ban him from the tournament.

She opened her mouth to warn Damien—except someone beat her to it.

“Enough!” It wasn't Egan who gave this command. Nor her brother Luc.

It was Kadon Stormhart.

He broke from the other fighters and strode toward Damien.

Thankfully, his shout was enough to bring Damien to his senses. He shoved N'gal Verish away, just as Kadon came near.

Coughing, N'gal staggered to his feet with a snarl. “I'll get you for this.”

“Try it.” Damien beckoned him forward.

Kadon stepped between them, hands up. “To your corners.” It wasn't truly his place to issue such an order, but he'd always been a leader. “Skolov, you're one stupid mistake away from getting kicked out of this tournament—and then where will you be? Out of luck, with no chance of winning the prizes you seek.”

Damien's gaze flew to hers, his arms dropping back to his sides. His chest rose and fell fast, but he appeared to have regained control.

Stormhart had done them a great kindness.

The vise around her chest loosened.

Until she noticed Egan striding toward the mats, that familiar smirk ghosting across his face as he glanced at her and back to the fighters once more.

“Disaster averted.” Cunning glittered in his stare. “The fights will continue, no harm, no foul.” A roar went up around the room. “But as I'm sure you'll agree,” Egan shouted over the din, “Kadon Stormhart deserves a boon.”

Dread thundered through her.

Stormhart scowled.

Damien tensed, his fists clenching.

“Bring the prize to me.” Egan pointed to the ground at his feet. “She will give Stormhart a private dance in his quarters as a token of our appreciation.”



SCARLETT HURRIED down the hallway toward Kadon Stormhart's quarters, security on either side of her, her heart hammering against her ribs.

The look on Damien's face when security led her from the crystal cage...  
Her stomach twisted.

She'd never seen such rage.

But surely he wouldn't do anything else foolish. It had been he who'd reminded her they had only one rotation left.

They could do this.

But she needed a moment, and the timing was perfect. "I-I need to use the washroom."

Nars frowned. "Orders are to take you straight to Stormhart's quarters."

"They're right here." She tilted her head toward the closest door. "I need to go. I won't be able to dance otherwise."

His scowl deepened, but he didn't touch her. He hadn't since that time in her sleeping quarters. She took great satisfaction from that fact.

"Fine."

She hurried inside and shut the door.

It didn't surprise her when the door at the rear of the washroom flew open, and Damien barreled through, ripping his scent muffler from his face.

He'd made it his business to learn every nook and cranny of the underground tunnels.

"You're not going."

She hurried to him and clutched his arm. "Keep your voice down."

Damien snarled. At her.

"He's not putting his hands on you."

"He won't."

"You're right. Because I am going to tear them from his fucking body."

"Damien, please. Stormhart is not your enemy."

"You're defending him?"

She held onto her temper. "Egan's trying to rile you. He... he knows you care about me and is trying to use it against you. Don't let him. Neither of us can allow our emotions to rule. Not now. We need to lock them down."

He growled low. "I'm not like you. I don't know how to smile so fucking pretty and say I'm fine when I'm not."

Another verbal blow. She hadn't expected it from him. It was so unlike the male she knew—and the invisible tether stretching between them vibrated with a black rage she'd never sensed in him before.

"Damien, please. Calm down."

He shook off her hold. "Don't tell me what to do. I'm a grown Alpha

male.”

Black swirls flashed across her skin. “Then act like it.”

His head snapped back, eyes narrowing. “There it is again. You have a problem with my age.”

“Right now, I have a problem with everything spewing from your mouth. You need to regain control and start acting smart.”

“Smart. Right. You keep saying that.” He barked out a laugh. “But this is who I am, Scarlett. I’ve been trying my whole damned life to live up to my brothers. To be smarter. More cunning.” He spread his arms wide. “But this might just be as good as it fucking gets.” Pain flashed in his eyes. “And if that’s not good enough for you...”

“You’re twisting my words.”

“Or are you finally giving me the truth? You’re so damned great at pretending; maybe I don’t know you at all.”

She reared back. “What does that mean?”

“It means that half the time you’ve got that enticing smile on your face, I wonder what you’re actually thinking inside when you look at me, your brother, Egan, or even Kadon Stormhart. You’ve been behind the Consortium’s display case looking out for so long, I wonder if you even know what you’ll want once you’re on the other side, ‘cause if it’s Stormhart, tell me now.”

“You’re being cruel. And ridiculous. All because you’re jealous.”

Red streaked his amber eyes. “Maybe I fucking am. But something is going on with you and Stormhart. I saw you with him... that time you were beside his father and Egan. You said Kadon just asked if you needed a drink, but I know it was more. I saw the way you looked at him. Touched his arm. I waited for you to tell me, but you never did. But I know I’m not crazy. There’s something between you. If you want him, just fucking say so.”

Damien’s high emotion fueled her own. “You want the truth? I like him, and I want him to like me. I think he’s a good Alpha. But I never thought he was the male for me.” She fisted her hands at her sides. “I never thought any male was until you, but now I’m wondering. Have we been too rash? Was my brother right all along?”

“What the hells does that mean?”

“It means maybe I need to be smarter too. The moment you showed up, I put aside my other plan and focused only on you. Now I’m afraid I’ve been a short-sighted fool.”

He snarled. “You don’t mean it.”

“I don’t know what I mean.” The pain in his stare dampened the worst of her anger, leaving her feeling stripped bare and alone. “I’m just... scared. You said you could keep control. You said I could count on you.”

“You can.”

A sharp knock had them spinning to face the washroom’s door. Damien moved to stand in front of her.

“Enough stalling.” Nars pounded on the door. “It’s time to go—unless you want me to get Egan.”

Pasting on a smile, she stepped around Damien and started forward.

A hand clasped her forearm. “Scarlett—”

“Don’t.”

“Meet me tonight.”

She shook off his hold.

“Please. You were right. Jealousy and anger, Egan, Verish, Stormhart, and the tournament,” he exhaled another deep breath, “it all got the best of me. I’m just... I’m riled up. I can’t lose you, Scarlett.”

“You will if you keep acting like this.”

“I know.” He slid in front of her. “I’m sorry. I’ll do better. None of this fucking matters unless I have you.”

The wounds inside her remained, but they bled less.

Her emotions were volatile. His too. The stress on both of them was tremendous.

“You told me before that we’re part of a team. That we each have a role to play. I’m dancing for Stormhart, and following Egan’s orders, because all I want is for this tournament to be over and for you to win me and that money. Everything I’m doing is to be with you. If you distrust that, there’s no point in meeting you.”

“Fuck. Yes, I trust that.” Damien reached for her, then stopped himself, his hand dropping to curl by his side. “I won’t let you down again.”

“We’ll see.” She unlocked the door and, opening it as little as possible, slipped through.



Damien

Guilt churned through Damien. Shame too. He'd hurt her. Let her down. Made her doubt him and their chance for a future together.

He could easily imagine his brothers' disgust. He'd shown none of the discipline, cunning, or charm they possessed. Instead, he'd acted like the youngling she'd accused him of being.

He wasn't sure what sickened him more. The way he'd let rage, jealousy, and aggression rule him as he spewed hurtful things at her. Or that he'd allowed himself to get into this position in the first place.

He shut the door behind him.

They should have run when Scarlett suggested it, but he'd let pride and ego allow him to risk the most important thing in his life.

That would never happen again.

He needed to trust her—and stop letting his bullshit about coming from nothing and needing to prove he could be something get in their way.

All he'd proven was that he was an idiot.

Tonight, he'd fix things with her. Apologize and promise to control himself from here on out. Then he'd ask her what she wanted.

If running was what she preferred, he'd do it gladly.

He didn't need the rep, the glory, or even the money, though the latter would have been nice.

But without Scarlett, none of it mattered.

He and his brothers would find some other way to meet their goals. It wasn't as if they weren't used to being in the hot seat. Hells, they worked best under pressure. They'd figure out another way to get into the Brotherhood or they'd blow the whole damned crime organization to smithereens.

Whatever it took.

Because having Scarlett with him and keeping her safe was most important.

From now on, ego was out the door. Pride too.

His omega came first.

That was being a real Alpha. The kind of male his brothers, and he, could be proud of.

He'd been such a stupid fuck, but even a bruiser with more brawn than smarts could learn.

And maybe he was young and still a little volatile—his Alpha aggression not entirely under control yet—but he'd figure out how to leash it and fast.

He wanted to be an Alpha who not only brought pleasure and a smile to Scarlett's face but one she could also rely on. Someone to be her shelter and her protector in every scenario, not just when it suited his wants and needs.

He'd been such an arrogant Alphahole, but he was—

A blurred fist swung at his head. So fast, there was no time to duck.

Lights out.



Scarlett

Kadon Stormhart had left instructions for the guards to wait outside, so Scarlett entered his quarters alone—and stopped short.

“Luc?”

“Kadon sent me in his stead.”

Stormhart was a good male.

“I’m glad.” She hurried to her brother, took his hand, and squeezed.

“How are you holding up?”

She knew this tournament had to be hard for him too.

“How am I?” He shook his head. “How are you?”

A short time ago, she’d have said amazing. Now, she wasn’t so sure.

“I don’t like the look on your face.” He studied her closely. “Usually, you’re better at hiding it.”

*I don’t know how to smile so fucking pretty and say I’m fine when I’m not.* Damien’s words sliced through her once more.

Scarlett knew she fell back on pretending when it was easier and kept things locked up tight, but she hadn’t wanted to be that way with Damien. She’d wanted to be real. Honest. Herself.

“So, this thing with Damien Skolov, it’s not a passing fancy?”

Her brother’s question wrenched her from her thoughts and stole her breath. “Excuse me?”

“You’d have to be blind to miss how he looks at you.” Luc squeezed her hand back. “And even though you hide it better, I am your brother. I see how you look at him too.”

Nerves churned in her stomach. “I’ve tried to be discreet. It’s harder than I thought.”

Luc’s smile didn’t reach his eyes. “I know exactly what you mean.” He

cleared his throat. “But it’s not your behavior over the past few rotations that matters. It’s what happens next that’s important. You really want Skolov to win the tournament over Kadon?”

“Yes. So much.” Even now, after their argument, being with Damien was all she wanted.

“He’s cocky, and a hothead.”

“He cares for me. He’s bold and straightforward. I like that.”

Luc sighed. “Of course you do. We’ve had too little of that in our lives.”

“It’s more than that. He’s... wonderful.” Despite her anger, her conviction in his character never wavered. “You’ll like him once you get to know him.”

“He’s too young.”

“I’m only three planetary rotations older.”

“Yes, but I remember myself at that age. Amped up. Still at the mercy of Alpha hormones... no control.”

“Damien is more responsible than most. He’s here to help his family, and me. And he’s never even looked at another omega, unlike so many other Alphas.”

“You love him.” Resignation thickened Luc’s voice.

“I do.”

“It’s obvious he cares for you too.” He sighed. “I just hope he can be what you need.”

“What do you mean?”

“You need to be careful. Word on high is that he’s to be prevented from winning the tournament at all costs—and that humiliation and revenge are on the menu.”

Her dread grew. “Egan doesn’t like him.”

“Rumor is, this comes from even higher up.”

“Higher than Egan? He mentioned a new investor. Do you know who that is?” For a long time, she and Luc had been speculating about who truly ran the Consortium, but whoever the other figures were, they preferred to operate from the shadows.

She wondered what had brought this one out now.

“No idea, but I’ll keep my ears open. There’s always some conspiracy or plot afoot at the top to gain more power and money. What worries me is now you’re wrapped up in this one.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll warn Damien. He’ll be careful, and we’ll be fine.” She

could only hope her words proved true, but speaking with Luc had only reaffirmed her conviction that making it work with Damien was what she wanted, no matter the risk. “This is better for us all. Kadon doesn’t want me as his prime omega, and deep down, that’s not what you wanted for me, either. Damien is going to win this tournament. I believe in him.”

“Stormhart—”

“I told you before. He’s not the Alpha for me.”

“Fine. I understand. I do. But Damien Skolov is young and volatile, and you know as well as I, that the Consortium plays by its own rules. You... you may think you can take them on. Hells, high on love, it can feel like anything’s possible. But it isn’t.” His voice cracked. “Sometimes, as bad as you want something, it just can’t be.”

His pain arrowed through her. “Oh, Luc. Has something happened?”

“Nothing for you to worry about.” He turned away and crossed to the window, his shoulders tense as he stared out at the lights of the dome. “It’s just... too risky. We’ve called things off. Again.”

“I’m sorry.”

“It’s for the best.”

Was it? After meeting Damien, she couldn’t imagine a world where she didn’t get to be with him forever.

It was too cruel and dark to contemplate.

And she hated that her brother had to suffer that fate.

“Things could change.”

He laughed, but there was no humor in it. “Not for the better.”

“I refuse to believe that.”

Luc turned to face her, his expression grim. “Hope is dangerous for the likes of us.”

“Not this time,” she assured him. “This time, the Consortium will not win.”





## SCARLETT

Where was he?

Scarlett paced the length of the room.

The guards had left her arms free this night, and her door unlocked—presumably, thanks to another bribe from Damien—so getting to their secret room had never been easier.

Still, she didn't like being here without him. And now it was way past the time they usually met.

He was the one who'd begged her to come. She knew without a doubt, he wasn't standing her up.

Which meant something had gone wrong.

Her bold words to her brother echoed in her mind, producing dread.

*This time, the Consortium will not win.*

She was right, wasn't she? Damien would win, and they'd be together forever. It would all work out.

So where was he?

She paced to the other wall, her stomach churning.

He promised he'd be here, and Damien never broke a promise.

The door creaked open.

Relief slamming through her, she spun around. "Thank the Goddess, Damien. I—"

"Not who you were expecting?" Egan stood in the doorway to the secret room, unmasked, his familiar sneer now even easier to read.

"H-how?" She staggered back.

Egan's grin widened. "You didn't think we'd discover your secret little

hideaway? Bribes work both ways.” He inhaled deeply. “You fucking stink of him.”

So that’s why they’d left her arms free and her door unlocked. It hadn’t been Damien’s doing, after all.

They’d come so close. All they’d needed was one more rotation. But, in the end, they’d fallen short.

“Wh-what are you going to do? Where’s Damien?”

Egan ignored her questions, his sneer slipping away as his eyes bled red. “You’re a fucking prize. You don’t ask questions. You don’t talk back. And you definitely stay where we put you.”

Her gaze flickered to the door.

“Hoping to escape? Or that Damien Skolov will swoop in and save you?” He shook his head. “Sadly for you, neither will happen.”

He stalked toward her, one slow step at a time.

Fear for Damien and for herself twisted through her.

Scarlett shuffled back.

Egan kept coming. “You have more spirit than expected. I thought I’d beat it out of you and your brother long ago.”

Another wave of panic slammed through her. He couldn’t possibly know about her brother, could he?

“But no”—her smirking handler circled closer—“you both refused to do as expected. After I put so much time and money into you.” His voice rose to a shout. “Ungrateful, defective merchandise.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“No?” Egan snarled. “I told you to stay away from Damien Skolov. I told you not to cause trouble. I told you this was bigger than you and me. But you didn’t listen.”

He feinted forward, then stopped, a predator tormenting its prey.

“Stay away.” She skittered back, just out of reach.

“Come here now!” He yanked the strap from his belt, snapping it in the air.

“You can’t. Th-the tournament. I’m a prize.”

“You think that can protect you? The vids only show what we want them to, and inspectors can be bribed as easily as guards. As long as the worst bruises are hidden from view, you’ll still serve as a workable prize—even if you’re a little more banged up and tarnished than most.” A leer twisted his features. “I’ve been given orders to make an example of you—and ensure it’s

made crystal clear what happens to those who get in his way.”

“Get in whose way? Who are you talking about?” *Who could hate her and Damien that much?*

But Egan ignored her questions, lost to his growing bloodlust as he stalked closer, his voice deepening to a menacing growl. “I don’t usually like to be told what to do, but in this case... I’ll enjoy every brutal moment, prize.”

He launched himself at her.

She screeched in rage and terror, her hands flying up to ward him off.

A searing wave of heat erupted from her, shimmering across her skin before exploding from her palms. It was a violent, monstrous streak of black, hotter than any flame and more potent than any laser.

Egan flew backward, his eyes white with shock, mouth open wide. But no sound emerged.

He landed on the floor, unmoving, his limbs twisted at unnatural angles.

Reeling, Scarlett remained frozen where she was.

Egan was dead.

She’d killed him.

There were no visible cuts or burns on his body, but she knew what had happened all the same.

She’d ended him with the monstrous black rage that seethed inside her, stripping him of all color and vitality, just as he’d tried her whole life to do to her.

She stared at her palms, awareness taking hold.

Her gift was evolving.

It—*she*—was no longer just a cute, shimmering thing. Ever since her first encounter with Damien, the power inside her had intensified by leaps and bounds. And now, it had killed.

She should have felt horror.

Instead, a glorious sense of power thrummed through every cell.

Was this the glory Damien sought? The knowledge that she had the power to make her own way. Fight her own battles. Choose her own course.

If so, she understood him in a way she never had before.

She glanced at Egan’s motionless body.

She would never regret the bully’s death, but as the glow of her victory receded, the reality of her situation hit hard.

A prize had killed a Consortium handler.

Her life was forfeit—unless she ran before anyone discovered what she'd done.

Or she covered it up.

She had to find Damien. Tell him everything. Together, they would make a plan.

He would understand. He would help.

They'd both made mistakes, but they were still a team.

Giving the body a wide berth, she charged for the door—only to have it slid open with a crash.

She skidded to a halt, her breath leaving in a rush, the tiny ember of hope that had flickered dying as a familiar figure filled the doorway.

“Going someplace?” The male's broad shoulders blocked her path.

She raised her hands, trying to propel the black from her palms once more, but nothing emerged.

Her gift needed time to recharge, and it didn't matter that she needed it now more than ever.

“I'm afraid I can't allow you to leave, Scarlett.” He pulled something from his leathers, and she flinched.

But it was only a vid maker.

With a click of a button, he recorded Egan's lifeless body, then her. “More to add to my collection. So delightful.”

His smug smile made her ill.

“You'll want to see the others I have as well. There are some nice ones of your brother too. He truly looks like a male in love.”

Her stomach churned. “Wh-what do you want?”

“So much. Death, destruction, revenge. But for now, I'll settle for a little pain at your expense.” His gaze flickered to Egan. “You actually did me a favor with that one. Unfortunately, I can't repay it with kindness... I can, however, give you a chance to save those you love.”

The dread inside her grew, the blackness eating away at everything but unable to come out—no matter how hard she tried, leaving her as helpless as ever.

Nothing more than a colorless, flimsy toy all too easy to break.

The Alpha took another step into the room, blocking out the light at his back, and quietly shut the door behind him. “You and I have much to discuss.”



DAMIEN

**R**otation five of the tournament: the Elite 100, the main event

Cheek pressed flat to the ground, Damien came awake with a splitting headache.

What in the fuck? He dabbed at the back of his head. Blood.

He was flat on his stomach in the underground tunnel.

Someone had gotten him good.

Screams and boot-stomps echoed above, followed by horns and drums.

*Fuck.* The tournament.

Those were the sounds of the Consortium's opening ceremonies. It was about to begin.

How long had he been out?

"Scarlett!"

He scrambled to his feet and promptly staggered into a nearby wall.

Whoever had sucker punched him hadn't held back.

But figuring out who he'd be killing would have to wait.

If they thought this would keep him from Scarlett, they were wrong.

He was already feeling better by the time he reached the locker room and shoved his way through the sea of fighters preparing for combat.

The stench of sweat, bloodlust, and nerves hit hard.

Out of the one hundred fighters gathered in the locker room, only one would emerge the ultimate champion.

It was going to be a fucking melee. A brutal no-holds-barred scrum. No scent muffers. No rules. The chance of injury—high. The possibility of death—real.

“You okay?” Crex’s worried face popped into Damien’s line of vision. “You seem off.”

“I’m fine.” He had to be. Scarlett was counting on him.

*Fuck.* He needed to find her. Apologize again for losing it. Explain what had prevented him from meeting her and assure her everything would be alright.

She had to be worried sick.

“You sure you’re okay?” Crex studied him.

He was fucking far from it. “I’ll be fine once I’m in the ring.”

“Must be that kind of rotation. Everyone’s off. Especially with Egan’s disappearance.”

Damien stilled. “What did you say?”

“Egan. Gone. It’s all anyone’s been talking about. Where have you been? Under a fucking rock?”

Actually, he’d been down in a fucking tunnel.

“Another Consortium lackey stepped in to run things.” As usual, Crex prattled on. “But it’s a total clusterfuck. Pure chaos.”

And Scarlett was dealing with this alone.

He pushed past Crex and through the throng of fighters stretching and talking smack.

“Ring entrance is the other way.” Crex pointed over his shoulder.

“Watch for the fight supervisors.” Damien didn’t slow. “Let them know I’m here. I just need to take a piss.”

He didn’t want anyone looking for him until he was ready to be found.

Damien leaped through the door to the hallway and marched toward the washroom, then kept on walking until he reached a smaller storage room near the end of the corridor.

Behind him, another ceremonial song started. The Consortium liked to draw out the hoopla. Next, the welcome speeches would begin, and they’d place a call for final bets. After that, the announcer would summon the fighters to the ring. Anyone absent would be disqualified.

Damien hustled faster and, after a quick look to make sure no one was around, slipped through the storage room door, kicked aside some old training mats, and found the grate that led to the tunnels below.

He heaved the grate aside—even for him, it took some effort—and dropped straight into a small hallway that opened onto one of the larger tunnels.



The opening ceremony music played on.

It didn't take him long to pinpoint the room where they held Scarlett. All he had to do was peer through the grate above and locate the four pairs of oversized boots clustered around a door that signaled security.

He listened for as long as he could stand, to ensure Scarlett was alone in the room, then, jumped up, slid his fingers through the grate, and hung by ten clawed digits while pushing his legs against the grate until it slid to one side.

"Damien?" It wasn't long until Scarlett's pale face peeked through the space he'd created.

"It's me." He slid his feet, moving the grate more—gratified to see Scarlett's fingers wrapping around the other side, tugging.

At least she was willing to let him in.

With her help, he soon had enough room to swing himself up and squeeze through.

He clambered to his feet in time to see her sway on hers. "Thank the Goddess. You're okay."

But she didn't run to him. Or throw herself into his arms. Bo vibrant colors shimmered across her skin, just a weak smoky flash of gray that sputtered and faded.

It gutted him.

They'd left her gold and red-streaked hair tumbling in loose waves down her back and put her in a sheer silken gold costume that exposed more of her gorgeous skin than it covered.

She looked so fucking beautiful—and so afraid.

His heart shriveled in his chest.

He could sense her pain. Feel the distance yawning between them like some fucking sinkhole he didn't know how to traverse.

This was his fault. He'd been so arrogant. So certain he could have it all that he hadn't protected what mattered most.

He took a step forward—and then forced himself to stop before he reached for her and she told him to get the hells away. "I'm sorry I scared you, beautiful. I'm here."

A single tear tracked down her cheek. "I went to our special place. I waited for you."

"I'm so sorry. You were right. I was a total Alphahole last rotation. Actually, scratch that. From the moment we met, I insisted we stay for the tournament, and then when I got all weird about Stormhart. I let my ego and

emotions get the best of me.”

Scarlett wrapped her arms around her waist as if she could hold herself together but said nothing. Another tear rolled down her cheek.

“I would’ve told you all this last night,” he hurried to explain, “but someone jumped me while I was on my way to you.”

She paled further. “Are you okay? Did they hurt you?”

“I’m fine.” He was so desperate that he took hope from the quiver in her voice. “I don’t want you to worry. I’ve got this. In fact...” He scrambled for anything that would stop her tears. “I think things are finally going our way.”

“What does that mean?”

“There’s a rumor going around that Egan’s missing. No one knows where he is. I can only hope someone finally took him down. Good fucking riddance and goodbye.” He cleared his throat. “One less worry for us. Things are already looking brighter.”

“Right.” She held herself tighter.

Instead of reaching for him.

His chest throbbed like someone had kicked him with a steel-toed boot.

“Come.” Damien held out his hand. “We’ll leave now through the tunnels. I’ll get you out of the dome. You don’t have to stay with me after. No expectations.” He forced out the words. “I’ll take you anywhere you want to go. Make sure you’re settled. And, fuck, if you ever forgive me, I’ll stay there with you. Keep you safe. Doing a better job than I did here.”

She stared at his extended hand, her body trembling.

He wanted to slice his own throat.

How had he let this happen?

“Scarlett, it will be okay.” He kept his hand outstretched. “I won’t disappoint you again.”

“I know you won’t.”

His heart rattled in his chest. It was a start. “Great. Let’s go.” He could hear the music softening and he wanted to be gone by the time the tournament got underway.

She took a step toward him, then halted, her hands fisting by her sides. “I-I want to stay.”

Surprise hit hard. “Why?”

“You—” Her chest rose as she inhaled deeply. “You were right before. I don’t want to be hunted our whole lives. I don’t want our families hurt. I want the chance for you to have the future you came here for and for me...”

Her voice shook. “T-to get what I need.”

“Are you sure? If you’re worried about me or that I might regret it later, don’t be. I won’t.”

She stood tall, her gaze locking with his. “I have never been more sure of anything. You told me you’d listen to what I want. I’m telling you now, this is what I want.”

He remembered: *Too many fuckers haven’t listened to a word you say. Not me. You tell me what you want. I do it. That’s how we operate from here on out. That’s my vow to you.*

“Alright.” He recalculated, a mix of determination, surprise, and unease running through him, but if that was what she wanted... he’d do right by her.

He would win this tournament. Not to prove anything to anyone else, but to show her that, from here on out, she could always count on him.

He took a small step closer. “I never should have put you in this predicament, but I will fix it now. I’ll win this tournament for you. From now on, it’s you first.”

Scarlett covered her face with her hands and sobbed. Hard.

He’d never felt more helpless.

“Baby, please. You’re killing me.” He opened his arms. “I don’t have much time. Let me hold you.”

She launched herself at him and burrowed deep, her arms clutching him as if she could hold him to her forever.

Then her arms were around his neck and she pulled him toward her, her mouth on his, kissing him like she wanted to consume him.

Nothing had ever felt so right.

Their tongues tangled in a frantic reunion, a desperate need, heavy with regret and apology, guilt and redemption.

He gripped her ass and lifted her until her thighs wrapped around his waist.

Her natural sweetness mixed with the salt of her tears. Wrecking him. Making him desperate to soothe. To erase every bit of pain he’d caused and replace it with pleasure.

“I’m so sorry, Scarlett.” He spoke in the space between their kisses, murmuring his regret against her skin. “I am going to make this right. You’ll see.”

She lifted his head from her mouth so their gazes locked. “I don’t want gentle now, Damien. I don’t want regrets. I-I just want us. Like we’ve always

been. Raw and honest, filthy and reckless. Don't hold back. Give me all of you."

They really were a perfect fucking match.

He pressed her spine against the wall and claimed her mouth once more.

"This, here... being with you." He scraped a fang along the column of her perfect throat. "This is everything I'll ever want or need."

She moaned, squeezing her thighs tighter around him, rocking her sweet pussy against his cock.

His knot swelled. His cock was so hard the laces of his leathers bit into his skin.

"Come inside me, Damien. Claim me now. The tournament's almost at an end. No more inspections. No one has to know."

Her plea clawed at his self-control.

And when she went for his laces, one small hand sliding down his chest to his waistband, her lithe hips working feverishly against him, he almost lost it altogether.

But he'd made a vow down in that tunnel. Her happiness and safety came first. Always.

He stilled her hand. "Nothing I want more." He pressed his forehead to hers and caught his breath. "But my leathers stay on. I will not rut you in some shitty spare room for our first time."

"No!" Wild desperation sharpened her protest. "I don't care. I just want you."

Scarlett was afraid.

He understood. The tournament was not without risk, but he would come back to her.

"My mate deserves more." He gripped her ass and worked her harder over his dick. "She deserves everything." He rocked her faster and faster. "Every pleasure. Every good thing in this galaxy."

Those sweet little moans of hers drove him wild.

"And I'm going to give it all to her." He nipped at her ear. Licked away the sting. And pumped her up and down his shaft, loving that she was leaving behind a trail of slippery slick on his leathers. A claim for everyone to scent and see. "Because Scarlett Skolov is my mate, and my heart, and I will love her forever."

She came apart in his arms, panting and sobbing.

He followed right behind, grunting as his knot swelled and his shaft

reached for her and he nudded in his fucking pants, stream after stream coating the insides of his leathers and thighs.

It was filthy. Raw. And so fucking good. Them, together.

Except she hadn't once purred for him. Not. Once.

The roar of the crowds echoed through the room. The music ended.

They'd run out of time.

"Baby, I have to go."

"Damien." She held him tighter.

"I'll see you again soon." But his words could only do so much.

Until he won, she would be afraid.

He slid her down his body, pressing kisses to her face, not liking the glassy look in her eyes, or her tight smile as he fixed her dress.

"It's going to be okay." He tucked a strand of hair behind her ear.

"Is it?" Even her post-climax flush couldn't hide the frantic fear on her face or the desperation dulling her stare. Her colors hadn't shimmered across her skin either.

He got it. Scarlett was scared she'd lose him. Scared this was goodbye.

It made him almost wish he'd done as she'd asked and fucked her here and now. Claimed her with his fangs and cock, so everyone would know she was his.

Except this wasn't goodbye; it was only their beginning.

And she deserved so much more than a frantic, fearful rut for her first time. They both did. They'd have plenty of time to get it right. Make it special.

"I know you're scared, but it's going to be alright." He gripped her chin and made sure she saw the determination in his eyes. "I will not fuck up again. I will keep my cool. I will win this tournament. For us."

"I know you can." She wrapped her hand around his wrist and squeezed before drawing away, her movements wooden, her voice a strained rasp. "I want you to remember. I have always believed you can win this."

The emotion in her voice slayed him. He heard the love and forgiveness.

Damien breathed easier. They were going to be okay.

He'd fucked up, but she still loved him.

And she truly believed he could be the champion.

Otherwise, she'd have taken him up on his offer to run.

The dual realizations filled him with a sense of peace. "I love you so much, Scarlett."

Her smile wobbled. “I love you too, Damien Skolov. I always will.”

Energized, he turned to go. Already, he could hear the announcer calling out the names of the entering fighters, whipping the crowd into a frenzy, playing up the money and prize awaiting the victor.

His chest puffed out—he’d be entering the ring with his female’s sweet slick on his leathers, a message to every single fighter and to the Consortium that she was already his. He couldn’t lose.

“Wait!” Scarlett hurried to a table, then back to him. She pressed a container into his hands. “Take this with you. It’s water.” Her smile wobbled.

His throat went tight. “’Cause we’re a team.” He tapped the canister to his chest, right by his heart. “Each time I drink, I’ll think of you cheering me on. And the next time you see me, I’ll be the winner of this tournament, and you’ll be mine. And I’ll be yours.”

She smiled wide and took a step back. “It sounds almost too good to be true.”

He moved to the grate. “Believe it.”



## DAMIEN

**D**amien dodged an elbow strike and rolled to his side, leaving a bloody trail before he surfaced an arm's length away. He shoved his boot heel into the closest male.

*Snap.* The fighter screamed, his body folding as he dropped to his knees, clutching his thigh and protruding bone.

Another one out.

But another fighter was right behind, fangs clashing, spikes elongating, silver horns snapping straight as he lowered his head and charged at Crex.

Damien shoved his orange-skinned friend out of the way and seized hold of the spiny fighter's biggest horn, yanking hard as he dropped his weight in the opposite direction. There was a squelching sound of tearing flesh and Damien held the blood-spattered horn in his hands while the fighter writhed on the ground in agony.

Damien slipped back into defense mode, the bottom of his boot sliding across the sand-covered ground as he circled, his gaze alert for the next attack. The tournament organizers had carted sand in from outside the dome and packed it down hard to better absorb the blood and sweat.

It was pure madness in the ring: bodies and limbs flying everywhere, the lasers that lined the sides buzzing and flashing each time a fighter crashed into them, the stench of charred flesh filling the air.

Outside the glowing bars, the spectators' cheers were a deafening roar.

Damien risked a glance at the tally board as the number of fighters left in the tournament dropped by yet another one.

Only fifteen to go.



A faint rush of air by his side was his only warning. Two fighters jumped him at once.

Rather than spinning away, Damien plowed back into them, throwing them off-balance and making it easy for him to take them down to the ground. They landed one on top of the other, weighing each other down and helping him as he slammed his fist into the chin of the one on top, then used his elbow to crack the temple of the one beneath.

Two sets of eyes rolled back. Lights out.

There was no time to celebrate.

Damien dodged just as a boot sailed toward him with lethal intent. He lurched to the side, ensuring it caught him in the thigh—rather than the stomach—but it still hurt like a motherfucker.

He swept out his foot and brought the asshole down, and then twisted the male's ankle, wrenching tendon and bone.

Another agonized scream echoed through the arena. The crowd roared.

Twelve more to go. Nor was he the only one dispatching fighters—Crex and his tail were definitely holding their own. The others were busy as well.

Leaving behind the smartest and most vicious. The most hungry to win.

But Damien was the hungriest.

*I have always believed you can win this.*

Scarlett's words echoed in his head, driving him on.

She believed in him. Was counting on him.

He was winning this tournament and making her his.

The bell rang, signaling the end of the round and the fact that only eight fighters remained in the ring. The next round would decide the winner.

Pumped, Damien exited the cage to catch his breath in the designated fighters' area while ring cleanup started, several robed betas scurrying out to mop up as much of the blood, tissue, and sweat as possible.

The crowd remained on its feet, screaming and cheering.

All Damien could think of was Scarlett and how it had felt to hold her. Taste her. And how fragile and worried she'd seemed.

Soon, she wouldn't have to worry anymore.

Unlocking the small storage space allotted each fighter, Damien pulled out the canister of water Scarlett had given him earlier and took a long drink, feeling closer to her already.

Crex staggered over to stand by his side, the curved spatter of blood across his cheek and the cut above his eye, making him look like some kind

of clown raider.

“You did it.” Damien clapped his friend on the back. Crex had made it past the final sixteen and all the way to the last eight fighters. His prize money would be even greater than he’d expected, his sisters’ futures assured.

“Thanks to you.” Crex shot him a smile.

Damien shook his head. “You got yourself here. I only cut down the competition.”

“Right.” Crex looked unconvinced. “Say what you want. I know the truth—and I’m grateful. And thirsty.” He made a grab for Damien’s drink.

Damien grunted, pulling his hand away. “Get your own.”

Crex just laughed.

Damien might have joined him, but his tongue felt weirdly heavy.

“You okay?” Crex’s question jerked him from his thoughts.

“Yup.” He shook off the weird sensation. “Just studying the competition.”

“You’ve got this in the bag.” Like him, Crex surveyed the fighters left.

Three Brotherhood-sponsored fighters remained, including a hulking, plated Kuril Alpha and a blob-like fucker who could only be from the Prendel crime family. There was one other no-name, non-Brotherhood fighter like him and Crex and a couple of Consortium-owned warriors, likely trained by Scarlett’s brother. And, of course, there was Kadon Stormhart. Still in the tournament, as predicted. Or perhaps someone had rigged that outcome, but there was only so much the Consortium or Brotherhood could do. Damien would not be controlled by them.

He surveyed those standing between him and his goal.

Cuts and bruises riddled everyone left, including himself. A couple had broken arms and horns, and a few more looked dazed, one listing from side to side. Those would be the easiest to take out next.

But fucking Kadon Stormhart looked as clear-headed and focused as ever. His gaze locked on Damien.

Scowling, Damien stared back, not looking away as he chugged down more water.

He’d taken out the fighters near him easily. But Stormhart was proving harder to dispatch.

They’d exchanged a few strikes whenever they crossed paths earlier, but there’d been so many bodies at the start, and they both kept getting ambushed by others looking to take out the favorites fast.

Damien didn’t let it worry him. He’d get around to the bastard soon.

Because this time, a sense of control guided him on and off the ring. He felt centered in a way he never had before. Stormhart was just another fighter to defeat. A stepping stone to what really mattered.

Damien pictured Scarlett's face and his true purpose reemerged, cutting through all the bullshit and the screaming crowd, the golden lights and flashing money signs.

None of that mattered.

Not even the title itself.

Not even beating Stormhart, beyond the fact that it was a means to his real objective.

His true end and his beginning was Scarlett Skolov.

He was going to be a better male for her. All grown up. Ready to be an Alpha she could be proud of.

He'd come to the tournament to prove himself.

But thanks to her, he'd discovered that he had nothing to prove—except that she was his everything.

He took another long drink.

The liquid cooled his parched throat. The thought of her caring for him soothed his soul.

They were going to be okay.

And after he won, he'd never put her at risk again. From here on out, he'd treat her like a queen. Worship at her feet. Hells, he'd even let her tie him up, just as promised.

Life was going to be so good.

He swayed on his feet.

"You sure you're okay?" Crex's worried face appeared right in front of him.

"Never better." He pushed his friend aside. "Out of my way so I can win this."

"You sure? You don't seem right."

The warning bell rang.

Damien took another quick drink for luck and reentered the ring—and had to blink twice when he noticed Crex back by his side.

"What are you doing back in the cage?" They'd both agreed he'd tap out right before the final round.

Crex's usual lopsided smile was absent. "You're off. Plus, you watched my back. Only fair I watch yours."

“No, that’s... stupid.” Damien’s tongue was thick in his mouth. “You... need to go. It’s too dangerous.” He jerked his chin toward the exit as a strong wave of dizziness rolled through him.

“Something is definitely wrong with you.” The lines beside Crex’s eyes deepened, his friend’s concern obvious as he looked him up and down.

Shit. He must be tired. Or he’d gotten hit harder than he’d realized in the last round.

“Damien?” Somehow Crex had snuck up on him and gotten right in his face.

He shoved the guy back. “You should... go. Too much risk.”

“Which means more reward.” Crex clapped a hand on his shoulder, his expression determined. “I got you.”

Damien shook his head and widened his stance, willing himself to focus.

Scarlett was close.

“With the final round set to begin”—the announcer shouted to be heard over the crowds’ screams, his voice echoing through the arena—“we wanted to remind those left of just what they’re fighting for.” Gold coins flashed on every vid screen. “Money beyond their wildest dreams.” A drum roll gained in volume. “Fame.” The screen shifted to an image of a past fighter being carried on the shoulders of an adoring crowd. “And, of course, a prize any Alpha would kill to possess.”

Scarlett’s beautiful face appeared on the screen.

Damien’s fangs punched through his gums. She looked so fucking scared—and sad.

He followed the vid maker’s line of sight until he found her. Closer than he would have expected.

She was being led into a luxury suite section right near the announcer’s table, crowding her in with a wall of Alpha Consortium higher-ups and Brotherhood investors, including N’gal Verish, Andor Stormhart, and a whole lot of other pompous-looking fuckers Damien despised on sight.

His nostrils flared. There was nothing about her proximity to those Alphaholes that he liked.

The bell sounded.

The crowd erupted.

And the hulking Kuril Alpha came at Damien so fast he almost missed it. Tearing his attention from Scarlett, he managed to leap out of the way—and shove the bastard straight into the laser bars.

Then almost face-planted into them himself as another wave of dizziness struck.

He staggered back a few steps.

What the fuck was wrong with him?

Off to one side, Crex took out another fighter. Two others went down, care of the Kuril Alpha. Then one more, thanks to Stormhart.

By some miracle, only four remained in the ring, and he hadn't lifted a fist to make it happen. He couldn't.

But the next time the Kuril Alpha came at him, Damien wasn't so lucky.

His arms refused to follow his command. Leaden, they hung at his sides.

Panic roared through him. Not for himself, but for Scarlett. He had to win.

*Crash.*

A fist smacked into his jaw.

He spun sideways. Flesh sizzled as he bounced off the laser bars of the cage.

The crowd went wild, sensing blood in the air.

But he heard only one scream: "Damien!"

Eyes bouncing wildly, he followed the sound until his gaze collided with Scarlett's.

He fucking hated that she was standing with those Alphaholes, some vaguely familiar bastard's arm draped around her shoulder, her face so sad.

He'd rip that fucker's arm from his body.

*Pow.* Another fist crashed into him, severing his view of Scarlett and sending him stumbling in the other direction.

"Fuck, Damien." Crex shoved him out of the way just before the final lights-out punch landed. "Get those fucking hands up. Or at least try to dodge." He flicked his tail and whipped the other fighter across the face—giving the Kuril a new target for his fury.

Damien wanted to protest but he couldn't make his limbs or mouth move right.

He stumbled toward the grappling Crex and Kuril Alpha. Took a swing. Missed.

Laughter echoed around him. Boos, too.

He was failing her.

Damien struggled to stay upright—and watched in horror as the Kuril Alpha looked over to where N'gal Verish stood, nodded once, and then

clapped his hands around Crex's temples and twisted.

"No!" Damien fought to make his limbs move faster.

*Crack.*

His friend dropped to the sand, his head twisted at an odd angle, that lopsided smile gone, his eyes empty.

"No." Agony ripped through Damien.

He launched himself at the other fighter, a rush of adrenaline providing a spurt of lucidity and control, enabling him to sink his claws into the bastard's throat and tear out his voice box—and his ability to breathe.

Crex's killer dropped to the ground, his face twisted in agony.

Another fighter down. But too late for his friend.

He'd fucking failed Crex.

Damien stumbled again and tried to think past his grief.

The Kuril Alpha had killed Crex at Verish's request, but how the hells did that relate to what was wrong with him?

*Drugged.*

The realization struck as Stormhart's fist slammed into him—bringing a flash of clarity.

Someone had drugged him.

But who? He'd been so fucking careful, only taking food and drink from...

His head snapped up, his gaze landing on the locked storage space. The water container. A container no one had touched but him... and Scarlett.

Disbelief hit.

He whirled back around, his gaze locking with hers.

Her despair and guilt were easy to see. Even easier to feel through their bond.

It was Scarlett. She'd done it.

She wasn't even pretending now. Darkness swirled within her, stretching toward him through their invisible bond, all her beautiful colors gone.

All his hopes for their future too.

But why?

Rage and pain explode inside him.

*I know you can win.*

Her earlier words to him. *Can.* Not *will.*

She'd known all along—but she'd sent him into the ring anyway, and now Crex was dead, and Stormhart was the only other fighter remaining.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Stormhart charge.

He didn't have time to give a fuck.

Damien stumbled toward her. "Why?"

Despite the laser bars between them, she lurched backward, straight into the body of the male at her side.

Her eyes overflowed with tears.

His eyes filled too.

*Crack.*

It was almost a relief when Stormhart's punch landed, and the darkness took him.





DAMIEN

**D**amien awoke with a groan, the vibrations from the shuttle jostling every sore muscle—which was damned near all of them.

But he was alive.

Which was more than he could say for Crex.

He tried to shift—only to have metal bite into his throat.

He might be alive, but they'd shackled his throat, wrists, and ankles to the hull.

The Consortium was taking no chances.

Off to one side loomed six mean-looking Alphas escorting him from the premises, their tasers already fired up.

As if he had any interest in drop-kicking their asses anywhere.

He'd caught sight of their destination flashing across the navigation screen: Abzal.

They were taking him home. Only place he wanted to go.

He let his head drop back against the shuttle wall.

She was probably with Stormhart already. Maybe even now signing the contract that would make her his prime omega: Scarlett Stormhart.

His stomach lurched, bile burning at the back of his throat.

Rage filled him. Hatred too.

Kadon Stormhart now had everything Damien once wanted.

Luc must be pleased, the Consortium too. Plus, Egan was gone, so that was one less worry for them all.

It had all worked out well for everyone—except for him.

Damien shifted on the hard seat. He'd never felt younger. Or dumber. Or

more lost.

He still couldn't fathom why she'd done it. But then again, her brother had warned him: Stormhart had always been the smarter choice.

Guess she'd wised up just in time.

Their dry humping against the wall her farewell sendoff before she chose security, wealth, and a family with Brotherhood connections over some bruiser with none of the above.

Orgasms were nice, but they didn't keep a female's belly full or offer the kind of legitimacy a prize would crave.

Lesson learned.

His gaze returned to the navigation screen, and he kept it together by watching the distance to his home dwindle.

He was so damned glad to be heading back to his family to lick his wounds.

To refocus and find his purpose once more.

First things first, though: locate Crex's family and do whatever he could to ensure his friend's six sisters were safe.

He owed Crex that much.

Damien knocked his head against the wall, accepting the sting as his due.

He'd taken his hits—emerged bruised and bloody. What's more, he was returning to his family with no glory attached to his name, no prize money, and no omega.

Losing wasn't easy. Swallowing it, as bitter as those energy drinks Scarlett had secretly hated.

But the only real defeat would be if he quit, and there was no chance of that.

The intensity of his feelings for the omega wouldn't let him.

They were still as deep and vast and intense as before. Only now, it wasn't love that filled his heart but hurt and rage. And rage was a hell of a lot easier to accept, so he let it crowd out the pain. Let it burn through him. Let it sear away everything but the determination to make sure, one rotation in the future, Scarlett regretted her choice.

That she'd be beyond sorry she'd become Stormhart's prime omega and wished she'd had enough faith to choose him instead.

And when that happened, and she came crawling back to him with remorse in her beautiful eyes, he'd show her the same consideration she'd shown him.

Or maybe he was fooling himself.

Maybe his rage would weaken over time.

Maybe in a few planetary rotations, he wouldn't care or even remember her name.

Maybe the stupid, dense piece of his heart that still beat for her would wise up and realize she was lost to him forever, their story a tragic tale with no happy ending.

Maybe he'd move on, shrug the whole clusterfuck off as a youthful misadventure.

But he didn't think so.

Scarlett was in his blood and, for better or worse, he didn't think he'd be able to fill the black space where his soul used to be until he had his reckoning.

No matter how long it took.



Scarlett

Scarlett stared out at the rising shuttle as its lights grew dimmer and more distant.

She blinked hard, fighting to keep it in her sight for as long as possible. Her finger swiped away the condensation forming on the luxury suite window, a material so much like her former display case. She was a prize no longer, but she'd never felt more like a prisoner.

Hopeless guilt churned within her. A hot, searing agony she knew would never end.

She missed Damien already.

But at least he was safe.

Kadon had seen to that, delivering a punch that would knock him out, but keep him alive.

She pressed her palm to the crystal as the darkness swallowed Damien's shuttle, carrying him home. His brothers had already been informed of his impending arrival.

That and his life spared, had been the few concessions she'd won.

She'd come so close to getting all she'd ever wanted—only to have it snatched away.

Outside, in the corridor, her brother Luc stood waiting to serve as witness to what was about to happen.

In the end, he hadn't wanted it to turn out this way either. Not once he understood how she felt about Damien. The same could be said of Kadon Stormhart, whose heart—like hers—belonged to another, and always would.

But there was nothing any of them could do.

She'd thought she'd known who their enemies were. Assumed she'd grasped the extent of the dangers she and Damien had to overcome: Egan. The Consortium. Damien's aggression.

She hadn't had a clue.

She'd never understood the extent of the threat they faced, or the depravity of those lurking in the shadows, and now it was too late.

"Come, Scarlett. It's time for a prize to be transformed into a prime omega and for you to enter into a contract with Kadon Stormhart, the tournament winner." The Alpha beckoned her away from the window, a smug look on his face.

Egan might be gone, but she was far from free.

"Do as you're told from now on," continued the Alpha, "and you and those you care about will live to see another rotation. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Alpha Lord."

"Good."

She fixed a tight smile on her face and followed him. Pretending. Just as she always had.

However, now she had a new goal, a new reason for being. And it wasn't to escape. It wasn't even to find a way to flee and beg Damien's forgiveness.

That future was no longer possible for her now.

But somehow, some rotation, she'd make things right. In the meantime, she'd do her best to keep those she loved safe.

Because that's what a true hero did. Damien had shown her that.

And she would love him with every part of her filthy, broken soul forever, no matter what the future held.

# **FILTHY ROYAL: A DARK FATED- MATES ROMANCE**

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## DAMIEN

**F**our planetary rotations after the prequel

“Trust me, kid. It’s a solid idea.” With his hood pulled low, Damien shouldered through the frenzied crush, pushing and shoving along with the rest of the crowd. The stench of sweat, bloodlust, drink, desperation, and over-fried meat lay thick in the air.

A howl of pain echoed above the spectators’ screams. An omega shrieked. Three Alphas stomped their boots and hollered for ale.

“Really?” Intent on keeping up, Maddox elbowed aside a wild-eyed blob of an Alpha clutching betting chips in two of his three tentacles, then dodged a scuffle. “’Cause I have a pretty clear memory of your brothers droning on about us being subtle and making no waves.”

“They’re your brothers too.” Damien’s correction was automatic, as his focus was on the luxury box perched high above, and the guarded doors below that provided access to the upper stadium areas.

“Right.” Maddox snarked back. “But more yours.”

Beneath his hood and cloak, the kid had the Skolov black hair, dark red skin, and uncanny ability to be a disrespectful pain in the ass. But he’d also inherited their stubbornness—and since his return home, he hadn’t settled in as well as Damien had hoped.

But he would.

Even if Damien had to knock acceptance into the stubborn, oversized brat with his bare hands. In a loving, brotherly way, of course.

The crack of bones—caught by the sound amplifiers in the cage—echoed through the stadium as the crowd grew more frenzied.

Blood splattered across the first three rows of spectators. Something shiny and white flew past.

Damien ducked just in time.

Maddox caught it—then chucked it deeper into the crowd. “Fuck me, that was a fang.” He shuddered.

Damien smirked.

The Golden Dome’s cage fights were an acquired taste. Hundreds of thousands of frenzied Alphas on their feet, sanctioned scent mufflers off, screaming and cursing at the fighters in the ring, calling for blood, while others in the crowd clobbered each other for sport, and many others worked off their aggression by bending a working omega whore over a seat to rut even as they kept their gazes locked on the ring and their favorite fighter. It didn’t even matter that it was evening-time. It was like this all the time in the coliseum.

Pure madness.

An atmosphere he’d loved...

Until his friend Crex died, everything went to shit, and he lost his taste for tournaments, and everything associated with the Golden Dome.

Now he kicked ass on his own terms, preferably without an audience.

“This place is fucking insane.” Maddox stared around wide-eyed, too enthralled to maintain his usual *I’m too cool* attitude.

Damien grunted in response. “Insane and loud. Which is exactly why my plan’s a good one.”

*Probably.*

Strategizing wasn’t exactly his forte. Breaking things was more his skill set.

“I was just saying,” Maddox yelled to be heard over a wave of ear-splitting shrieks, “you’ve seemed a little... *off* since we arrived.”

“Off?” Damien’s gaze snapped back to the kid. “I’m fine.”

Two omega whores who weren’t yet on their backs hissed and scurried out of his way.

Par for the fucking course.

He could not have cared less.

Because he was fine. *Totally fine.*

The past was the past. He was very clear on his mission—track down his half brother Darvish Sartin and find out what he’d done with their missing sister, Zaya.



Oh, and side benefit: put the previous mistake he'd made in the Golden Dome behind him and prove to his brothers without a doubt that he could be relied upon to do more than follow orders, smash heads, and fuck up.

He was no longer a stupid kid.

He'd grown up.

At twenty-two-planetary-rotations-old, he was in his prime: bigger, stronger, faster than ever. He'd learned discipline and patience. Plus, he'd made a name for himself and now had power, money, and a much bigger... attitude.

Though, yeah, his cock was thicker and longer too.

Point was, he had his shit locked down tight and was totally fine with being back in the dome. Focused. Determined. Eyes on the fucking prize.

Prize. *Fuck!*

"Yeah, you definitely seem fine." Maddox's gaze settled on Damien's claws.

Claws that were now mere inches from the nape of the cheering spectator stupid enough to have blocked his line of sight to the luxury box above.

"I am one hundred percent issue-free." Damien willed his claws to retract and stepped around the oblivious viewer.

"Uh-huh." The flashing lights from the cage bars sifted across Maddox's scowling face and highlighted the burn patches on his neck and forearms.

A reminder.

The kid had suffered over a decade of abuse thanks to their half brother, Darvish, who'd abducted Maddox as a baby, then planted him with another family, allowing him to be raised by a sadist.

Darvish had stolen Maddox's twin sister too, but Damien had no idea what he'd done with her. Yet.

"Yes! Kill 'em!" The crowds' screams rose to a fever pitch.

On the surface, the dome appeared to be all glitz and fun and bright lights. But it was controlled by a secretive, profit-focused corporation known as the Consortium and built on the blood, sweat, and tears of fighters and omega prizes who were treated as property.

Not that most spectators in attendance gave a damned. They just wanted to be entertained, get their dicks wet, and win big. Preferably all at once.

Those standing ringside rattled the outside bars of the cage as the two fighters inside clobbered the shit out of each other. It wasn't an Elite 100 tournament, but it was still brutal. One snapped his opponent's horn and

jabbed the point toward his heart, while the other countered by raking his claws across his rival's face.

Crex's empty eyes flashed through Damien's mind.

"So being back here doesn't bother you?" Maddox's question slapped Damien straight back into the present.

"Nope. You were there for my chat with Darvish's driver." He refused to take the bait. "You heard what I did."

Maddox snorted. "Chat. Right."

A valid reaction. Damien's *chats* often involved his fists, but this interrogation had been especially bloody. And justified.

He and his brothers had recently gotten a bead on their notoriously slippery half brother and triangulated his location to the dome. That in itself was a massive victory since the male had eluded them for some time now.

Learning of his half brother's connection to the dome had come as a major shock.

But Damien had kept his cool. Only tearing apart four workout rooms while his brothers weren't paying attention.

Then he'd pulled his shit together and gotten down to business—capturing an employee of their half brother's that had provided them with more intel.

"All I'm saying," Maddox skirted another brawl, "is that sneaking into the Golden Dome was a breeze. But finding this fucker Darvish is proving much harder."

"Truth." Folks were terrified, and no one was talking. Even Darvish's Consortium shuttle driver, Henel Brock, had been reluctant to talk.

Still, with some "encouragement," he'd spilled what little he knew.

Brock seemed far from sharp, his sole responsibility ferrying his boss and a handful of others to and from Consortium headquarters. He knew nothing about his boss's activities. Even less about what his boss did once he returned to his shuttle. Brock's denseness and lack of curiosity were likely why Darvish kept the driver around.

But Brock was also a horny Alpha, which meant he remembered one passenger very well. In fact, he could describe *her* in great, pervy detail.

Mostly because, unlike the others, she was a regular. And hot. And known to be a close business associate of the boss.

Brock uttering the name of that individual had been Damien's final shock.

And he'd taken it about as well as he had the rest of the surprises, only this time, he'd torn Brock apart rather than some workout rooms.

But now he was back to fine. As chill as an ice comet.

"This is the best lead we've had yet," he told Maddox. "So we follow it. Simple as that."

Yup. Simple as that. Because the past was the past, and he was fucking fine.

"As *simple* as you deciding to let Anya come on this mission?" Maddox didn't sound convinced. "'Cause I suspect your uptight older brothers will like giving her that kind of freedom about as much as they'll applaud this new plan of yours. Which means not at all."

"*Freedom?*" Anya's outraged screech pinged through their comms. "*You locked me in the shuttle, outside the dome limits, here in the middle of a nowhere desert. How is that freedom?*"

She'd snuck on board his shuttle, concealed herself in an air duct, and waited until they entered the planet's airspace to reveal herself.

Of course, he'd already known she was there. He knew all her tricks.

But he also knew what it was like to be young and restless.

So he'd feigned surprise. Then put her to work operating the shuttle and monitoring their communications—since he wasn't a stuffed shirt like his older brothers. Plus, his sister's flying skills and connection with machines were a thing of beauty. As they should be, given that he'd taught her how to fly.

He'd rip out the tongue of anyone who said so out loud, but he could admit to occasionally being a softie when it came to the females in his life. Saying no to Anya was challenging, and Crex's sisters walked all over him every damned time he visited.

But he had his limits, and there was no way he'd allow his sister free range inside the Golden Dome.

"The cages are no place for an omega like you." Damien picked up right where they'd left off their argument.

"*You have no clue what I can handle.*"

He hoped to the Goddess neither of them ever found out.

All he had to do was look around at the vacant stares of the omega whores working the crowd to see what happened to females here.

Except for *her*.

She'd managed to come out just fine.

His fangs punched at his gums.

“Enough. From both of you. Just zip it and stick to the plan.” He surged another few steps toward the guarded doors. “Nikolai and the others will see the rightness of it soon enough.”

Or they wouldn’t.

He didn’t give a shit.

Make no mistake, he worshipped his brothers. They were far better males than he’d ever be. Smarter. Sneakier. Each a visionary in their own right. Nikolai had dragged them up from ice urchins to become one of the most powerful families in the Brotherhood. Maxheim’s tech skills were legendary, and his ability to run their enterprise was nothing short of breathtaking, as elegant as the inventions he created in his spare time. Alexi ran their entertainment industry as if he’d been born to do it and had somehow learned to control a beast that would have turned a lesser male into a monster.

But, as the Skolov Enforcer, it was Damien’s job to back them up. To ensure no one messed with them so they could continue to lead their family to greatness.

He’d do what he had to—and was more than *fine* about it.

His gaze returned to the luxury box. Or, more accurately, to the monitor the size of a small building that floated just below the ceiling, conveniently providing glamorous shots of life within the luxury suite.

And that’s how he caught sight of Scarlett after four long planetary rotations of abstinence.

The air vanished from his lungs as his chest squeezed tight.

*Fuck. Him.*

That damned liquid-gold hair streaked with red was as glorious as he remembered. Same for the sensual *koti*-eyed slant of those eyes that had once turned soft and glassy when he fucked her with his tongue. And that full lower lip that had trembled when she swallowed his cock, her cheeks hollowing as her head bobbed up and down.

As if no time had passed, those memories seared his brain and soul.

Then he noticed the differences too.

She now wore her hair up in an intricate series of braids adorned with jewels that must have cost a fortune, and the standard Consortium-property bands that had once encircled her wrists and throat had been replaced by a thicker, shinier collar and cuffs.

Her eyes appeared harder too, and those glorious lips were now painted a

bright, brazen red while golden dots lined the delicate arcs of her eyebrows. An exact match to the sheer golden strips that could barely be called a dress artfully draped across her stunning curves, baring far more skin than they covered.

She was no longer the young female he'd once known. Her jaw appeared more defined, her cheekbones leaner and more pronounced, while her breasts and hips had only grown lusher. At twenty-five planetary rotations, she was at the height of her beauty.

Truth be told, adorned in glittering jewels at her neck, wrists, and forearms, she wasn't the pretty, innocent prize-in-training he'd met, but a fucking sex goddess: sparkling, perfect, flawless.

An ideal match for the rest of the elite snobs seated in the suite, especially the polished, golden-haired Alpha to her right.

Her Alpha lord: Kadon Stormhart, liaison to the Consortium board

The male she was contracted to.

The male for whom she'd betrayed Damien.

The male who'd become champion of the tournament, winning the money, the reputation, and the omega prize Damien had coveted for himself.

Dark energy surging through him, he clamped his mouth shut to keep from roaring in fury and reminded himself that he was fucking fine.

He no longer cared about Scarlett's past choices.

Only her recent mistakes.

He reached his desired location in the stadium: a spot not far from the door and the guards.

As intended, the constant ebb and flow of the frenzied crowd ensured that he and Maddox didn't stand out. Most in the stadium were too focused on the fight to pay attention to anything else anyway; the increased shouts, roars, and tearing flesh proof that the battle was reaching a fever pitch.

Then Damien caught sight of another familiar face—this one much less pretty: Luc, Scarlett's brother, the male who, four planetary rotations past, hadn't thought much of Damien and encouraged her to choose Kadon Stormhart instead.

Jaw tight, veins popping in his oversized neck, the scowling bastard stood to the side of the ring, dressed in standard Consortium uniform, shouting fighting tips at the losing Thanatos.

*Interesting.*

While Kadon and Scarlett appeared to have risen exponentially in power

and stature, Luc had remained a Consortium lackey and training coach.

Guess they hadn't bothered to take him along for their ride through the ranks.

Damien wondered if that grated—and whether Luc still thought Kadon was such a great choice for his sister.

But then Damien remembered that he didn't care.

From his new angle, he had a better view of the monitor showcasing the luxury box—where the spotlight shone on Scarlett.

The golden beam of light illuminated her in full, glorious detail as she turned away from Kadon to the hulking male seated to her left—some wealthy, purple-skinned, pretty-boy Alpha with a crown planted between his horns.

She poured more drink into his golden cup and laughed at something he said, her tiny scrap of a dress only highlighting how the movement set her lush tits jiggling.

Damien's hood fell back. His hands fisted by his sides.

She looked more beautiful than he remembered—and he remembered everything.

A low growl escaped him.

Scarlett lurched to her feet, knocking the cup from the purple Alpha's grasp, a flush spreading across her chest, those gorgeous tits heaving.

Damien's lip curled upward.

*That's right, baby. Fucking chaos. You feel me? Vibrating through those folds? Seeping inside that desperate, tight little body? Making you burn? Making you remember exactly how good it used to be between us?*

In the luxury box, her purple-skinned Alpha reached for her. She shook him off and stepped closer to the edge to search the crowd.

Damien's smirk hardened—even as his claws gouged deeper into his palms.

*That pull isn't going away. You can play the perfect little prime omega; you can enjoy your perfect life and your perfect view and your perfect mate and the thrill of these perfect princes panting after you, but that cunt of yours knows exactly whose cock it wants buried within—and it's not that fancy, too handsome bastard by your side.*

*You still want your dirty little secret.*

*You still want it filthy.*

*You still want me.*

*And I'm coming for you, Scarlett.  
Only this time, it's not for pleasure.  
It's for punishment.*





## SCARLETT

Scarlett's hand clenched into a fist as another wave of heat rippled across her skin with the same frenzied madness as the screaming crowd below.

This could not be happening. Not here. Not now.

Thinking about Damien, allowing herself to imagine for even one heartbeat that she could scent him in her lungs was far too dangerous.

Especially when everything hinged on staying focused on the task at hand.

The situation was already tense enough with Brock missing.

"If you wanted to see me without my shirt, you could have just asked." A wall of muscle crowded at her back, the heavy scent of spirits indicating who'd followed her to the front of the box.

Fixing a smile on her face, she turned.

With its backdrop of golden paneling, glittering chandeliers, and plush seating, the luxury box appeared to be an oasis of beauty and wealth. But things were seldom as they seemed.

"Forgive my clumsiness, Prince Jai." Scarlett had to nearly scream to be heard. Though not as crowded as the regular coliseum seats, at least one hundred elites and their entourages were packed into the box.

But Prince Jai L'erk was one of the wealthiest Federation princes in the galaxy. He was also a sadist who got off on causing extreme pain—and the special guest of her Alpha lord, Kadon Stormhart, for this fight.

Making it all the more problematic that she'd just spilled top-shelf ale all over him.

Two drunk Alphas in sumptuous robes staggered by, pawing at the near-naked giggling omegas slung over their shoulders and almost knocking over one of the poor betas holding a serving tray.

The prince didn't notice.

Scarlett pretended she didn't either. She'd become even more of an expert at pretending these past few planetary rotations.

*Slap.* The prince's palm slammed onto the crystal wall by her head. "I know exactly how I'll exact payment for the loss of my garment. Give me a private showing. I want to see what all the fuss is about."

He wasn't the first to make such a demand.

Her innocence and her enticing gift—the ability to create shimmering colors across her skin while she danced—had made her a favorite among the fighters who came to the dome.

"What's underneath that barely there dress must be the fucking sweetest, tightest pussy in the galaxy." His liquor-soaked breath whispered across her cheek. "Because if an Alpha of Stormhart's stature and reputation chose an orphaned, penniless, Consortium-owned omega with no real bloodline as not only a short-term fuck-toy but his prime omega, the official breeder of his bloodline, then that must be one magical cunt and ass—and I want in."

Rage flared. She shoved it down.

"A tempting offer." Scarlett forced her fingertips to trail across the swell of her breasts. There wasn't much to the dress she'd been told to wear, just a few scraps of fabric across her breasts and a short skirt that scarcely skimmed her bottom, but it had its uses. "But my Alpha lord expects me to return to him once the fighter Mercurius wins."

"Mercurius? No." The red streaks of lust cleared from the prince's eyes, his gaze flicking to the fight below. Hers followed, her brother Luc and the fighter he was coaching were little more than a smudge from this height. "I got a tip and put my money on Thanatos."

"Oh, I overheard some fighters whispering that Thanatos has a thigh injury, but what do I know?" She let her lashes flutter downward. "An omega's expertise lies in other areas."

"Obviously." But the prince's nervous gaze, and fingers, strayed to the wrist comms she'd made sure he received at the private box's entrance.

Three breaths later, he was tapping away, placing a large sum on the fighter Mercurius—right before the buzzer sounded and all bets closed.

*Just in time.*

“Thanatos comes from behind to win it all!” The announcer’s shout boomed through the stadium, barely audible over the screams of a crowd shocked by the sudden upset and an enraged Prince Jai.

Unlike her, who’d known from the start that the match was fixed, and Thanatos would win.

Scarlett also knew what she’d just done was risky—and far from subtle—but she’d had no choice. She’d been given explicit orders.

“I’m being summoned. Please excuse me.” She slid past the stunned prince. “I—”

“No.” The Alpha seized hold of her forearm and spun her to face him, fangs flashing. Twice her size and strength, he dragged her toward the private rutting rooms off to one side. “I just lost a ton of chits because of you, and I plan to take my payment out of your hide. I’m going to bend you over and fuck you raw until your screams surpass even those of the hordes below.”

*Sometimes, when you teeter so close to the edge, you fall over.*

She tugged at the prince’s hold, the darkness rippling beneath her skin even as she fought for calm. “I must return to my Alpha lord. I—”

“There you are.” The heat at her back was her first warning.

The second was when the prince’s hand fell away, his lavender skin paling.

“You left your seats.” Her Alpha lord’s tone was sharp with displeasure.

He’d been one of the greatest fighters in the cages, a vicious warrior known for his brutality and skill. Now he was liaison to the Consortium board and in charge of every aspect of the eastern cage-fighting sector—including her.

She stepped away from the prince and toward Kadon. “I was delayed returning to you. Forgive me.”

“I see.” A slight pause. “Watching the fights is a definite adrenaline rush, don’t you think, Prince Jai?” Kadon’s tone was conversational; however, the threat beneath his words was unmistakable. “But I do miss the sensation of breaking bone. The whimper of my opponent. The sweet scent of pain.”

Scarlett held her breath.

Kadon was often referred to as the Golden Boy, the Golden Dome’s perfect Alpha, and thanks to their similar hair color, they’d been nicknamed the Golden Couple of the Golden Dome.

But things were seldom what they seemed.

“No need for that.” His crown teetering, the prince stumbled back a step.

“You’ve already fought and won a stunning prize. A genuine treasure.”

“And she’s all mine.” Kadon yanked her back against him. “To the victor go the spoils.”

Scarlett barely stifled a hiss of pain.

But Kadon must have remembered the bruising because he stiffened against her.

The air thickened with tension.

Did he think she’d give them away? Spill her secrets to someone as weak and useless as a Federation prince and mark?

But it was the prince who struck first.

“She’s all yours,” Jai mocked, bolder now he was farther from the other Alpha’s reach. “Unless, of course, an elite Consortium Alpha with chits to burn visits the dome, and you wish to rut elsewhere. Then you let them touch her all they want. So why not me?”

Kadon stilled. “You don’t know what you’re talking about. My omega’s not for sale.”

“Really? Then who’s the mystery bastard that summons her to Consortium headquarters every time there’s a major fight? And if not chits, what does he give you for the chance to rut between her legs? Because whatever it is, I’ll pay double.”

Scarlett froze.

Kadon growled. “You insult me with your offer. If I were you, I’d shut my mouth and walk away. Now.”

A few nearby heads swiveled their way; Kadon’s voice was loud enough to have drawn attention.

“Why?” The prince didn’t seem to care. “You think others haven’t noticed the driver hustling her into that luxury black-paneled shuttle? Or how she doesn’t return from Consortium headquarters until the next suns’ rising, her hair tangled, clothing torn, her skin pale and covered in bruises?”

Scarlett swayed as the flashback hit hard and fast.

*“You know the drill. Hands behind your back, legs spread wide.” Nars, the smirking guard, stood at Consortium headquarters’ massive metal door.*

*“Behave, pet.” The voice came from the comms attached to the camera in the ceiling. “Or else.”*

“Stop talking!” Kadon’s angry snarl snapped Scarlett’s attention back to the two furious males. “Or I’ll make it impossible for you to talk at all, royalty or not. Luxury-box rules or not.”

The prince backed up another step, his voice growing even louder. “The Golden Dome may be big and busy, but word gets around. Everyone knows she’s more high-class whore than prime omega.”

Kadon’s fangs lengthened. “You are done for.”

The prince shuffled back. “This isn’t over. One rotation soon, I’ll get my shot with her, and I’ll make her pay for tonight with her tears. What the hells else is an ex-prize good for anyway?”

His parting shot delivered, he turned and shoved his way through the crowd.

Eyes bleeding to red, Kadon went to follow.

Scarlett stepped into his path. “Not here. Not now.” She eyed the camera in the ceiling. Then a group of nearby spectators.

Kadon’s frown deepened, but thankfully, he stayed where he was.

Because perfect Alphas and happy, golden couples didn’t get into knockdown brawls with their esteemed guests.

“Hells.” Her Alpha lord plowed a hand through his hair, the red streaks fading from his eyes. “I got carried away.”

It wasn’t the first time. “I’m fine.”

“But I heard you cry out.”

“You’re mistaken.” What was the point of the truth when it only made their wounds bleed deeper?

“Boss wants to see you.” As if summoned by her darkest thoughts, her least favorite security guard, Nars, appeared. “The *big* boss.”

Her heart stuttered, then started again, double-time.

At her side, Kadon bristled. “If this is about Brock, we had nothing to do with it. The fool’s always going off on binges. This *summons* of yours will have to wait. We have guests, and there’s already gossip. She—”

“Is coming.” Scarlett spoke over him.

Because Kadon might be her Alpha lord, but in the end, he wasn’t the one she had to please.

And they both knew his efforts to protect her only made things worse.

Shoulders back, she turned to follow the guard.

“Scarlett!” Kadon reached for her.

She dodged his grasp and left without looking back. Nothing he could say would change what had to happen next.

Scarlett followed Nars out of the luxury box, down the long corridor, past row after row of sculptures featuring the Dome’s most celebrated fighters, the

decor growing less fancy and more utilitarian the closer they got to the elevator.

Nars moved to block her path. "You know the drill."

She started. "But we're not at headquarters yet." The coliseum and her destination were near one another, but first, they'd need to descend in the secure lift and then take a quick ride. She had no idea who'd be driving her now that Brock was missing.

"Extra precautions. Turn and spread."

"No." The word was out before she could stop it.

"What the fuck did you say?" Nars loomed above her.

"I said no." Because something was fraying at her control and the thought of this monster's hands on her was even more unbearable than usual.

Unused to her defiance, the guard raised his fist. "Behave or else."

"Nars, send her into that lift now!" The metallic command echoed through the corridor.

Because *he* was always listening. Always watching.

Nars froze.

"I don't like to be kept waiting, pet." The smug voice from her waking nightmares blared through the intercom once more. "Are you wishing for punishment?"

"No." She forced all defiance from her tone. "I'll behave."

"Good." The voice from above was heavy with satisfaction, as if he'd never had a doubt.

But why should he? He'd controlled everything for the past four planetary rotations. Won every struggle between them before she'd even had the chance to score a single hit.

But maybe that was about to change...

Maybe, after four planetary rotations, this would finally be her moment. Maybe Brock's disappearance was *exactly* the boon she'd been waiting for.

Her heartbeat accelerated, and it took everything she had to keep her hands from shaking, her expression serene.

"That's right, bitch. Behave or else." Voice pitched low, Nars poked her with his finger, asserting what little power he had. "Your blood may give you exclusive access to the boss's private room, but I doubt you'll be feeling so smug once you're up there."

The guard's words cut deep.

Not because of his threats. She'd experienced his cruelty so many times it

barely registered now. No, this time, his words left a mark because Nars might be stupid, but for once, he might also be right.

For the first time in four planetary rotations, she was about to be with her employer when her brother was down below by the cages, training the fighters, and *not* in the room with her.

And if that were truly the case, then just as Nars predicted, she wouldn't be feeling so smug when she was in her employer's private suite.

She wouldn't feel anything at all.

Because if everything went according to plan, she'd be dead.

And so would her tormentor.

The nightmare would end. After all her scheming and plotting, those she loved would finally be safe.

Scarlett steeled herself and took a step toward the elevator.

"I knew it." Lurching from behind a sculpture, Prince Jai shoved his smug, entitled face into hers, his crown listing to one side as he clamped his purple-skinned hand down on her arm and spun her around. "Stormhart is passing you around, and now that I'm here, I'll take my turn."

"Let go." She tugged at his hold. "I'm otherwise engaged."

"Alpha Lord, you need to return to the party." Nars used his most polite tone. The guard might not be the brightest, but even he knew a prince when he saw one.

"No." The prince's grip tightened. "I'm owed, and I intend to collect."

Nars yanked his taser from his belt, his short fuse sparking. "I don't think you know who you're messing with."

Darkness enveloped the corridor as the lights—and overhead cameras—flickered and went out.

"What in the hells?" Nars shifted his weapon, pointing it at her. "I told you to behave."

"I am." Panic surged through her. He thought she'd used her gift to cause the power failure, but she hadn't.

"I demand the lights be turned back on," the prince shouted.

"You know the boss's rules, Omega." Nars had clearly rejected her profession of innocence. "Behave or else."

Black shadows flashed on the walls. One of the wall tiles fell, shattering when it struck the floor.

Now that... that was her.

Goddess, she hated being told to behave.

Another flashback hit, too sudden for her to defend against.

*“That’s right, bitch. You heard the boss. Behave or else.” Nars’s rough hands dragged up her stomach. He was always bolder once her hands were restrained.*

*Unlike her employer. He never touched her himself. Well aware of what her gift could do, he left the searches and hands-on discipline to his lackeys.*

*She stifled a gasp as Nars’s grabby hands came to a still-healing bruise.*

*“Nothing here but two ripe handfuls.” Chuckling, Nars squeezed her tits. “But it pays to be thorough, especially with you. You act so high and mighty, but we all know what you really are: Consortium property and a two-bit pawn who’ll never be anything more.”*

*His words would have stung if she hadn’t come to the same conclusion herself.*

Lips pressed together, Scarlett shoved the memory away and wrestled the seething darkness back down, absorbing her gift’s strikes against her ribs.

Still, the shadows grew darker. The walls shook.

“What the hells is happening?” Ever the coward, the prince hightailed it back toward the luxury box.

She hardly noticed.

“Make it stop.” Nars shoved his taser against her forehead.

“I’m trying!” This wasn’t her plan. She needed to reach her employer’s private suite while conscious so she could see her plan through. “Back off.”

“Omegas don’t give the orders, bitch.” Nars flicked off the safety on the taser. “Especially you.”

*Behave or else.* She was so tired of being told what to do. The rage inside her expanded, her gift once more out of control. The walls shuddered.

“That’s it,” Nars barked. “You asked for it.”

*His taser was only set to stun, but still... it was going to hurt.*

Nars’s finger twitched on the trigger.

Scarlett braced for the agonizing pain.

A low growl sounded behind the guard.

A shock of red splatter hit the wall.

Nars folded, crumpling to the ground without a sound as a figure loomed behind him.

While she... she came alive as something raw and electrifying trailed across her upper thighs, breasts, and heart like rough, calloused fingertips.

The figure pushed back his hood.



She stared up at a face and form straight out of her dreams.

One whose claws were stained crimson.

One whose eyes shone with the red of rut.

One who she'd never thought to see again.

One who had the power to destroy all her plans.

“Omega.” Damien’s deep rasp vibrated down her spine, shattering her good sense and jerking her toward him as if the tether between them still existed, as if she hadn’t destroyed it long ago.

As if Damien Skolov were still her home, her hope, her harbor—even though she knew he was no longer any of those things.

Lust and need ricocheted through her bloodstream, her plans forgotten.

“Alpha.” She staggered forward, already sinking to her knees to present; everything obliterated but him.



## SCARLETT

“**M**ine.” Damien tangled his fingers in her hair, preventing her from reaching the floor while his other arm wrapped around her waist and lifted.

Without conscious thought, she wound her legs around his waist, her short skirt sliding upward.

“Yours.” Scarlett shivered with pleasure as the edges of his cloak fluttered around them.

She’d waited so long. Been so lost, hopeless, and afraid. Yearning for him. Missing him. Dying... for him.

And now he was finally here. Everything was right once again.

Her spine struck the nearest wall.

His mouth fused with hers, his hold on her bottom tightening.

*Paradise.*

Their tongues clashed. Relearning. Savoring. Remembering. The sweetest of homecomings.

His taste was everything she’d missed. Everything she wanted. Power. Need. Reckless, wild lust and fierce possession.

He tasted like sin and hope and life. He tasted like every beautiful shade of joy bleached from her life and now returned in full, vivid color.

A sob escaped her as her hands slipped beneath the tight black shirt molded to his skin and reveled in the hard heat of him.

He ground against her.

She rose to meet him, frantic for every thrust, even through his leathers.

The tips of his claws pricked her skin as he worked her up and down over

the bulge of his shaft.

Scarlett clawed his back with her nails, desperate to be closer.

There was no tenderness. Just rough, raw possession coated with a ferocity her inner darkness recognized.

She exalted in it.

He was so familiar, so perfect, and yet so different—his body bigger, more muscular, and she wanted more.

“Mine.” His knuckles brushed against her neck, followed by a cracking sound.

In a daze, she registered her broken prime omega collar hitting the floor. She took her first deep breath in a long time. “Yes.”

She ground up against her true Alpha, tilting her head back, giving him everything.

Damien nipped at her throat. Laved her ear with his tongue.

She wound her fingers through his hair—relishing the longer strands—and tugged.

He growled low and rocked harder against her.

The storm inside her spiraled higher, her pleasure winding tighter and tighter with each slide of his cock against her clit.

Except she needed more. She needed her Alpha inside her. Filling her.

The emptiness was almost more than she could bear.

She fumbled with the waistband of his leathers, shoving downward. “Please.”

“Mine.” Growling low, Damien spread his hands at the back of her flesh-colored panties. *Rip*. They split in two, creating a slit in the silk.

Cool air struck her clit. “Yes, Alpha!”

Hot, ridged steel bobbed against her cunt. So much better in flesh and blood than any memory.

“All... for... me.” His cock nudged at her folds.

“Yes.” Panting, she writhed against the fat shaft, her slick mixing with his precum to make her slippery and wet and ready to welcome him home.

“Damien, do you hear me?” An angry voice intruded. “You need to get a fucking grip and snap out of this rut.”

Fury surged through Scarlett, her thighs tightening around her Alpha. Stop? Now? *Never!*

With a hiss, she bobbed up and down more vigorously, demanding his attention.

He groaned in response, his tongue claiming hers, the huge head of his cock notched at her entrance.

*Finally.*

“Scarlett! What the hells is going on here?” Kadon’s voice, thick with horror, echoed down the corridor.

A shard of sanity cutting through the haze.

*Goddess help her.*

She was grinding against Damien, her prime omega collar broken and discarded on the floor. Nars lay dead at their feet. The corridor was in shambles. Statues broken. Crystal lights shattered.

Shame slithered through her. Followed by sheer panic.

She ripped her mouth from Damien’s. “Kadon—”

An enraged growl rumbled from Damien’s chest. “Mine.” Still in full rut mode, he dug his fingers into her hair and jerked her head back, arching her neck painfully into a submissive pose. “Not his. Mine!”

Her body melted at his command: instinct and duty warring within.

“Get away from her!” Kadon stormed forward.

With a snarl, Damien placed her on her feet, then turned, his body blocking hers, his weight keeping her pinned against the wall. “Mine.”

“Not... yours.” Kadon was slipping into rut too, Damien’s aggression sparking his own. “My... prime... omega.”

Damien’s muscles bunched, preparing for attack.

Scarlett grabbed his shoulder. “Don’t.”

But he was already gone, barreling forward.

Kadon rushed at him, horns and claws unleashed.

The darkness flared inside her, fast and hard. More wall tiles crashed to the ground as she fought to maintain control. “Stop! You can’t—”

There was a crackle and a flash of light, and Kadon dropped to his knees, then crashed to the floor face-first.

A young Alpha who resembled Damien stared down at Kadon’s prone form, taser in hand. “Payback for knocking out my brother while he was drugged, tournament cheater.”

“What did you do?” Horror pumping through her, she ran toward the downed Alpha.

Only to be yanked back as an unforgiving hand wrapped around her wrist.

“Mine.” Damien pinned her to him.

“Let me go.” She thrashed in his hold.

“Omega, Stormhart’s not dead. Just out.” The younger Alpha used his boot to roll Kadon over, revealing the rise and fall of his chest. “But that could change real fast if you don’t settle down. Now both of you need to—”

“Everyone, face down on the floor, hands at the back of your heads.” Another commanding voice boomed down the corridor.

A new disaster.

Prince Jai had returned, and he’d brought backup. At least fifteen Consortium guards, all of them armed not with tasers, but with deadly lasers.

How had everything spiraled so out of control so fast?

“You’ve got three heartbeats to do as ordered.” A vindictive smirk crossed the prince’s face before he added, “Or the guards start lighting you all up, starting with the omega.”

An ominous crackle rent the air—the sound of lasers being turned to full force.

Scarlett braced for the strike, only to be scooped up and tossed over Damien’s shoulder.

He leaped to one side. A flare of green light hit the wall where she’d just stood.

The darkness inside her coiled tighter, skittering through her veins and blackening the wall.

Tucked behind one of the few statues still upright, her feet touched the ground.

“Stay.” Damien turned and attacked, his body a blur.

Screams erupted. Bones cracked. The stench of blood thickened the air.

Guards’ dead bodies dropped to the ground.

She thought she heard Prince Jai scream—then fall silent.

Utter chaos surrounded her.

Some rational part of her whispered that this was her chance to slip away.

Her body refused to obey.

Instead, with her every breath, more of Damien’s mouthwatering leather-and-ice scent teased her nostrils; more of his power glided across her skin. Her will weakened after four long planetary rotations away from him. The heat consumed her, fracturing her sanity and stealing her ability to think.

The heat... was back. And she... she was losing it once again. Rational... thought... slipping... away.

Omega instincts coiling low in her belly, she bent at the knees; her folds dampening as she dropped to all fours on the dirty floor, preparing for her

Alpha.

Her chest heaved as her back arched. Her thighs grew slick, the ache inside her a relentless yearning that escalated with each obstacle he took out to be with her.

She needed her Alpha. Needed him to rut and breed her.

Just as he was always meant to do.

A guard appeared out of nowhere, his eyes red, triggered into rut by the same aggression that held them all in its grip.

He grabbed her by her hair and dragged her down the corridor, away from the others. "Always... wanted... a piece."

Rising to her knees, she bared her teeth. Clamped her hands around his wrist. And let the darkness take him.

She belonged to Damien.

No one else touched her.

Focused on her Alpha, she settled back into position, tracking every flex of his carved muscles as he took out the rest of the guards one by one. He was so strong. So perfect.

Four planetary rotations ago, he'd been a force to be reckoned with. But now, he was unmatched.

And he was hers.

The rest of the battle lasted only a few heartbeats, then silence descended.

Satisfaction slammed through her.

Now it would happen. Now he would take her.

Arching her back, she wiggled her bottom, summoning her Alpha home.

With a growl, he launched himself toward her. "Mine."

*Yes!*

A taser shot flared between them.

Scarlett hissed in fury.

Damien roared, his wild-eyed stare narrowing as he honed in on the younger dark-haired Alpha only a few lengths away, a fresh bruise blooming on his jaw. "That was a warning shot. You two need to pull it together and come back to yourselves."

Her Alpha grunted, menace pouring off him as he stalked toward the other male.

"Okay, keep it calm. I know it's not one of your strong suits, big guy, but let's think this through." The younger male backed away. "You managed to

put these guards down, but more with lasers will be coming. Numbers that even you won't be able to handle. They'll keep interrupting. Keep preventing you from fucking her."

Her Alpha snarled.

"Right. I get it. That won't work for you." The younger Alpha's tone was low, coaxing. "So how about you take her away from here? To a den, maybe? Some place where there'll be no interruptions. Then you can rut and knot her at your leisure. We got what we needed, after all."

"Yes. Safe." With a single leap, Damien reached her. He lifted her from the ground and tossed her over his shoulder. "Mine."

Scarlett wiggled in protest. She wanted his cock. Here. Now.

*Smack.* His palm landed on her bottom. "Soon, Omega."

She mewled louder.

He growled low in return, his hand covering her ass cheek as he turned and ran, bounding along the corridor, through a busted door, and down a flight of stairs.

She pressed her thighs together, her body so wet and ready, her clothing so flimsy that every bounce of her breasts against the smooth cloak stretched tight across his muscled back only made her wilder.

Everything around her blurred, her whereabouts of no consequence, as long as she was with him. Even as the air grew staler and their surroundings darker.

She was close to sobbing by the time he set her down, her body desperate, shaking, her need a torment.

Four planetary rotations of waiting were at an end.

Slick dripped down her thighs.

"Alpha." She bit her lip. Looked up at him.

"Mine." His arms closed around her.

"Yours." Finally. Everything would be right once more.

Damien lifted her.

She wrapped her legs around his hips, her core against his heat, her hands fisting in his cloak.

"You're fast for such a huge fucker, though your extra baggage is a hell of a lot lighter than mine." Dragging something behind him, the younger Alpha who'd tried to separate them intruded yet again.

Scarlett didn't even bother to peek over Damien's wide shoulder. She was too fascinated by the possessive look darkening her Alpha's face.



Lips peeling back, he tightened his grip on her hips as the younger Alpha stepped closer. And despite that fact that her Alpha's gaze remained locked with hers as he spoke, she knew his warning was for the other male. "Get... gone."

"Good job getting her out of there." Ignoring his instruction, the younger male spoke again.

She didn't want him there. What she wanted was for her Alpha to fuck her.

Scarlett rocked herself against him.

Nuzzling her neck, Damien grunted, then inhaled deeply. "Home."

She shivered with pleasure.

"Now, now, let's keep this family friendly." The intruder came closer. "We're all friends here. Brothers, in fact." More cautious footsteps. "You remember that, right, Damien?"

Her Alpha tensed, his hold easing as he set her down on her feet, readying to take action.

She peeked around her Alpha's broad chest.

"Yup." The other male stood only an arm's length away, his hands clasped behind his back. "Even in this crazy-ass rut state, some part of you remembers I'm Maddox—your *favorite* brother—and that you're the one who keeps harping at me to embrace that role." His arm appeared from behind his back, something metallic glinting in his palm. "So don't blame me. You asked for this."

Scarlett shouted a warning, but it was too late.

There was a roar and the crackle of skin as the taser landed against her Alpha's back.

She screamed as his body shook with the force of a blast.

*Betrayed.*

Hissing, she reached out to cradle him, but he refused.

Instead, he roared in fury, his body curling over her, protecting her, as his hands slapped against the wall and, somehow, he managed to remain upright.

"What the fuck? Anya said you'd go down. Why isn't this working?" His voice shrill, the younger Alpha jumped back, the bitter stench of fear suffusing the air.

"Nothing... keeps... me... from... her." Body blocking hers, Damien whirled around—straight into another charge.

This one blasted him so hard that he flew back into her.

Her head struck the wall.  
Darkness consumed her.



## DAMIEN

“**W**hat the hells?” Damien came awake with his cheek pressed to packed dirt, the taste of ash in the back of his throat, a sore dick, and a body that felt like a space shuttle had landed on it. Then he noticed the manacles.

Clamped around each wrist and ankle, the restraints curled his body into a c-curve: his arms bolted to his ankles, his ankles locked to the floor.

“Ah, he awakens. Enjoy your nap, big brother?”

Damien recognized that voice. And the snark.

He snapped his fangs as a wave of aggression rolled through him.

“Still in the last throes of rut, huh?” Maddox chuckled. “Just give it a few more breaths, and her scent will dissipate. Then your mind should right itself—as much as it’s able.”

Unamused, Damien rolled upright—or attempted to—the chains rattling as he teeter-tottered like an idiot thanks to his restricted movement.

A humiliation tactic he knew was deliberate, as he was the one who’d bolted the damned restraints into the ground in the first place.

So what the hells was he doing in them?

They’d commandeered this room for imprisoning and interrogating others. Not him.

“You ready to behave? No more murderous rut rampages?” Maddox shuffled closer.

Damien growled low.

But not because of the kid’s condescending tone.

Because the memories of his recent behavior were slamming into him

hard and fast.

*Fuck. Him.*

While his actions were fuzzy and colored by the haze of rut, he recalled enough: Him all over Scarlett. The need to claim her, scent her, rut her a raging compulsion inside his veins and cock.

He'd been two heartbeats away from fucking her against the wall without a care for the guards or their mission.

Definitely not the I'm-over-you vibe he'd intended.

Shame slithered through his veins.

"Remember how you said you had no issues being back here with her?" Maddox's big boots came into full view, illuminated by the glowing crystals set in the wall; although long past their prime, they still managed to emit a low light. "I don't fucking think so."

"Enough." Damien rocked enough to get himself upright, bringing the rest of the interrogation room into view. "Just shut up and let me..."

He noticed the slight form curled up inside one of the two cages they'd set up in the room. His mouth went dry as something squeezed tight inside his chest.

Scarlett's eyes were shut, her gorgeous face pale and still while her hair lay tangled across her cheek, and the crystals' faint light sent shadows dancing over her body.

"She's fine." Maddox spoke fast. "I checked her vitals."

Damien grunted and tried to pretend like he didn't give a shit.

"Turn around so I can get you out of these things." Maddox's request yanked him from his thoughts, and he redirected his gaze to his brother.

"Fuck me." The kid's swollen jaw and fresh black eye were hard to miss, even in the partial light.

"No thanks."

"Funny guy." Damien eyed the mess that was his brother's face. "But that? Not so funny. I'm sorry I didn't do a better job of guarding your back."

"I can take care of myself." *Snick.* The kid unlocked the manacles and stepped back. "Plus, I've had way worse."

That only made Damien feel more of a shit.

He'd vowed to protect his family. Told himself and them that he was fine and could handle this assignment, no problem.

And yet the instant he saw her, scented her, he'd lost it.

Some fucking Enforcer.

He shoved off the ground, then rubbed at his wrists and stretched, trying to work out some of the kinks—and stall so he could pull his shit together before looking at the cages again.

Scarlett's still form was easy to see, as was the comforting rise and fall of her chest.

The other cell, however, was in dark mode; its clear crystal turned opaque, so it was impossible to see in or out, and all sound was muffled. A good thing since their other “guest” was throwing himself at the cage wall hard enough to make it shake and likely roaring loud enough to bring reinforcements—if they could hear him. Which they couldn't.

“You did good by bringing that one.” Damien gestured toward the shuddering cage with his chin. He'd caught a glimpse of the other prisoner right before Maddox tased him.

The kid grinned. “Fucker's as heavy as hells and clearly dense as a black hole too. Guess he has no clue he's underground and not about to be rescued.”

“He'll find out soon enough.” Damien's gaze shifted to the other cell. “They both will.”

Few who came to watch the fights knew about the abandoned city buried beneath the glitz and shimmer of the Golden Dome.

It had been built by Scarlett's ancestors, a simple society with a small population who'd foraged for food on the surface at night and lived underground during the suns' rises. Clever and resourceful, they'd embedded soft golden crystals into the walls and ceilings to serve as light sources, constructed aqueducts for running water, sewers to remove waste, and built sleeping quarters of dirt, clay, and rock. In places, you could still glimpse their skilled artistry in the carvings above the crumbling doorways.

Then the Consortium arrived. With more advanced tech and cold brutality, the new arrivals dropped the Golden Dome onto the surface, hunted down those who refused to be incorporated and systematically obliterated the nomadic society's traditions until all that remained was ruins.

As a result, large swaths of the underground city lay in rubble. But there were some sections—those closer to the surface—that had fared better. Passages that could still be traversed and old sleeping quarters that could provide shelter—or be repurposed as interrogation rooms.

And where, hopefully, few would think to search for the missing.

“Good idea, hitting me with the taser.” Although it hurt like a son of a

bitch even now.

“Wasn’t my idea.” Maddox held out his comms. “Here, take mine. Yours got fried.”

With a scowl, Damien shoved the piece into his ear canal.

“*It was my idea,*” Anya piped up. “*I knew you’d give the go-ahead if you were in your right mind.*”

“You guys did good.”

“*Oh, we know it.*” Anya had never been one for false modesty.

Maddox, on the other hand, only grunted, but Damien thought he stood a little taller.

Not that the little shit would admit to liking the praise. But, again, Damien understood. He’d been the youngest Skolov brother for a long time.

“So, ah...” He decided to get it over with. “What did Nikolai and the others say?”

For four long planetary rotations, he’d tried to erase the inglorious image of arriving home shackled and beaten, tossed onto the Abzal ice at his brothers’ boots after the Consortium banned his ass from the Golden Dome for using illegal drugs during the tournament. Drugs they’d likely played a part in dosing him with in the first place.

Back home, he’d trained hard. Focused. Gotten bigger, meaner, more disciplined. Became their Enforcer, someone who his brothers could rely on.

Three heartbeats in Scarlett’s presence, and he’d fucked it all up.

“Nikolai and the others said... nothing.” Maddox rubbed his jaw. “We haven’t mentioned it. It’s not like I’d want to broadcast the fact that I got my ass partially kicked by some Golden Dome wanna-be soldiers.”

“*And I’m not about to risk them coming here and me losing the small amount of adventure and freedom I get with you,*” Anya added. “*Emphasis on the small.*”

Damien actually got a little choked up.

Those two... He heard beneath their excuses loud and clear. They were covering for him.

Maybe they weren’t such pains in the ass after all.

“*Plus, now you owe us.*” Anya’s words brought him back to reality.

But he couldn’t be mad. He did owe them.

And now it was time to step up.

“Right.” He squared his shoulders. “So, what’s the damage?”

Maddox shrugged. “It’s all a bit of a blur, but I’d say between our efforts

and some friendly fire that worked in our favor, there were at least fifteen dead when we left.”

Definitely not subtle.

Damien blew out a forceful breath. “If Darvish is here or nearby, he’s likely to notice that.”

“*You think?*” Anya’s sass was legendary.

“At least we clipped the vid feeds in the corridor before we went in,” offered Maddox. “If it is Darvish in that building, he’ll know there was an attack, but he won’t know by whom.”

“Kadon can identify me. He’ll give them a description.”

“*Well, that’s the interesting part,*” Anya said. “*I’ve been monitoring the chatter, and there’s been no mention of the kidnappings or you two on any public channel.*”

Damien considered this. “It makes sense the Consortium would want to keep the abductions under wraps. News that a high-level omega was stolen from right under their noses might raise too many questions and shake up business, make bettors jittery, and risk profits—and no way will they want that.” He smiled, feeling a little more hopeful. “We can use that to our advantage. Still, Anya, continue to monitor the chatter. At some point, we’re bound to have unwanted guests.”

Hopefully, though, their prisoners would be smart and cooperate, and this wouldn’t take long.

Damien finally allowed his gaze to return to the smaller cage—and growled.

The barely there scraps of Scarlett’s dress did even less to cover her now that they were torn. Her fancy hairstyle was ruined, most of the jeweled adornments that had dotted her face and hair had fallen off, and her eye and lip paint was smeared, yet she somehow looked just as gorgeous as before.

But not so high and mighty or perfect—and that, he liked.

Then he noticed the bruises and scrapes on her body, and his gut clenched in a different way; the thought that he’d played a part in putting them there was something he didn’t like at all.

*Knot him.* That was definitely not Enforcer thinking.

“You good?” Maddox’s voice pulled him back from the edge.

“Yup.” Damien choked down the unwanted surge of protectiveness and tossed the comms back to Maddox. “You hold on to this. This time, I’m staying in control.”



“No doubt.” A slight pause. “Still, I’ve got the taser.”

“Good call.” No point in pretending.

An omega’s scent was always distracting to an Alpha, but his reaction to Scarlett was on a whole new level.

Worse, after that scene in the corridor, an unwelcome internal voice kept whispering that it was clear she wanted him too. Whatever her reason for kicking him to the curb and choosing Stormhart, her body still craved his. Responded to his command.

And that was a filthy little secret he wasn’t sure how to forget.

But he’d find a way.

He was a fighter, the Skolov Enforcer, and his family meant everything to him. There was no way one deceitful, social-climbing omega would bring him to his knees.

“Let’s do this.” Skirting the chair and the older bloodstains beneath, he stalked toward her cage, shoving up the sleeves of his shirt as he advanced.

Ironically, it was an old prize transportation unit, one of two he’d found abandoned in the side tunnels. Though the smaller one was missing two wheels, it had been easy to repurpose as a holding cell. Its three transparent walls and a lockable back door made it an ideal prison inside an already contained space.

He probably should have felt at least a twinge of guilt for locking Scarlett in the same kind of Consortium cage he’d once promised to free her from. *But no. Nope. Negative.* He did not.

Payback was a bitch. Or, in this case, a very pissed-off Alpha with a personal score to settle.

The past was the past. His missing sister, Zaya, was counting on him.

Scarlett had made her choice, and now she’d suffer the consequences.

To ensure he was extra ready, he armed himself with the memory of Crex’s vacant eyes and broken neck. Of the burns on Maddox’s body. Of his baby sister still out there: scared and alone without Skolov protection. He thought of Darvish and all his half brother had done to their family. Of Kadon sitting next to Scarlett in the luxury box while she laughed and smiled and drank. Of how she’d told him she loved him and then fucked him over.

Game face on. He approached the cage and slapped his palm against the crystal.



## SCARLETT

**S**lap. Scarlett waded through the darkness toward clarity, her body screaming at her.

But she was used to that. Pain was an every-rotation occurrence, her usual greeting when she emerged from sleep. As were the grief, longing, and shame that accompanied each breath, and yet, somehow, it was more visceral than usual this time.

*Slam.*

The louder noise jolted her fully awake, and she gazed up into familiar hard eyes. “Damien?”

His arms opened wide, muscles bunching beneath his black shirt. “In the flesh.”

She blinked twice. “It’s really you.” Everything came crashing back, and she lurched to her feet. “You can’t be here.”

Her palms landed against the cool transparent crystal, and some part of her registered her surroundings. *The knothole!* He’d locked her inside an old prize display case.

But she had more important concerns to address. First and foremost, returning to Consortium headquarters. Before Damien ruined everything. Or she did.

“You need to let me out of here.” Scarlett glared up at him. “Immediately.”

“Such a rush to get away.” He crossed thick arms across a broad chest and raised an eyebrow, ignoring her demand. “You didn’t seem to have a

problem when you were grinding all over me up in that corridor.”

Heat suffused her cheeks.

It didn't help that she was suddenly aware of every single rip in a gown that had already provided very little coverage and the tear in her undergarments that left her basically bare-assed. Worse, she had an almost crystal-clear memory of doing exactly what he'd accused her of.

She'd been rabid for him, her cunt soaking the front of his leathers.

Of all the ways she'd imagined seeing him again—and she'd fantasized plenty—this had not been one.

Still, she tilted her chin high. “Arrogant as ever.”

“You got that right.”

“Let me out.”

“I don't think you're in any position to make demands.”

That smirk... pure Damien. Some things, it seemed, hadn't changed.

When she first laid eyes on him again, she'd been lost to the madness of the heat.

Now, thanks to the thick barrier between them, her senses were less clouded.

But, damned it all, he was still as mouthwatering as she remembered, even with his knuckles swollen and his chest covered in spatters of blood.

His hair was longer, his face leaner and harder, those perfect cheekbones and square jaw even sharper—and everything was more massive. Damien was an Alpha in his prime, and her body purred its approval.

But that appeal, as all-consuming and powerful as ever, only made his departure more essential.

“You have no idea what you've done.” She slammed her palms against the crystal, the darkness inside her expanding, a perfect match to the shadows flickering across the cage that were all too easy to see thanks to the dim lighting. “You need to return me to the Consortium.”

“You want out? Tell me what Darvish Sartin's up to and how I can get to him.”

Scarlett stilled. “Who?”

“Don't bullshit me.” A muscle flexed in Damien's jaw. “Though I guess that's asking a lot from you, the female who pretended she wanted to run away with me. Even when she'd already picked out someone else.”

*Her secrets were all she had left.* “I'm in no mood to rehash the past.”

His nostrils flared. “Fine. Let's stay laser-focused on the present and your

current employer, then. Perhaps you refer to him by his alias: Shivrad Nitras.”

Her heartbeat sped up.

“Doesn’t take a genius to recognize that name when spelled backward. Fuckers been taunting us, but I promise I’ll have the last laugh.” His palm struck the crystal, but it was the hatred in his eyes that stole her breath. “I know Darvish Sartin, aka Nitras, is the Consortium’s new head. I also know you’re involved with him... financially.”

Panic slammed through her. She didn’t want him to know that. Didn’t want him to know any of this. “You have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Such a little liar.” Damien shook his head. “I should punish you for that alone.”

Her clit throbbed. *Foolish, traitorous body.*

“You think I don’t remember your tells, Omega? The way you tilt your head to the side, your eyes flicking away for a heartbeat before you utter an untruth. I saw it then. I see it now.”

The wound inside her deepened, bleeding out. Only Damien had ever cared enough to pay such close attention.

Once, she’d adored that trait. Now it was far too dangerous for them both.

“You don’t know me anymore, Damien. Don’t think you do.”

His horns snapped straight, his chest expanding as his calm façade thinned. “I was about to say the same to you, Omega.”

A sudden realization dawned: despite all the sensations rushing through her—and there were many—one she’d always felt around Damien was conspicuously absent.

Scarlett glanced down, pushing aside the golden cuff on her wrist. “No marks.” Her thumb tracked across the clear skin.

“You’re surprised?” His words sliced through her.

Was she surprised? Yes and no.

Yes, because, even now, knowing that he despised her, her heart ached for him.

And no, because she’d watched the marks fade from her wrists and throat until, two planetary rotations after Damien’s departure, they’d vanished altogether, as if they’d never been. Unlike the scars he’d left on her soul.

Still, she’d always wondered whether they’d return if she ever saw him again.

Now she had her answer.

Her actions had changed everything.

There was no going back. The lack of markings drove that message home loud and clear. The lust might remain, but he was no longer her fated mate.

She was merely someone from his past. Someone he now hated.

Breathing grew difficult, the weight on her chest as heavy as an anvil, the loss as vast and bleak as the desolation of starless space.

It felt like a death.

But she'd grieve later, lick her wounds in private. Now she had to do what she always did: find a way to save those she loved. "Why am I here?"

"I ask the fucking questions. Not you."

Damien was right. He had changed.

He was harder, and not just on the outside, though he was definitely more muscular. There was a new scar on his eyebrow and another at his lip.

Unfortunately, his impact on her—the way he burrowed beneath her skin like a wild, seething storm—hadn't altered, despite the fact that they were no longer fated mates. In fact, he'd only grown sexier.

Even now, the darkness inside her strained toward him like greedy, grasping fingers as if he were the fuel that would ignite the powder keg and free it once and for all.

That, she could not allow.

Scarlett shoved the impulses down. "You never should have come back."

His gaze narrowed. "You never should have gotten mixed up with Darvish Sartin."

*True.*

A loud thudding sound caught her attention; she followed it to its source and gasped.

She'd been so caught up in Damien that she hadn't even noticed the other cage. A slightly larger version of hers, except the crystal walls were in dark mode, and it was rocking as if someone was throwing themselves against its sides.

Terror gripped her. "Who's in there?"

"Wouldn't you like to know?"

"Tell me." She slapped her palms against the crystal, wishing she could rip the smirk from Damien's face. If it was her brother inside that cage, it changed everything.

He laughed, but there was no warmth in it. Just the cold, hard merriment

of someone who knew they held all the cards. Or thought they did. “It’s a mutual acquaintance. One I’m not too fond of.”

Her heart sank. Could it be Luc? Or Kadon? The latter had been in the corridor with them and the more likely possibility. “If you hurt him—”

“You’ll do what, exactly?” Gaze hardening, Damien tapped the transparent crystal barrier. “This cage suits you. Perhaps I’ll keep you here forever.” His claws lengthened. “But not him. He won’t live much longer.”

Tears gathered in the corners of her eyes. “Please.”

“Ah, such a pretty word from such pretty lips. I used to love hearing it while I fucked you with my fingers and mouth, and you spread those legs wide.”

Her gaze flicked to the kid standing behind, soaking in every word.

“Eyes on me, Omega.” Damien’s fist struck the crystal again. “He’s none of your business. Plus, he already knows all about our sordid past and what a betraying little viper you are.”

“Go. Away.”

“No can do. I’m your jailer—and your *friend*’s as well.” The other cage shook. “So, I’m going to need you to cooperate... or else.”

Fear slithered through her veins. “You know that you’re banned from the Golden Dome? That if you’re caught, the penalty won’t be banishment like before, but death.”

“You concerned for me, Scarlett?” He stepped closer, that cocky smirk back in place. “Cause you remember about me and rules, right?”

“Of course.” She tried to match his smug tone. “One set for you. One for everyone else.”

His voice lowered. “You used to like the rules I set for you. The pleasure and the praise—and the rewards too.”

Against her will, heat pulsed between her thighs as memories she’d tried to erase sparked to life.

Damned the male, he knew it too.

His smirk grew and his nostrils flared. “Does Stormhart pin you down like I used to? Tongue fuck you until you make those soft purring sounds? Finger that slick little hole until you beg for more?”

Scarlett was suddenly grateful for her cell and how it hid her scent. Four planetary rotations of nothing. A damned wasteland between her thighs, where even the sight of hundreds of hot, muscled fighters in the ring hadn’t produced so much as a flicker in her clit—then one filthy reminder from this

male, and she was a soaked, throbbing mess, her control fraying.

“Does a part of you still wish you were my good girl, Scarlett?” His rumbled words slid down her body like a caress.

She leaned toward him in spite of herself.

“Too bad—and too late.” Damien’s words smacked her back to herself, his smirk transforming into a scowl. “Should have thought of that before you screwed me over and became a *very* bad girl.”

Bastard. He was toying with her.

Crossing her arms across her chest—and her beaded nipples—she glared up at him. “What I wish is that you’d turn around and go home. There’s nothing left for you here. And I’m not in a position to help you.”

“No? So I should move on to the poor guy in that cage? *If* it’s pretty-boy Stormhart, and I have to ask him to help persuade you, I promise he won’t look so pretty afterward.”

Her palms struck the crystal. “Don’t go near him.”

Damien wanted the truth. The problem was the truth was ugly, and she wasn’t sure he’d react any better to it than the lies, and she couldn’t afford to risk it. Not when it wouldn’t make a difference either way.

Damien’s fangs flashed. “So protective of your worthless Alpha lord. I’d worry for yourself, Omega. Though I do wonder if our other guest will last any longer than Brock.”

Shock slammed through her. “You took Brock?”

“Took. Tortured. Then he died.”

Her heart leaped into her throat.

“But,” Damien continued, “not before he told me that he’d driven you to see Darvish at Consortium headquarters several times and how you hadn’t emerged until the next suns’ rising.”

The ugly memories crashed into her.

*“You know the drill, Omega. Hands behind your back, legs spread wide.” Nars’s smile was smug. They’re already up there, waiting for you, especially your brother, that taser pointed at his pathetic head. Going to be a long night, I suspect. I hope you’ve built up some endurance since last time.”*

*The darkness inside her contracted, then expanded, searing the edges of her lungs. Black shadows flickered across the walls.*

*“Behave, pet.” The voice came from the comms attached to the camera in the ceiling. “Or else.”*

“Omega!” Damien’s hand slapped the crystal. “Eyes on me.”



She obeyed without question—relieved to have the ugly memory so easily banished, the reminder that Nars was now dead thanks to Damien soothing something inside—until she realized she was following the commands of an Alpha who wasn't hers. "None of this is your business."

"Stepping out on Stormhart?" Seemingly undeterred by her rebuke, Damien struck back harder. "Trying to level up with an even bigger mark like Darvish Sartin? To think I once thought you were sweet. I almost feel sorry for the infamous Golden Boy, but according to Brock, Stormhart's being well reimbursed for his willingness to share."

She'd never liked Brock. Or the way he'd looked at her. And she definitely didn't like the tales he'd spread about her being a user and a whore.

Still, she found it hard to fathom he was dead. Harder yet to accept that, thanks to his big mouth, all her plans were in danger of imploding.

"Sweet's overrated." She forced a shrug and finally took a longer look around the space. The stacks of supplies and lack of dust suggested Damien and the kid had been here long enough to make themselves at home and reinforce the cells and the exit door to the room. It didn't appear this was where they slept, though. More like—she shivered—where they worked.

There were manacles bolted to the ground, a single, rusty chair in the center of the room, and... dark red spatters on the floor beneath it and on the walls.

She'd come to terms with her own death long ago, but... not yet. And not like this.

"I'm not telling you anything"—she glared at her captor—"until you tell me who's in that other cage."

"Do not fuck with me." Damien's roar shook the crystal.

"Looks like the hothead's still there below the surface."

He jerked back as if struck. Then caught himself, a muscle jumping in his jaw. And, Goddess help her, she wanted to lick it.

"I'd be very careful if I were you, Omega." His voice had dropped to a dangerous rumble. It should have terrified her.

All it did was make her wetter; the darkness hungrier. When it came to him, she'd never been able to keep her emotions in check. "You're the one who should be careful, Alpha."

"Perhaps we should all take a breath?" The dark-haired kid popped up on Damien's right, proving he was either seriously brave or unbelievably stupid.

Still, he wasn't wrong. Things had always been tumultuous between her

and Damien, but this... this seething storm was a whole new level of precarious.

“I don’t need a fucking breath.” Damien glared at him, then at her. “What I need is for this omega to realize how much trouble she’s in.”

She wondered who the kid was. He had the same muscled physique as Damien, though leaner, and the same dark hair and golden eyes. Same jawline too. The smattering of faded burn scars on his neck, forearms, and handsome face only added to the sense that, like the male at his side, he was exactly the kind of mouthwatering trouble most omegas longed for.

She had a vague memory of the other Alpha referring to himself as Damien’s brother, but Damien had never mentioned a younger sibling when they were together.

Was that one more thing that had changed?

*Slam!* The side of Damien’s fist struck the cage. “Are you listening, Omega? This is not some joke. What will it take to get you to behave? If I need to give both your brother and pretty-boy Stormhart the same treatment as Brock, I will.”

Rage surged through her, a thousand jolts of pure, black fury.

“Don’t you dare!” Her palms hit the crystal.

A crack appeared in the cell wall—and grew, snaking into numerous branches that skittered along the crystal.

Usually, she reined in the darkness, doing her best to maintain control. But screw that.

For once, she wanted to let it out.



## SCARLETT

“**W**hat the fuck?” His mouth hanging open, the kid stared at the cracks advancing across the crystal.

“Get back.” Damien shoved the younger Alpha toward the far side of the room. “Scarlett, you too! Move away from the wall before it shatters, and you get hurt.”

Her heart turned over. Even now, even through all the hate, he tried to protect her.

Could she do any less for him?

“No, you get back.” Their gazes locked, and she caught the moment his eyes widened, and he realized it was her causing the damage.

The chair in the middle of the space shook, then flew backward and crashed into the wall.

Her fury immediately dissipated. Unfortunately, the darkness did not.

Cracks snaked across the wall of the other cage as well.

Her gift had become even more violent and unruly.

It had to be Damien. Somehow, his presence made it worse.

Thinking rationally once more, she fought to regain control before she harmed everyone in the room.

Another flashback sliced through her—at the worst possible moment.

*“Calm yourself, pet. Or I’ll be forced to take action.” Darvish stroked the length of his single horn, his gaze flicking to where her brother stood surrounded by Nars and four other guards.*

*Luc’s face was a bruised mess, his arms hanging by his sides, a taser to his temple. But it was the helpless fury in his stare that sliced the deepest.*

*The rage inside her spiraled higher, her wrists straining against the cuffs at her back while the lights dimmed, and menacing shadows surged across the walls of Consortium headquarters.*

*Darvish did not like this. "Behave. Or else."*

*"Want me to remind her what happens if she doesn't, boss?" Servile as ever, his assistant shuffled closer, his neck cocked at its usual odd angle, his fist raised to strike her brother again.*

*Luc, meanwhile, did nothing to defend himself.*

*Because he couldn't.*

*And neither could she.*

*"Not yet." Darvish's command stilled the assistant's fist in midair. "My lovely pet already knows exactly what will happen if she doesn't do as she's told and control her evolving gift. What ugly, dangerous secrets will suddenly be not so secret if she doesn't obey. Isn't that right, pet?"*

*"Yes." Scarlett forced out the word, struggling to tamp down her gift before it put her brother in more danger. "There's no need to hurt Luc. I am here as summoned. I'm in control of my gift, my blood and eye scan ready to be used to transfer the money into your accounts."*

*"Good." Darvish's smile never reached his eyes. The fact that those eyes were so close in color and shape to Damien's made it even worse. "I guess that's one more rotation you and yours get to keep your secrets."*

*She didn't react.*

*You could kick a creature only so many times before it stopped flinching.*

*"Except," Darvish paused, and her heart skittered in her chest, "that's not all I require this time."*

*A low chuckle emitted from the comms unit on the desk.*

*Scarlett's mouth went dry. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Luc tense.*

*She had no idea who it was that sometimes listened in on these sessions, but Darvish seemed even crueler when the unknown eavesdropper was in attendance.*

*"I've already done everything you commanded." The panicked words escaped before she could stop herself. "Damien's gone, humiliated and with no intention of returning. I've contracted with Kadon Stormhart. Allowed you to use my identity to launder your funds. There's nothing more I can do."*

*"That's where you're wrong."*

*A shiver ran down her spine.*

*That was the problem with extortion. It never ended. The blackmailer just kept on squeezing and squeezing. Until you broke.*

*Only, she couldn't shatter. Not until she'd saved those she loved.*

*Her gaze shifted to Luc, and she forced her lips to move. "What do you want?"*

*Her blackmailer gestured to the main door. "Bring them in."*

*A battered male—with both horns torn off—was dragged into the room and dumped at her feet. She recognized him as one of the older Consortium board members who'd been reluctant to relinquish his power. Carted in next, his wings twisted and broken, was N'gal Verish, the fighter who'd worked alongside Darvish to bring down Damien, only to get greedy and threaten to tell the Brotherhood what Darvish was up to.*

*Both males stared up at her with terrified eyes.*

*"We'll wait in the hall with your brother. Use your gift," commanded Darvish. "Kill them."*

Scarlett pulled herself from the past as more cracks appeared in the cell wall in front of her.

But the crystal didn't explode outward. Instead, it melted and twisted, caving in on itself as the shadows ate away at the crystal.

Thankfully, expending so much of her gift was enough to snap her back into a calmer state, the shadows slipping back inside her to rest and recharge.

But not before leaving a hole large enough for a small body to duck through in the crystal.

Unfortunately, the edges of that hole glowed white. Too hot to use without running the risk of burning her skin.

Forced to wait until it cooled, she rubbed her palms on what remained of her dress and braced herself for what would come next.

"What the fuck was that?" The kid spoke first, returning from wherever Damien had shoved him, the banged-up chair clutched in front of him like a shield. "I mean... I saw a guard fly back after he put his hands on her, but it was chaotic, and I figured I was seeing things. Now I know I wasn't."

Scarlett didn't bother trying to explain.

She doubted Damien would have heard anyway. He was too busy studying her as if he'd never seen her before.

Which was kind of true.

Pain twisted inside. She'd never wanted him to know.

It was silly, but a part of her had wished to preserve who she'd been in his

mind. Stay the same sweet omega he remembered with all the pleasant colors. As if that would ensure some part of that girl still existed.

But now, even that final illusion was gone. One more secret she'd failed to keep.

She cleared her throat, her gaze locking with Damien's. "I told you. Everything's different now. You need to go. Before you or the kid gets hurt."

"Did you just threaten me, Scarlett?" Damien sounded eerily calm. "After almost creaming on my cock?"

Heat prickled across her cheeks. "I just gave you the only truth I can."

"Well, here's mine in return. I'm not going anywhere." He crossed his arms across his broad chest, biceps bunching; an impenetrable blockade between her and the door. "That little display changes nothing."

What in the hells? Shouldn't he be at least a little worried?

"Want to know what else Brock told me?" Damien stepped closer, his intoxicating scent wafting through the hole in the crystal and making her mouth water.

"No."

"He told me Darvish visits the Golden Dome's Consortium headquarters a few times every planetary rotation." Damien continued talking as if he was entirely unfazed by what he'd seen her do. As if her gift wasn't entirely different—and more dangerous—than what it had once been. "Do you know where he goes when he leaves here?"

Shocked by his reaction, she could only shake her head.

"We'll see." It was clear he didn't believe her. "He also told me that each time Darvish visits, he stays for no more than five suns' rises. The rest of the time, some guy known as the Assistant operates as the big boss's stand-in." He raised an eyebrow. "You know who that is?"

She pressed her lips together and remained silent.

Damien didn't seem to care. "According to Brock, the assistant's a real Alphahole who shuffles when he walks, has dead eyes, and is quick to solve problems with his tail and fists when the big boss isn't around."

*Oh gods. Oh gods.*

"We'll get to that as well." Damien kept on talking. "Brock also told me that there are rumors that the assistant's actually more of a puppet, his strings pulled by an invisible second-in-command who's as elusive as the big boss."

So he knew about the mystery Alpha who often listened in?

Her heart slammed against her ribs, and from the sudden gleam in

Damien's eyes, she suspected she hadn't done a great job of masking her reaction, but she was off-kilter. His reaction to her changed gift was not what she'd expected.

"I should warn you," Damien continued, "Brock was also initially reluctant to talk to me, but in the end, as you can tell, he ended up being very chatty."

Goosebumps prickled along her flesh. Brock had been a thick-necked pervert who spent far too much on the fights, drink, and omega whores, but he'd never once struck her as chatty.

"We'll get there with you too."

She tried not to hyperventilate.

Damien took another step closer. "He was particularly *talkative* when it came to you."

She swallowed hard.

"Such a gorgeous thing," he said. Accommodating, too." Damien's voice hardened. "So willing to drop everything whenever summoned. Which, apparently, happened every time the big boss swung into town. Matter of fact, Brock said you were one of his boss's most frequent visitors, and he swore, on his dying breath, that you're the key to finding Darvish."

Scarlett lost the battle not to hyperventilate, her chest rising and falling fast. She was in so much trouble.

"So"—Damien unfolded his arms—"this new *trick* of yours won't make a blind bit of difference. Not when I know you're the key to what I want."

"Trick?" She finally found her voice. No one who'd witnessed her new "gift" had dismissed it as something as inconsequential as a trick before.

"You think that little show of yours impressed me?" The muscles in Damien's broad shoulders bunched. "I'm the Skolov Enforcer. I eat tiny things like you for breakfast."

Her gaze flickered to the hole in the crystal, an important reminder. She wasn't Brock. She wasn't thick-necked or dense, or the young female Damien once knew, and she had options. "You might not find me as easy to devour as those others."

"No?" Her captor's voice dropped to a sinful rumble. "I remember you being very easy to eat."

Her lungs contracted; her traitorous body betrayed her yet again.

The past swirled between them, lust brushing against her skin, the memory of his tongue at her clit making her pulse surge.



However, she couldn't afford to weaken.

The hole's melted edges were proof of that. She watched as they cooled to yellow, then orange. Such pretty colors—like the ones that had once existed inside her.

But no more.

All that seethed inside her now was darkness. And that was dangerous to all, including Damien.

She ducked her head and carefully stepped through her self-made exit.

This time, she made sure to take shallow breaths; letting the impact of Damien seep into her slowly, acclimatizing to his appeal, so the overall effect on her senses would be less cataclysmic.

She couldn't afford to lose control as she had in that corridor back at the stadium.

Her caution barely worked, desire licking across her skin like a roaring fire.

Their gazes locked.

She hardened her heart. "I no longer give away free samples. Especially to those who are not my Alpha." She knew she was baiting the beast but couldn't find it within herself to care. "And this little *trick* of mine works on flesh too. So, I want you to tell me who is in that other cage, and then I want you to let us go. You'll have to get your answers from someone else."

The kid backed way up.

Damien stayed where he was. "You're not going anywhere."

She raised her palms. "Don't make me hurt you."

"You gotta do what you gotta do. Same as me." He stepped between her and the exit.

While they no longer shared fated-mate marks, somehow, she still felt his fury like a roiling wave inside her, amplifying all her emotions.

The walls around them shook.

"Um, bro?" The kid again. "You saw the flying chair and the cell wall, right? You sure this is a good plan?"

The stubborn male didn't hesitate. "Yes."

"Really? I mean, that's what you said last time and, no offense, but you and plans..."

Damien's shoulders bunched. "*She* is the key to reaching Darvish."

"Right, but—"

"Maddox. Outside." Damien bit out each word. "Put down the chair."

Guard the door.”

“The door’s not going anywhere.”

Damien never once took his gaze from her. “How about this smart-ass? You go guard the door, or I contact Alexi’s pregnant omega and tell her that you and her sister have been sneaking out to see each other when you think no one’s watching.”

“What?” The kid froze. “How the hells do you know about that?”

“I didn’t for sure. Until now.”

“That’s just—”

“Maddox, now!”

“Sheesh, okay.” The kid dropped the chair back in the center of the room. “But I’m taking the taser with me!” He stomped toward the door. “Brothers! Way more trouble than they’re worth.”

Under other circumstances, Scarlett might have smiled. Seeing Damien as an older brother was eye-opening—and way too endearing.

But this was no smiling situation.

This was a showdown she could not afford to lose.

The door slid shut with a thud. The cage in the corner rattled louder.

“Now, where were we?” Damien’s gaze fused with hers.



SCARLETT

“**Y**ou were about to let me go.” Scarlett tipped her chin, refusing to be intimidated.

“Not how I remember it.” Damien stalked toward her.

She stayed right where she was. “I don’t want to hurt you, but I will. I’m dangerous.”

He stepped closer. “Believe me, Omega, between the two of us, I’m the one to fear.”

*If only.* “You can’t touch me.”

“Wrong thing to say.” He moved so fast that he had his hand wrapped around her throat, propelling her backward before she’d even raised her palms in defense.

“Don’t!” Her spine hit the wall, fear for him thundering through her. She was too keyed up, the darkness inside her primed to kill.

His chest slammed into her as he pinned her to the wall.

For a heartbeat, everything was suspended, sound and movement frozen.

Then the calm detonated.

Raw, vibrant power exploded through her.

The walls rumbled. Dirt crumbled from the ceiling. The cage that had held her flew backward. The other one tipped on its side.

However, none of the violence touched Damien. There was no dark surge or deathly charge. No horrific burning scent or dead, empty eyes.

Instead, the power that ricocheted between them was an altogether different type of seething storm. One fueled by white-hot, incandescent lust.

Pleasure radiated through every cell, a thousand points of erogenous

pleasure, the bruises that had once bothered her entirely forgotten under a surging tide of ecstasy.

Damien groaned as his eyes flickered red.

Panting, overwhelmed by a need that burned hotter than a thousand suns, she dug her nails into the wall to keep from reaching for him.

No wonder they'd lost it in that corridor.

She should have known he'd be different from the rest. He'd always been her exception.

He pressed his cock into her belly. "Fuck, you were right. That hurts in the *best possible way*."

"Alpha." She couldn't think past the need for him.

"Omega." His hand, firm around her throat, secured her in place as his mouth descended.

Her lips tingling, eyes fluttering shut, she stilled. Breathless. Freed from her usual terror and guilt. Stripped of her defenses and pride. Ensnared by the hunger that glittered in his stare. Helpless to do anything but await the warmth of his lips.

Except one heartbeat turned into two, and his lips never touched hers.

Scarlett blinked, eyelids drifting open to find his mouth a hairsbreadth from hers.

She started, uncertain. "Damien?"

He growled low, and she thought she saw a flash of regret in his stare, even confusion and pain, but it was soon replaced by an arrogant smirk. "Bet you're not thinking of Kadon Stormhart right now."

Outrage slammed through her. Humiliation too. Because he was one hundred percent right: Kadon hadn't crossed her mind at all. "You're such an Alphahole."

One who was proving he had far more control than she—and that only shamed her more.

She might be more like Brock than she'd realized. Dense, without options, and, since her gift didn't work on her captor, in big trouble.

Damien's grip tightened on her throat. "You got that right, Omega. I am an Alphahole. I hold grudges. And what's more..." He shifted until his mouth hovered over her ear, the faint flutter of his breath against her earlobe sending tingles skating across her skin. "I fucking hate you, Scarlett Stormhart."

The wound inside her bled deeper.

“But,” his voice hard once again, Damien dragged a fang across her earlobe, “that doesn’t mean I don’t remember just how fuckable that little cunt of yours once was. Or how much it likes me. You can spout crap about returning to that pretty Golden Boy all you want. It’s my tongue, my hand, my toys that pussy craves.”

“Stop.” She panted, torn between indignation and the agony of the truth.

“No way Stormhart makes you feel the way I do.”

“What do you care? You’ve moved on. So have I.”

Without warning, he spun her around, his hand controlling her at the nape of her neck. She bucked in protest, the wall rough against her left cheek, her palms flat against its surface.

“Have you?” His cock dug into her ass. “Because I’m not the one sending hot little electric pulses straight to my dick.”

Her eyes widened. *That* had certainly never happened before with her gift.

Scarlett was still processing that information when something cool pressed against her neck. A sharp sting as something pierced the flesh just below her hairline.

“What are you doing?” She hissed, trying to pull away.

Damien kept her trapped with the weight of his body. “Stay still, or you could actually get hurt.”

It almost sounded as though he cared.

But who was she kidding?

A faint whooshing sound followed, and she knew exactly what he’d done. He’d extracted the Consortium tracker and Kadon’s as well.

“You can’t do that.” She bucked against his hold—and got nowhere.

“Just did.” He trailed his thumb over the throbbing puncture wound. “Now they can’t track you. But I can.”

Of course he’d replaced it with one of his own. Fury careened through her.

The plink of small rocks shaking free from the ceiling caught her attention, as did the growing shadows on the wall.

She tried to rein in the darkness.

A moment later, the latch of the prime omega cuff on her right wrist opened. Then the left one. She watched as they fell to the floor. Kadon would not be pleased.

Scarlett was still trying to get her head around Damien’s actions when she

heard another sound.

*Snick. Snick.* This time, it sounded like two clasps closing in quick succession. Then the faint weight of something light and delicate molding to her neck and belly registered. Cool metal settled loosely against her stomach, spine, and the flare of her hips—and since her dress was now little more than a few torn scraps of thin fabric, she felt the chain’s weight *everywhere*, including her core.

She glanced down. “No.”

“You recognize it, Omega?” A slight tug from behind, and her hips drew back. “I like it a whole lot more than Stormhart’s collar and cuffs.”

She realized exactly what he’d done. “Take this off me. Now.”

“No.” The delicate chain dug into her skin as he wrapped his fist in it and pulled, controlling her movements easily. “I had this taming chain made just for you. As light and beautiful as the finest jewelry in the galaxy, but deceptive, concealing an additional purpose. Something I knew an omega such as yourself would appreciate.”

“I said take it off.” Her breath came faster and faster.

Damien ignored her, the smug satisfaction in his tone when he spoke only making her chest rise and fall even more rapidly. “This one was created by the finest blacksmith in the outer rim, using the lightest, strongest material available anywhere, extracted from my family’s own mines. It’s unbreakable.” Voice low and hard, he pressed his mouth to her ear. “Unlike the fated-mate bond, apparently.”

“Don’t.” The tear in her heart deepened.

He continued, his knuckles brushing against her spine as he played with the chain, the ripped, gauzy material of her gown doing little to block the sensation. “It’s even more durable than the ones Alpha clients use to mark their chosen whore for the moons’ risings, especially in the Consortium brothels filled with ex-prizes.”

Scarlett sucked in a sharp breath.

“Yes. The fate you were once so desperate to escape.” One calloused finger skimmed the curve of the chain as it dipped from the middle of her back to her hip. “But here you are anyway.”

“Fuck you.” Rage surged through her. The bastard.

She’d told him about her fear of becoming a used-up prize in confidence. Now he was twisting her trust to punish her, binding her in a chain that allowed him easy, full control of her body, with or without her consent.

A faint hum stirred the air. Her skin heated beneath the chain as it activated.

“I would watch that mouth, Omega. I’m letting you keep those scraps of clothing on for now because I know they’ll do little to get in the way of the chain’s effect but get too mouthy, and I’ll strip you bare and have you in the taming chain and nothing else.”

“Stop.” One palm still flat to the wall, she grasped the throat chain in the other and yanked. All she succeeded in doing was digging its small links into the back of her neck.

“Don’t touch that chain.” The hum grew louder as he amplified the device’s power. “That’s only for me.”

With a snarl, Scarlett yanked at it again.

As the pulses within the chain increased, warmth suffused her skin, making it tingle.

“Bad choice, Omega. The taming chain can only be operated by the Alpha owner’s fingerprints. Only he can lock it into place or open the clasps.” Damien pressed his mouth to her ear, the warm rasp sending a bolt of terrible, unwelcome, delicious heat tumbling through her. “And I intend to use it to ensure your *full* cooperation.”

She went rigid.

“What’s the matter, ex-prize? You used to love my toys.”

The memories of how they used to play, the awe and tenderness in his gaze as he used his toys in the service of her pleasure and trust, whispered through her, making this moment all the more obscene.

She knew *exactly* how taming chains worked. How the warm pulses the metal created sent blood surging to every erogenous zone, making every portion of an omega’s body breathtakingly sensitive. Until, if it went on long enough, it became an exquisite agony, a climax just out of reach.

Brothels used them because they made the whores so much more willing, desperate even, to be fucked by whoever wielded their taming chain. Or, if turned to high volume abruptly, the chain could cause agonizing pain. Another reason Alphas at the brothels liked using them. There was no chance of anything but compliance.

And now Damien was using one on her.

Until now, she’d felt mostly guilt, sorrow, and longing when she thought of him.

Now rage consumed everything else.



The packed dirt of the walls curled in on itself, forming fist-sized holes. The chair slid across the floor.

“Stop that.” *Slap.* Palm sliding easily beneath the hem of her short skirt, he tapped her bottom. Nothing more than a firm warning, but when combined with the chain’s heat, it rippled through her body like a caress.

“Control this new gift of yours.” He growled as another fist-sized hole appeared in the wall. “You could bring the ceiling down on us.”

Scarlett screeched in outrage. “You’re the one causing the problem. Take your damned hands off me and release me from this taming chain, and I’ll control my gift.”

“No.” His tone shifted to calm and controlled. “From here on out, you’ll answer my questions until I’m satisfied.” His voice dipped. “And thanks to the taming chain, your satisfaction will now, of course, depend on mine.”

“If you think this will work, you’re wrong. You don’t hold sway over me anymore.”

“You so sure about that?” *Slap. Slap.* His hand struck her ass twice more. This time, with a little more force.

It should have hurt. Instead, the impact was an altogether different torment, her fingers clawing at the dirt, her mind grasping desperately for the last shards of her control as her body throbbed with need: proving every one of her boastful words wrong.

The taming chain hummed as its power pulsed through her veins, swelling her breasts and the folds of her pussy. He hadn’t even kissed her or plucked her nipples or touched her with any care, and she was already near panting.

Worse, she knew she couldn’t blame her reaction solely on the chain, still set on a low level. It was her susceptibility to Damien that was proving her true downfall.

She was in serious trouble.

“Don’t forget, Omega. I know exactly how to work this body. How to give it pain—or pleasure.” His hand dipped between her thighs.

To find her shamefully wet.

“Ah, sweet, needy Scarlett. Finally, the truth.” He drew a featherlight fingertip through the cream at her folds. “You want me.”

“No!”

Fast as lightning, he rapped his fingers against her pussy twice in quick succession. “Such a naughty, lying omega.”

Scarlett bucked in his hold, pleasure coursing through her, but managed to gasp, “And you’re an arrogant, degenerate Alphahole bully.”

His bark of laughter was almost cruel. “Maybe so, but you seem to like degenerates, Omega. I may not have been good enough to become your Alpha lord, but that greedy little cunt of yours enjoys these rough hands all the same.”

She couldn’t stop the moan that slipped out as his fingers trailed over her folds, shifting the burn to something even hotter.

“Shhh.” His other hand left her throat to clamp around her mouth. “Can’t have anyone else hearing the sounds a lying, faithless omega makes when she’s being punished. Even those belong to me alone.”

She thrashed harder in his grip.

He chuckled low, a menacing, filthy sound. “Such a wild thing. Just like always.”

*Slap. Slap*

He’d returned his attention to her ass, her pleasure cresting higher with each fall of his palm until she was panting in earnest beneath his hand.

“You still think I don’t hold any sway?” Damien’s words barely penetrated as he ground his hips against her, the taming chain priming her as his hand pushed between her thighs, keeping her spread as his fingers ghosted over her folds. “Now it’s time for my questions, and you’ll answer every single one.”

Oh Goddess, she might.

Pride and planning were almost forgotten as her world narrowed to her fever and desperation.

She needed to stay strong, but this... resisting Damien was next to impossible.

“Does he touch you like I do?”

Shock whispered through her. That was not the question she’d expected.

From the way Damien stiffened right after he spoke, she wondered if he hadn’t intended to ask it either.

Whatever the case, there was only one answer she could give when he lifted his hand to allow her to answer. “You need to let me go. I can’t give you the answers you want.”

“Damned it, Scarlett. You want to speak; tell me what I want to hear.” There was a low growl as his hand slanted across her mouth again, then the chain at her hips pulsed hotter. “Submit.”

His big hand flipped up her skirt. Returned to her bottom. Kneading as his touch sent her blood surging through her.

Before she knew it, she was rising to her tiptoes and thrusting back into his palm.

“That’s right, Omega.” He moved again, thumbing her clit. “Let the taming chain do its job. Give me my answers. Does he play with that sweet pussy the way you like? Own it just right? Make you so wild and needy you’ll do anything to be my good girl?”

Something fevered and perilous crackled through her veins, his possessive claim soothing her even as it drove her need higher.

Pain. Punishment. Pleasure. At this moment, she didn’t care what he meted out. Only that he put his hands on her and gave her something.

“Tell me the fucking truth.” His palm descended. A single strike, harder than before.

She screamed behind his hand. The sting mixed with the darkness inside her, her body and soul quickening in a way it hadn’t in four planetary rotations.

“Tell me.” He did it again. And again. “Tell. Me.”

Before long, she was raising her hips for every rough stroke. Wanting. Needing.

“Tell me he never made you feel like this.”

She broke.

“Never!” She screamed the confession against his palm. “No one’s ever made me feel the way you do.”

He froze. She did too.

Then his mouth was pressed to her ear, the chain no longer digging into her skin, as his hand slipped between her folds, his fingers working her, no longer in punishment, but in reward. “Good girl. Such a good fucking girl.”

Her head fell back in surrender, her gift quieting as everything else inside her sharpened and brightened. Colors flashed behind her eyelids after so much unrelenting darkness.

She was so close to soaring... her toes curling, core tightening.

The sound of crystal shattering echoed through the room.

Followed by an enraged roar as the Alpha in the other cage burst through the crystal.



## DAMIEN

“Do you know who I am? I’ll have your dick for this!” The purple-skinned fucker who’d been pawing at Scarlett in the luxury box stumbled through the broken crystal.

“Prince Jai!” Scarlett’s shocked gasp echoed right behind.

Damien cursed. So much for keeping her fellow prisoner’s identity a secret to gain the upper hand.

The guy looked a whole lot smaller without his crown.

Removing his hands from Scarlett and the taming chain, Damien pulled his shit together fast.

Fuck him; he wasn’t sure whether to gut the Alpha or thank him for the cockblock.

Before his interruption, Damien had been way too close to further complicating an already complicated situation.

“I will kill you.” The prince charged.

Damien shoved Scarlett behind him and stepped forward to easily clothesline the idiot.

The prince hit the dirt with a thump.

Jacked-up morons like that always thought they were better fighters than they were.

“Ahhh.” The prince rolled around on the floor, his hands clawing at his throat as he fought for breath.

Scarlett was already halfway to the door when Damien clamped a hand around her wrist and wrapped the other around the chain. “I don’t think so.”

“Let me go.” She kicked and thrashed as he lifted her off the ground, her

back to his front.

“That’s not what you were saying a few moments ago.”

She fought harder. It only made his dick harder.

“Need any help?” Maddox peeked through the door.

He didn’t. But, as much as he didn’t want to admit it, he could probably use a chaperone.

*No one’s ever made me feel the way you do.*

He should have felt smug after forcing such a confession from her. Sadly, smugness was the last emotion coursing through his veins.

“Deal with that.” He tilted his head toward the moron rolling around on the ground.

“I get all the fun jobs.” Maddox might have been younger than the prince, but he handled the prisoner easily, grabbing him by his overpriced shirt and yanking him off the ground. In the next heartbeat, Maddox punched the male in the stomach. Then, while the guy wheezed in panic, the kid secured him to the chair.

Just like a Skolov pro.

Embarrassingly, it took Damien longer to subdue his own captive, but that was because there was no rough handling involved. Grip firm but not painful, he made sure to add no additional bruises as he carried Scarlett to his intended destination.

He refused to examine why.

“Let me go.”

He ignored her. “Keep moving. Just like that.” Her perfect ass rubbed against him.

She fought harder. “Screw you.”

“Maybe later. But I doubt it. I’m not a fan of secondhand.”

Pebbles skipped down the wall and hit the ground. More cracks appeared in the already wrecked cages. A sure sign Scarlett’s new abilities were firing up once more. Abilities he found way too fascinating for his own good.

He squeezed her tighter. “Stop that.” He pressed his mouth to her ear. “Or I’ll turn the taming chain to an even higher level and spank that naughty pussy again right here and now.”

“Go to hells.” But the pebbles stopped falling, and no new cracks appeared.

“You first.” Eventually, he wrestled her to the ground. Then cuffed her in the same manacles Maddox had him in earlier.

He and Scarlett were both breathing heavily by the time he stepped back, leaving her on her knees, her red-streaked golden hair a wild tangle around her face as she glared up at him. Her face was also flushed, her ankles free, her body tilted slightly forward, arms spread and cuffed close to the ground while two hard nipples pressed tauntingly against the torn scraps of fabric that had, miraculously, stayed on during their scuffle.

Fuck him.

His gaze traced the shimmer of the chain as it encircled her throat, descended down her belly and the line of her spine, and draped over her lush hips.

He barely managed to lock his knees in place and keep from lunging at her.

She might not be his by contract, and their fated-mate marks might be gone, but that chain ensured she was fucking his to do with as he wanted.

And restrained as she was, worked up as she was... it would be so damned easy to do anything he wanted to her.

Undo his leathers, tangle his fingers in her hair, take that perfect mouth... or slip behind her, flip up that minuscule skirt, grip her hips, finish what he'd started any fucking way he craved.

"Damien?" Uncertainty glittered in her stare. But beneath, he saw defiance.

It only made his dick harder.

He should want her frightened. Want her fucking cowed and telling him what he needed to know.

But he fucking admired her spirit. Always had.

Plus, if she continued to misbehave, he'd be forced to put his hands on her again—however he wanted.

"Why am I here? What is this?" The prince's shouts pulled Damien from his dark thoughts. "I can pay you whatever you want. Just... just let me go."

The entitled bullies always broke first. Especially Federation prince bullies.

Dragging his attention from Scarlett, Damien turned to the Alphahole who'd cozied up to Scarlett in that luxury box and then threatened to have her tased when he returned with his guards.

Tied to the chair, straps around his arms, chest, and thighs to keep him secure, the prince no longer looked quite so regal.

Two quick steps forward and Damien's fist connected with the male's

chin.

The prince's head snapped to the side. Blood splattered on the dirt, adding to the dark stains already there.

Maddox laughed.

From behind him came a gasp.

Damien told himself it was better if she was afraid, that it would make it easier for him to extract the intel he needed.

He loomed over the prince. "I don't want to hear shit from you, just the answers to my questions."

The guy nodded, wisely keeping his mouth shut.

"Do you know Darvish Sartin?"

"No. I—"

"Shivrad Nitras?"

"Y-yes. I mean, I've heard of him," the prince hurried to explain when he saw Damien's expression. "But I don't *know* him. He's the head of the Consortium, has been for several planetary rotations now. His name is on all my invitations to fighting events, but he's elusive. Never attends the events himself."

It fucking killed Damien to think how long their half brother had been plotting and scheming right under his and his brothers' noses when they hadn't even realized the guy existed or what he'd taken from them.

*Hang on, Zaya. I will find Darvish, and then I will find you.*

"What do you know about his operations?"

"Nothing."

"Maddox." Damien glanced at his brother, who stood behind the chair. "A little help?"

"Sure thing." The kid wrapped his big hands around the prince's neck and squeezed. They'd perfected their interrogation techniques on the last guy.

Another sharp intake of breath came from behind him.

Ignoring it, Damien leaned in close to the male, whose purple skin was fast changing to a mottled black. "I'm going to ask you again, and I want you to think hard."

Eyes wild, the male nodded.

Damien gave Maddox the signal.

The male gasped for breath. "I-I know he makes a lot of money for the Consortium. That he doesn't like to be seen. Th-that he has an assistant."

"Nope. Think harder." He signaled Maddox again.



The prince screeched in panic.

“Stop!” Scarlett’s chains rattled. “He’s an entitled fool. But he knows nothing. He’s just a mark. A means to more profit.”

“You sleeping with him too?” Damien’s hand struck out, wrapping around Jai’s throat. “Is that why you’re so protective of him?”

A moment’s silence. “I wouldn’t let him touch me for all the chits in the galaxy.”

Truth or a lie? Damien had no idea. “So you won’t mind me fucking him up?”

The prince moaned beneath his hold.

Another brief hesitation from behind. “I really don’t care what you do to him, but he is Federation, and they will retaliate if he disappears.”

“Interesting. The old Scarlett would never have been so callous.”

“Whereas this new Damien uses his fists to solve everything, as always.”

He loomed over her in the next heartbeat, his boots straddling her pretty knees. “You want me to stop playing with him and release you? Then tell me what you and Darvish are doing with all that money you stole from the Golden Dome tournaments.”

She started, her eyes going wide.

“Didn’t think anyone knew about that?” He threaded his fingers through her hair and drew her up as far as the cuffs at her wrists would allow, arching her spine, the chain tinkling softly as she hung suspended in his hold, her eyes fixed on him. Just as he wanted. “I keep giving you chances to tell me the truth, but you don’t.”

Her gaze flickered away.

Damien dragged it back to him. “Once Brock gave us your name, it was easy for Maxheim to dig into your accounts to follow the dirty trail that led from the stolen money to you, but, not surprisingly, that gets murky before it can be linked to Darvish”

Scarlett blanked her expression, but there was no missing the telling rapid rise and fall of her chest.

“Nothing to say?” He leaned in close.

She shook her head, or at least tried to, achieving only the slightest of movements—since he was the one in control. Since he finally had her under his thumb after four planetary rotations of rage and... craving.

His hold tightened. “Did you even stop to think what would happen if your bullshit was discovered by the Brotherhood? Because, as silent

investors, they collect a substantial portion of Golden Dome profits, and they'll not take kindly to finding out they've been consistently robbed, especially if you're the only culprit they can identify."

Her breathing sped up, but he had to give her credit; she didn't break. "I know what happens. Death."

"And what?" Red spots danced in front of his eyes, her cavalier attitude enraging him further. "You're so damned greedy or foolish or desperate to gain status you thought it was worth it? Or that they wouldn't find out?"

"You're hurting me."

He loosened his hold immediately but didn't back down. He couldn't. "It won't be just you that they go after either. It will be that precious brother whose approval you're so desperate for. That pretty boy you seem so keen to protect." He growled low. "How could you be so fucking stupid? It's your blood and eye scan being used to approve those initial transactions. It's you who looks like the guilty party here."

"I know the consequences."

It made no sense.

Because Scarlett might be a lot of things, but she'd never struck him as foolish.

"Did you believe Darvish's bullshit when he said he could protect you?"

She barely blinked, but he caught the slight stiffening of her posture.

"He did tell you that, didn't he?" Damien cursed. "What did he say? That he had an inside source?"

Her lips pressed tight. Another yes in his view.

"I hate to break it to you, but all those who've allied with him in the past have died. Darvish uses others, then spits them out, sacrificing them for his own revenge schemes."

She said nothing, her gaze flicking away.

He grabbed her chin, forcing her eyes back to him. "Who is this inside source?" He and his brothers had already exposed a few traitors in the Brotherhood's ranks, but Damien was one hundred percent certain there were more.

When she didn't answer, he squeezed harder. "Who?"

"I wish I knew."

It sounded like the truth. And yet it told him nothing.

Damien flashed his fangs. "Your refusal to cooperate is really pissing me off. Time to return to the prince."

“No.” Big, beautiful eyes stared up at him, pleading, frustrated. “He’s not worth it. He—”

“Don’t bother. Having you defend him only pisses me off more.” Unable to restrain himself, he rubbed a thumb across her full lower lip. “You use these lips to tell me what I want to know or I’ll find another use for them.” A mix of sensations pummeled him as her eyes widened in response. “After I deal with the prince.”

“No!” Panic sounded behind him. Prince Jai had been paying attention. The guy spoke fast. “Listen to her. I-I had no idea the bitch or this Darvish guy was stealing. She cost me a fucking fortune. It’s her who deserves to be in this chair or bent over it.”

Damien spun around. “What did you say?”

Maddox groaned. “Bro, your eyes.” He tapped beside his own. “Streaked with red.”

But before Damien could rein it in, the prince was spewing again. “She’s a thief and a slut. She’s the one you should punish. It’s a badly kept secret that her prime omega contract means nothing. Stormhart whores her out.”

“He has no idea what he’s talking about!” Scarlett’s cry echoed as Damien stalked toward the blubbering prince.

“It’s probably this Darvish guy she spreads her legs for.” Desperate to earn favor and ignorant of the fact that Scarlett was trying to save him, the fool of a prince shouted over her. “They’re probably in it together. All of them. Punish her. Hurt her. Hells, I’ll help. I planned to rip the bitch apart anyway. I—”

Damien’s claw filleted the prince’s belly, a long, deep horizontal cut that sent blood and guts spilling out—and, thankfully, shut him up.

The scumbag’s mouth opened in a voiceless, shocked scream.

“Gross.” Maddox eyed the mess.

One of the many reasons Damien preferred to wear black.

“Damien, what have you done?” Scarlett’s chains clanked behind him. “The prince is Federation. You’ll start a war. The Brotherhood will be furious.”

Could she actually be worried about him? Or was that more bullshit, and she just didn’t want her money source being jeopardized?

He tried not to let it bother him either way. “He won’t say a word, right, Prince Jai?” The rage and confusion inside Damien was a seething, murderous mass. *Stormhart whores her out. It’s probably this Darvish guy*

*she spreads her legs for. I planned to rip the bitch apart anyway.*

The prince's head lifted before sinking back down.

Damien jabbed his claw into the deep cut in his belly. "I asked you a question."

The guy screamed, his muscles drawing tight.

"Damien, please."

He barely heard Scarlett over his rage. And what did he care if she thought he was a monster? She hadn't wanted him anyway.

"Med... care." The guy's words were a faint plea.

"You want help?"

"Y-yes." The prince's head bobbed up and down.

Damien studied him. "Then give me something useful, and I'll help you in return."

"I-I..." Eyes clouding, the prince struggled to keep his head up.

Maddox grabbed the guy's chin and held it upright. "Think really hard." The kid was as committed as the rest of them to finding Darvish—and his sister.

The prince remained silent, and Damien figured it was a lost cause. But then, his spine stiffened, and his head snapped up on its own, sadistic satisfaction gleaming in his eyes. "She... she can get you into Consortium headquarters. I-I heard a guard. She has... special privileges. Yes, that's... that's right. Her eye scan and blood give her exclusive access to the boss's private room. The guard said so himself."

"Stop talking!" Scarlett tried once more to shut the prince up.

But it was too late.

"She's his pet..." The prince's spite gave him strength. "She's the one... you should use and then gut."

"Now, there you go. Something useful." Damien patted the top of the prince's head before glancing over his shoulder.

Scarlett stared back at him with a mix of dread and fury.

He smiled in return, then faced Prince Jai. "So, I'll keep my promise and help you out too. Unlike *some* in this room, I keep my word."

Fast as a sun's flash, he struck, dragging his claw across the male's jugular. "There. No more pain."

The dead prince slumped in the chair.

Damien only wished he could kill the fucker all over again.

Silence descended: a tense, heavy menace that vibrated throughout the

room and in his chest, and this time, Damien didn't think it came from Scarlett. But from himself.

*I planned to rip the bitch apart anyway.*

With the prince's words echoing in his brain, Damien spat on the Alphahole.

"You didn't need to kill him."

Damien spun, his stare locking with hers. "You're still defending him? He sold you out."

"H-he was misinformed."

Whatever she saw in his eyes had her shuffling back on her knees, her arms stretching as far as they could go.

But that wasn't very far thanks to the manacles at her wrists keeping her chained to the dirt.

There was nowhere for her to run anymore...

"Maddox"—he never looked away from the omega—"take the fucking trash out." He considered. "Then do a lap and make sure none of our traps have been messed with."

There was a slight pause, but the kid was smart. And a survivor. He knew better than to challenge Damien right now.

Without a word, Maddox sliced through the prince's bindings and let the corpse fall to the ground.

Soon, the determined tread of the kid's footfalls as he dragged something heavy from the room was the only sound.

The door shut. Then there was no sound at all.

"Damien, please." The chains at Scarlett's wrists rattled as she broke the silence.

"I like that word on your lips. I like when you beg." He stalked toward her. "Seems I might not be the only one."

"No one's whoring me out." She spoke fast. "Least of all Stormhart."

"You sure you want to mention that name right now?"

"All the prince did was give you rumors and speculation."

"And confirmed Brock's intel that you're my best shot at getting into Consortium headquarters and finding Darvish. Access to his private room—that sounds important."

Her lips pressed tight. At least she wasn't foolish enough to lie about that. "Even if I can somehow get in, headquarters and his private suite will be heavily guarded. You'll never make it."

“I disagree.” Damien moved closer.

“It’s a suicide mission. The building’s fortified and full of security. Even if I get you in, you’ll never make it out.”

“Let me worry about that.” He was near enough that he loomed over her again, the tips of his scuffed, dirty boots coming into contact with her perfect, shimmering skin, his groin mere inches from her mouth.

She stared up at him. “He’s likely already gone, the headquarters’ top floor evacuated. The fact I’ve been taken will have put everyone on high alert.”

“You worried for me, Scarlett? Or are these pretty lips working overtime, trying to save your business associate Darvish from the prince’s fate?”

“I hate him. I’d gut him myself if I could.”

“Oh yeah?” He stretched out his hand and caressed the top of her head, the strands of red and gold softer than silk beneath his palm.

She trembled beneath his touch, but she recovered fast, jerking her head away.

Except he didn’t allow it, his palm easily keeping her right where he wanted as he raised his other hand.

His thumb pressed against the lush seam of her far too appealing mouth. “I remember when you used these lips to do more than tell me lies. Let’s see if you’re better at answering my questions this time around.”



## SCARLETT

“Don’t do this.” Scarlett’s heart skipped a beat. Her position on her knees, body tilted forward, wrists chained to the dirt was suddenly more precarious than ever.

“It’s too early for begging.” Damien dragged his thumb slowly across her lower lip.

When Damien held her before—when he called her his good girl—she’d thought that maybe some part of him remembered, even cherished, what they’d once been to each other, but she’d no longer delude herself.

Her gaze flicked to the wet, shiny new bloodstains on the floor, left by Prince Jai.

She had no idea what this older Damien was capable of.

“Tell me what the prince was talking about.” Damien wasted no time. “How can you get me into Darvish’s private headquarters?”

Not a personal question. She wasn’t sure if that was better or not.

“Are you here to turn me in?” Ignoring his question, she asked her own.

“I don’t owe you any explanation, Omega. You’re the one who needs to start talking.”

She refused to let it go. “Did you come back because you found out about the money and wanted to impress your precious Brotherhood?”

One eyebrow raised. “Keeping tabs on me and my family’s rise to the top?”

Not as much as she’d have liked, thanks to Darvish’s strict controls, but even he couldn’t stop some of the bigger news stories from trickling down to her. And the fact that the Skolovs, a bunch of outsider orphans with no



familial lineage and little funds, had clawed their way into the most exclusive and powerful crime organization in the galaxy was big news.

“So that *is* the reason?” Scarlett pushed. “The Brotherhood found out about the stolen money and sent you here to punish me.”

He scoffed. “I don’t give a shit what the Brotherhood thinks. They’re a means to an end.” His expression hardened. “Same with you.”

Another deep cut.

While hearing that the Brotherhood wasn’t yet on to her should have lessened the sting, somehow, it didn’t.

“I’m here for Darvish,” Damien continued.

“I wish I could help you bring him down.” The truth leaped from her before she could think better of it.

Her captor took it as a challenge. “Oh, you will.” He palmed the back of her head, his grip menacing. “You’ll tell me everything you know about his operation, his plans, and who works for him before we’re done.” He slid his hand to the chain at her neck and toyed with a few links, the rough pads of his fingers a caress that raised the tiny hairs on the nape of her neck. “Then you’ll take me to him.”

“Or what?” The ceiling shook, and some larger rocks hit the ground, the darkness inside her snapping at its leash, as always. “You’ll do the same to me as you did to the prince?”

Damien’s grip tightened. “I can do anything I want with you, Omega. Keep you chained down here for eons. Break you as easily as I would a pretty icicle.”

“You’ll regret this.”

His entire body stiffened, the tendons in his corded neck bulging as his horns snapped straight and his fangs flashed. “Are you threatening me?”

“No.” She let the truth seep from her once again. “Just telling you what I believe. I-I know you don’t care about me anymore. I understand why, but you can’t have changed that much that you’d relish—”

“Don’t tell me who I am or what I’d relish.” He leaned in close. “You. Don’t. Fucking. Know. Me. Anymore.”

A painful breath shuddered through her.

“Give me the intel I want, or we proceed.” His tone thickened with ominous promise. “And, as you already know from what happened with the prince, it won’t go well for you.”

Scarlett swallowed hard. She did know her fate.

It didn't matter though. She couldn't do anything that might look like she was cooperating with Damien.

Not when Darvish still had his bargaining chips. Not when he still held the lives and deaths of those she cared about in his palm.

All she could do was endure.

Shadows crept up the walls. A large clump of rock and dirt tumbled to the ground, her gift leaking out as her anger built.

"No more of that." Damien gripped the throat chain tighter.

Scarlett bared her teeth. "I warned you what could happen."

The walls shook harder.

She had no idea how these new abilities of hers actually worked. She hadn't asked for her gift to alter, or to keep evolving.

Moreover, she hated what it had turned her into. She also despised the monsters it had drawn into her life.

Because it hadn't taken much time at all to realize that, while Darvish had likely noticed her because of her connection to Damien, he'd kept her with him because of her gift's ugly nature, a match for his own.

Her initial gift, shimmering colors she'd projected onto her skin and across the walls, had been wavelengths of light she'd manipulated without much thought.

Now she wielded the absence of color, a dark, seething storm of vibrating shadows that absorbed all her pretty colors and compressed them into something infinitely dangerous. Something that erupted from her whenever she was upset or scared or enraged: waves of dark light that weren't always visible to the naked eye but were powerful enough to rattle walls or burn holes in reinforced crystal. Or absorb another's life force, leaving them scorched and dead.

Thankfully, Damien had proven he was immune to it, but her gift could hurt him in other ways.

Just the thought of the danger he was in sent more rocks tumbling down. Worse, the more she tried to rein in her so-called gift, the more the walls rumbled.

Stacked supplies slid backward, smacking the wall. The chair followed. Then the other cage somersaulted through the air before crashing into the far side.

Shadows took over almost the entire wall, flickering like monstrous omens. If it had been anyone besides Damien touching her right now, she

suspected they'd be dead.

His gaze followed the destruction. "You will stop that."

"Fuck you." Scarlett refused to admit she couldn't control it. Refused to look weaker than she already did.

"Strike one." He shook his head. "Time to take things up a notch."

*No, no, no.*

The chain hummed as it activated.

"If you thought it was rough before, just wait." He rubbed the links at the base of her neck, and the force of the vibrations increased tenfold.

Her nipples instantly went tight with need, rubbing against the fabric covering her breasts and tormenting her further.

Breathing in and out through her nose, Scarlett told herself she was still in control. That this time would be different from the last. This time, she'd fight the chain—just as she did the darkness—and remain immune. Give Damien nothing more. Certainly no further admissions like he was the only one who'd ever made her feel the way he did.

The last four planetary rotations hadn't broken her. This wouldn't either.

"Tell me about this special access you have to Darvish's private suite in Consortium headquarters. How does it work?"

A tingle ran up her spine, her mouth opening before she could command it to stay shut. Compulsion. He was using his power as an Alpha, the force of his dominance, to sway her.

He'd done it before, but never with such potency.

Scarlett panted through the discomfort.

Resisting an Alpha command wasn't easy. Especially when every instinct clamored to please him, whatever it took, an impulse to obey that slithered just beneath the surface of every omega. But when the male was her ex-fated-mate, it was even more acute, a near-agonizing burn that licked across her skin.

Except she'd had a long time to get used to pain.

Spine stiffening, she tilted her head upward and met his glower head-on. "No."

"Strike two." A flash of what looked like respect flickered in his gaze, but it was wiped clean in the next breath, replaced by a frightening determination. "Such a stubborn thing you've become." He sounded eerily calm. "But you've never had to withstand the full effect of a taming chain."

Her heart raced.

“Or maybe you simply want my hands on you again, Omega?” Damien stepped closer and knelt, putting his face only inches from hers. “No matter how I use them.”

Her mouth went dry. His words were too close to the truth.

“I must admit, I was almost hoping you’d choose this path.” He got to his feet again, looming over her, his expression demoralizingly detached. “But don’t expect it to go like last time.”

The taming chain’s amplified vibrations stole her breath and made her core clench. Each tiny pulse was a direct tap to her clit, clouding her mind with need and making it almost impossible to think straight.

Panting, her control slipping, she felt every bit of the vulnerability of her position. Chained on her hands and knees, forced to endure whatever Damien decided to make her feel. Pleasure. Pain. Humiliation.

To him, it must be the sweetest of revenge. To her, it was ecstasy and torment, and some part of her knew this was *exactly* what she deserved.

“So many times...” Proving his thoughts traveled in the same direction as hers, he trailed his fingertip across the chain at her throat, and to her shame, slick dripped from her and coated her thighs, her short skirt doing nothing to hide it from his eyes. “I’ve played those last moments of ours in my mind.”

She had too. Wishing she could have done something differently.

“I recall the way you came all over my leathers.” He traced the line of the chain along her spine, taking his time, his fingers traveling over fabric and flesh, lingering over each bump, letting the effects of the taming chain build and meld with the impact of his touch.

Scarlett curled her fingernails into the dirt to keep from arching her back and spreading her legs.

His siege continued, his claw dragging lightly across the dip of her back. “I remember too how, after our last embrace, you handed me that water container as if you cared—and all the time, you were plotting against me.”

Sweat dampened the nape of her neck, her skin trembling beneath the warmth of his touch as she remembered too: Damien drinking the drugged water, then wading into the ring. Crex falling, his eyes empty. The dawning realization in the gaze of the male she loved that she’d been the one to drug him.

It was at that moment something inside her had fractured. A wrenching tear in her soul that had never healed.

She doubted it ever would.

And now, her reckoning was due.

But if she told him everything and Darvish followed through on his threats, it would all have been for naught.

“So very stubborn.” He shifted to the side, but she was too busy trying to keep her body from shattering to find the strength to lift her head and follow his movement. “Perhaps a little extra incentive might help.”

Damien yanked up her skirt. His warm palm curled around the curve of her ass, his thumb sliding over her puckered rosebud, his touch purposeful, as if claiming that forbidden part of her was his right.

“Oh gods.” She shook beneath him.

“No celestial beings. Just me.” His touch ghosted over the sensitive spot once again. “Shall I find another hairbrush and take you here? You fucking loved it last time.”

Head hanging low, she trembled, her arms shaking. Not out of fear. Out of sheer, white-hot need. The memory of that rendezvous, when he’d introduced her to a pleasure unlike anything she’d ever imagined, was almost enough to make her climax on the spot.

Almost.

But there would be no release.

Because Damien’s thumb shifted away while the taming chain’s vibrations lessened, leaving her right on the edge.

Moaning, she arched her back and pressed her thighs together, the friction bringing the first flash of relief.

“Uh-uh.” His hands wrapped around her thighs and pulled them apart. “Legs stay spread.”

As if to drive home his command, he lodged his boot between her knees.

Scarlett whimpered, the slap of cool air only making her hotter. Near feral. Ravenous to be fucked.

Her thighs trembled with the depth of her want. Her arms quivered too, barely able to support her, the throb from clit to womb to rosebud all-consuming agony and excruciating pleasure.

“You want me to give you some relief?” His mouth brushed against her ear, and she gasped.

Lost to the heat, she hadn’t noticed him shift position, his body now curled over hers, though not quite touching.

But even the faint grazing of his lips against her skin was pure, excruciating ecstasy.

She clamped her mouth shut to keep from screaming *yes*.

He growled low, as if he knew anyway. “It wouldn’t take much. Just a single tap of my thumb against that needy, swollen nub, and you’d explode.” The tip of his nose nuzzled the whorl of her ear. “I wouldn’t stop at one either. You remember how relentless I can be.”

She did.

“How I’d work you over and over, let you leave wet streaks on my leathers while I dragged your ass up and down, and you rode my covered dick to climax after climax.”

She locked her jaw to keep from moaning aloud.

“Beg me, Omega. Beg me to stop. Or to fuck you.”

“Go. To. Hells.”

“Only if you come too.” The taming chain vibrated with greater intensity.

“Oh, Gods!” Her entire body jerked. Flashes of white stole her vision. It was hard to reconcile this male with the one who’d once been so fixated on caring for her.

“We haven’t even come close to reaching the full extent of what this taming chain can do, Omega. Nor have I played with those gorgeous tits yet, tugging on those nipples the way you like. Or fucked your pussy with my tongue.”

Panic slammed through her, along with desperation. She’d never make it. Never withstand.

She was losing herself to the sweet torment. To the heat of him so nearby. The scent of him. The sound of his deep voice. The force of his domineering will. Old and new memories collided. Long-ago and fresh needs throbbed at her core, the heat of his palm her only anchor—and her only chance at absolution.

“P-please.”

“That’s right, Omega.” His voice was a low, coaxing rasp. “Beg me not to go to the Brotherhood with all your transgressions and to keep you and your kin alive. Beg me to give you the chance that Crex never got.”

“Please.” Forget control. Forget being older and wiser. Forget victory. With Damien, there was only ever reckless, wild, foolish need.

His voice grew deeper, huskier. “Yes, little one. Tell me what I need to know, and you won’t even have to beg.”

She whimpered. That sounded so good.

“Tell me exactly how you can get me into Consortium headquarters.”

*Oh gods. Oh gods.*

“I can feel your pain.” The rasp of his cheek against her jaw pulled a whimper from her. “Give me the truth for once, and I can take it all away. I’ll make you feel so good. You know I can.”

*Images battered at her: the sweetest of memories.*

*Him teasing her, playing with her, sharing a secret. On the same team. “You getting those panties filthy wet for me, wild thing?”*

*Him so cocky and sure and full of hope. “I want Scarlett of the Consortium for my omega, and she wants me. I can’t lose.”*

*Him between her thighs. “Yes, baby. Say my name, just like that. Over and over. Until you’re screaming it.”*

*Him gazing at her with tenderness and awe. “I never want to do anything that would cause you harm.”*

*Him slapping a hand against his chest. “I can feel you here. See you here. All those vibrant colors sinking beneath my skin, staining every cell so I’ll never look at anything the same ever again.”*

*Him tucking her hair behind her ear and telling her he’d fight for her no matter what. “You should know, Scarlett, I have fought for everything I’ve ever gotten, and I have no problem fighting for you too.”*

It had all been so beautiful. So right. So filthy and wild and hot. In his arms, she’d felt as if anything were possible. As if, as long as they had each other, the galaxy was theirs.

His rough demand came once more. “Give me the truth, Scarlett.”

So she used the last shreds of her sanity to give him the only truth that really mattered to her. “I. Never. Stopped. Caring. For. You.”

An enraged howl tore from him. One so intense and dangerous that it reverberated deep in her core, a match to the darkness swirling within.

Then there was only silence, punctuated by her soft sobs.

And the terrifying certainty that her confession was the one truth he hadn’t wanted to hear.

The taming chain shut off.

Rough fingers threaded through her hair and wrenched her head up and back. “Don’t you fucking dare use that bullshit to try to soften me.”

“I…” Scarlett panted through her need. “Wasn’t.”

“Liar.” His expression hardened. “I’ll give you a little time to change your answer before I return for round three.”

His hands vanished. The heat and scent of him, too, her anchor

disappearing.

She was so lost it took her a moment to realize she'd gained a momentary respite—and that Damien was stalking from the room.

Arms giving out, the taming chain—now off—resting harmlessly against her skin, she pressed her cheek to the cool ground and did her best to remain perfectly still as the agony of need continued to surge through her.

The break was its own torment, her body an aching ball of unfulfilled yearning, her mind terrified of what was still to come. But worse was the realization that, despite this, she wanted to beg him to come back.

Because missing him was the greatest agony of all.





DAMIEN

**I** *Never. Stopped. Caring. For. You.*

Damien slammed his back against the door to the room where he'd left Scarlett, breath coming too fast as he stared at his damned hands.

Fucking shaking.

Unacceptable.

Clenching them into fists, he thanked the gods that Maddox was still out checking the traps, and Anya was safely tucked away in his shuttle, far from the Golden Dome.

*I. Never. Stopped. Caring. For. You.*

Fuck him.

Scarlett's words gutted him anew.

It was bullshit.

She'd drugged him, betrayed him, gotten his friend killed, joined herself to someone else, stolen money, and plotted with his family's worst enemy.

Where the hells was the care in that?

But her confession, combined with the heady scent and sound of her and the beauty of witnessing her swollen, wet, and arching into his touch, was seared into his brain, and he could not shake it loose.

Every cell in his body screamed at him to turn around. Drag her to her hands and knees. Give her what they both wanted. Slide his dick into that sweet pussy after waiting for so long. Rut and knot her until they both came—then do it all over again.

Fuck. Him.

This was not the taming chain's intended objective. It was meant to break

her, not enslave him.

Yet here he was, one heartbeat away from losing their battle of wills, while she'd managed to elude all his critical questions.

No one did that to the Enforcer.

Since his major screwup at the Golden Dome, he'd made it a priority to stay on guard, to avoid additional fuck ups, and to always deliver what his family needed—through whatever means necessary. He hadn't exactly been happy, but he'd been effective. Fueled by anger and rage, he'd used his fists to give as good as he got. Striking out before the universe struck back at him again.

Except... he couldn't do that with Scarlett.

He'd pretended he could.

But the truth was, he... just... couldn't.

Still, she didn't know that. And the fact that she'd resisted in the face of his hardest play yet shocked him.

Grown males like Prince Jai blubbered and broke within moments of being in his presence.

But not Scarlett.

He didn't remember her being this strong.

She'd always been a survivor, but somewhere along the way, she'd become a fighter too.

On one level, it worried him, sending wariness coiling through his gut. Because character shifts such as that didn't happen unless there was a damned good reason, and Damien had no idea what had prompted this evolution in Scarlett.

On the other hand, it frustrated the fuck out of him because not only was this new scrapper stubbornness impeding his mission, but it was also maddeningly, all-consumingly sexy as fuck.

As was everything about Scarlett.

Always had been. Always would be.

On a low curse, Damien knocked his head against the door.

Then, leaning back, he undid his laces and gave in.

He'd never get the intel he needed in his current state.

He was too worked up to do what needed to be done. Too keyed up from having her on her hands and knees, wet and needy, all silky skin and soft curves, to be any kind of interrogator.

Too close to breaking.

All he wanted was her. All he saw was her.

Shoving his hand into his pants, he tugged out his cock.

Already leaking cum, he gripped it hard. Hells, he was almost ready to go off. So damned hard; the vein pulsed along the shaft, his cock an engorged, angry purplish red.

Eyes closing, he rested his head against the door and rubbed two fingers along his shaft, the memory of those same fingers sliding through her sweet, perfect cream making his cock jerk in his palm.

Fuck, he hoped some of the mouthwatering juice from her pussy remained on his fingers, enough to coat his cock and mark it.

He was that fucking gone, that fucking desperate for some small part of her to stay with him.

Forearm flexing, Damien worked his fist faster; the image of her beautiful face and body in that room playing over and over in his mind.

He'd spent four planetary rotations fighting to forget, banishing images of her every time they intruded, and now look at him.

Because nothing compared to the carnal, vivid perfection of the real thing—the flesh-and-blood, maddening, stubborn, spirited Scarlett on her hands and knees, dress torn, hair wild, arching into his touch.

For one moment, he let himself believe she truly wanted him too. That they were as they'd once been; flawless and filthy and stupidly in love.

He came with a low groan, body shuddering as white ropes of cum spurted onto the ground.

And knew he was in trouble when, even after that, he stayed hard as granite.

Because his cock still wanted the real thing. His damned heart too.

But that had been an illusion, and he needed to remember that.

With a curse, he struck the back of his head against the door twice more in punishment.

Damien shoved off the door and then grabbed a cleaning tablet from the extra supplies they'd stacked outside the room—just as well, as Scarlett's gift had tossed the ones inside all the hells around. After breaking it open, he rubbed it onto his hands and let it seep into his skin and clothes, climbing his arms and spreading as it warmed. Twenty-five heartbeats later, he and his leathers were clean.

Not as effective as the cleaning devices on his shuttle, but still good in a pinch.

He picked up one of their extra water skins and, jaw tight, dumped its contents over the mess he'd made on the ground and kicked dirt over that. No point in traumatizing the kid more than he already was. Or in letting anyone see just how fucking weak he was when it came to this female.

Damien used what remained of the water on his hands and face to get rid of the slight sanitizer scent left behind by the cleaning tablet.

Unfortunately, nothing could wash away the need still churning inside. Or the overwhelming urge to head back into that room and pick up where he'd left off.

He paced instead, forcing himself to picture what he usually did: Crex's empty eyes and broken neck. The burns on Maddox's body. His baby sister still out there alone and scared without Skolov protection. Darvish, Kadon Stormhart, and how Scarlett had once told him she loved him before fucking him over.

But now those images warred with others.

The defiance and spirit in her stare. That look of anguish in her eyes when she noticed the fated-mate marks hadn't returned. The beauty of her responses to him, the lust she couldn't deny.

And her confessions...

*No one's ever made me feel the way you do.*

*I. Never. Stopped. Caring. For. You.*

He knew he shouldn't believe a single word out of her gorgeous lips, and yet—

A cry came from within.

Instantly alert, Damien wrenched the door open and stalked inside, claws extended and eyes searching for any threat or intruder—even as the sane part of him knew that was impossible.

As expected, all he found was Scarlett: fast asleep, curled on her side, one cuffed arm tucked beneath her head while the other stretched over her temple, the soft curve of her hip making his gut tighten, his cock twitch once more.

Fuck him.

She was clearly exhausted, her dress shredded, her hair a wild tumble, the gold and red streaked with dirt. A far cry from the perfectly put-together golden goddess in that luxury box. Thanks to him.

It should have made him feel vindicated.

It didn't.

Claws receding, he crept closer. Need warred with his last shreds of

decency. Anger with the protectiveness he couldn't obliterate no matter how hard he tried.

Then she cried out again, and his chest went tight.

It appeared she was having a bad dream, her breathing rapid, and her body trembling.

Or perhaps she was cold.

Before he could think too much about it, he hustled back to the stack of supplies in the tunnel outside and returned just as fast.

Lifting her as high as the chains would allow, he tucked one hide beneath her. She was so exhausted that she didn't even stir. After setting her down, he broke open another cleaning tablet and rubbed it on her hands. Throat tight, he watched as the cleaning foam crept up her skin, beneath the taming chain, and over what remained of her gown. When that was done, and the dirt was gone, he covered her with a second hide.

Then he forced his hands to lift away and walked fast to the door before he could do something even stupider.

Like pulling her into his lap and cradling her while she slept.

Instead, he told himself he'd use the break to get his head straight, then get down to business.

Because Zaya and his family were counting on him.

And he'd let himself be a fool for this female once before. He'd not allow it to happen again.



## SCARLETT

The heavy fall of footsteps woke Scarlett.

It took her a moment to orient herself. She lay underneath something soft, but her body was sore and not in the usual way. Instead, she was throbbing and achy.

She moved to press a hand between her thighs and drew up short, the rattle of chains bringing her fully awake.

*Right.* She was Damien's prisoner. And, somehow, despite—or maybe because of—everything that had happened, she'd fallen asleep.

Except now, her respite was over, her captor once more prowling toward her, a determined gleam in his eye.

Stifling a moan, she pushed up from the dirty floor as far as the chains at her wrists allowed and then froze.

*What was this?*

She stared down at the soft hide beneath her and the other one that had just slipped from her shoulders, a curious tug activating in the center of her chest.

Then, to make matters even more confusing, she noted that she felt almost clean; the worst of the dirt streaks were gone from her skin, and the faint scent of sanitizer lingered in the air.

She refocused on the male striding her way, trying to reconcile what he'd done with the hard expression on his face. She couldn't.

His unpredictability only made her more wary.

"You ready to talk?" Apparently, there'd be no pleasantries or warm-up.

"No."



The taming chain heated immediately. “I hoped you’d use the break to come to your senses.”

She stifled a whimper and tipped her chin. “I did, and that’s exactly why I am not talking.”

“Bad choice.” Damien advanced.

“Stay away.”

“Those tight little nipples say differently, Omega.” He stepped onto the edge of the hide and nudged her knee with his boot. “They say you want me close. Very close. And I think that smart, greedy mouth keeps opening precisely in the hopes of it being filled.”

Scarlett wanted to scream.

Mostly because he was right.

Even after her exhausted sleep, her clit still throbbed, and soon, whatever cleaning fluid had washed away most of her slick and sweat would be for naught, her folds already dampening at the sight of him looming above.

He’d washed too, and looked as beautiful as ever, his dark clothes molding to every muscle, showcasing his carved biceps and chest as well as his thick, powerful thighs.

Confused, her emotions a mess, she gazed up at him and struggled to lock down the twisted part of her that wanted him to take full advantage of their positions. To force his thumb inside her mouth. To beg him to give her a taste before shoving down those leathers and thrusting the thick head of his cock past the seam of her mouth, filling her until it struck the back of her throat, her jaw straining as her nose pressed into his pubic bone, and her lips stretched wide around the swollen knot at the base of his shaft.

Nor could she blame the taming chain for such urges.

The fault lay with the memory of how good it had once been between them; the hides he’d covered her with offering her a shred of proof that the male she once knew might actually still exist.

As if reading more than she wanted in her gaze, Damien’s nostrils flared. “You’re playing a dangerous fucking game, Scarlett.”

Didn’t she know it?

But, for some reason, her darkness wanted to come out and mingle with his own.

“You greedy for my cock, little liar?” His fingers slid through her hair. “Or is it now that you’ve had some time to rest, you’ve decided the best plan is to use your mouth to loosen me right up? Just like all the others you’ve

been with.”

As usual, he ascribed the worst motivations to her, though she got why. Didn't mean she had to like it.

She snarled up at him.

He pulled her closer to the bulge in his leathers. “Because I can promise that fucking your mouth won't change a thing about what I feel for you, but I'm willing to give it a go if you are.”

“Don't you dare!” Scarlett glared, the cuffs rubbing against her skin nothing compared to the storm inside her chest.

“I dare a lot of things these rotations, Omega.” He kept right on stroking her hair. “And as you already know, I control what happens here.”

This mix of gentle and cruel did strange and foolish things to her core.

She fought the sensation. “My gift might not work on you, but”—she bared her teeth— “these will.”

He continued petting her, his smirk returning. “That's okay. These rotations, I like a little bite.”

The cracks inside her chest widened.

Pebbles slid down the wall. The interrogation chair—still on its side—skittered across the room.

Her short sleep might not have calmed the worst of her lust, but it had helped to recharge her gift; the darkness inside her seething with greater force.

Not. Good.

Especially as his words painted a clear picture of another omega's mouth on him.

Which meant she'd changed her mind. She didn't want her mouth anywhere near the bastard.

“Come near me, and I'll do more than take a little bite,” she threatened, hoping to wipe that smirk off his face.

“Then tell me what I want to know, and this will all end.”

“You need to leave while you still can.”

His scowl deepened. “I see we'll be starting this next round of interrogation with another spanking. And not the good kind. Plus, I should warn you. This time, we're not stopping until you've told me everything I want to know. I'm done playing.”

Scarlett strained against the chains, but with nowhere to run, she could only snarl as one hand tangled in her hair and the other cupped her throat.

“Your resistance ends now.” He pushed her head down, guiding her cheek toward the smooth hide of his leathers as the taming device did its job, swelling every sensitive tissue and making her clit pulse.

She tried to resist, her neck pushing back against the force of his hold.

“That’s right, Scarlett. Fight me.” Damien taunted. “Let’s see how much you can take before you break.”

“Screw you.” But she was no match for his strength, particularly with her wrists locked in manacles.

Her body tipped forward, leaving her no choice but to steady her cheek against his thigh, her mouth a hairsbreadth from the huge, covered bulge laying hard and thick against his thigh.

His hold tightened, pinning her cheek against the cool fabric of his leathers.

The vulnerability of her position hit hard, especially when she felt the cool air against her ass and recalled that he’d already split her panties, leaving her in tattered scraps of fabric that did nothing to hinder his view.

Worse, thanks to the low vibration of the taming chain and her earlier reaction to his kindness, she was once again a sopping, needy, slick mess.

“Fuck.” The shudder that ran through him confused her more. “Look at you. Fucking glistening with slick. All the rest might have been a lie.” His thigh tensed against her cheek. “But this... you can’t pretend this away.”

The scent of leather, ice, and power filled her lungs, and she hated him—and herself—even more for the way her pussy clenched, aching for him.

Still, she had her pride. “You have no idea what’s real, and if you continue to touch me like this, you never will.”

“Does Kadon punish that smart little mouth? Because you’re about to learn exactly who you’re dealing with now—and it’s not the Damien you remember.”

The heat of the chain disappeared, and she sucked in a relieved breath, until he spoke again.

“And this time, you’ll take your punishment without the taming chain to lessen its impact.” Crouching over her, his hand glided over the chain. Then to the curve of her bottom.

The vibrations ended, but there was no relief.

The bastard really intended to spank her. And this time, it would not just be a few light taps. Worse, her body was already preparing, slick creaming her thighs.

“Such a filthy little omega. Getting all creamed up for her punishment.”

Scarlett jerked against his hold but got nowhere, her cheek still pinned to his thigh.

How could this be the same male who'd covered her with the hides? Who'd cleaned her? Her fury intensified.

“Resistance won't work. You know what it's going to take to stop this.” He pressed her face harder into his thigh. “You know what you need to do to prevent this punishment from happening.”

“Fuck. You.” The darkness inside her surged. The ground shook.

She ignored it all, shifting from the hide beneath her knees to the cuffs keeping her wrists locked to the ground, her rage continuing to escalate.

How. Dare. He.

It was one thing to hate her, but to use her need against her, to twist what had once been so beautiful into this?

Her darkness flared, and the nearby chair crumpled. The crystal walls of both cages shattered—and the entire time, her gaze remained locked on the cuffs that chained her to the filthy floor.

She'd never been able to direct her abilities so specifically before.

Usually, her gift simply erupted, harming whatever was closest to her, despite her fighting and stifling and trying her best to corral it.

But she'd never surged with this level of power before. She'd never had Damien touching her while she tried to channel it. Never been so in sync with the darkness thrumming beneath her skin, instinct whispering to her that all she needed to do was let go, and it would do as bidden.

And she'd never, ever been so certain that if Damien touched her now in vengeance and anger, there was no way she'd be able to forgive him.

“Last chance, Omega.” His hand rose, and she knew he was preparing to deliver on his threat.

Another spurt of rage and her gift erupted in a silent, incensed shriek.

But still, when the cuffs around her wrists snapped, she almost didn't believe it.

“What the fuck?” Damien's reaction convinced her it was true.

Rearing upward, triumph slamming through her, she didn't bother trying to grab for the hand in her hair. Her brother had taught her better than that.

She aimed her freed fist straight at the cock in her sightline.

Unfortunately, Damien was a trained fighter. An Alpha. And far stronger and faster.

He caught her hand easily. Then grabbed the other.

Jerking her to her feet, he loomed over her, his stare harder than she'd ever seen. "That all you've got, Omega? 'Cause it'll take a lot more than that to save you from me."

Rage and need engulfed her, punching against her ribs before erupting outward. Undirected. Ferocious. Dangerous.

A terrible rumbling sounded overhead.

Their chins jerked up together.

"Shit!" Damien moved before she'd even processed what was happening.

He shoved her backward just as a section of the ceiling caved in overhead. Right where they'd both been standing. Right where he still stood.

"No!" Scarlett screamed as rocks, dirt, and debris tumbled to the ground between them.

The cracking overhead grew louder, and more rocks fell.

The momentum of his push sent her slamming into the wall, then she tumbled onto her ass. On instinct, she curled her arms overhead to protect herself as sharp edges pinged against her skin, the deluge of falling rocks keeping her from springing up.

Coughing, she peered through the thick haze of dust and falling rock, searching for the male who'd stood there only moments before.

But there was no sign of him. "Damien!"

"Scarlett!" A hand shot out of the pile of rocks and clamped onto her ankle.

She shrieked, more from surprise than pain.

Rocks were tossed aside. Then Damien appeared, scrambling over rubble on his hands and knees. He loomed above her, his hands pressed to the wall on either side of her head, his thighs straddling hers as he curled himself around her, forming a barrier between her and the falling rocks.

A cut bled above his eyebrow. But it was the wild, savage look in his eye that had her heart pounding in her throat.

Recent memories of other angry fists and cruel retaliations juxtaposed with his image for an instant. Then disappeared just as fast.

Because Damien wasn't like the others. The concerned look in his eyes told her everything. No matter what he said, no matter what he threatened with the taming chain, she refused to believe he'd ever be a monster. He had not changed that much.

But she had.

She only had to look around to see the destruction she'd wrought. Either one of them could have been crushed when the whole ceiling gave way.

The rocks stopped falling.

"Are you hurt?" Dark, intense eyes bore into her.

Scarlett shook her head, shame making it impossible to speak.

"Answer me!" Hands clasped her jaw.

"I'm fine. But you..." Her voice hitched, her fingers trembling as they hovered over the cut above his eyebrow. "I'm sor—"

Damien dragged her to him, and before she could fully process his intentions, his mouth claimed hers.

Hungry. Intense. A demanding kiss that stole her breath.

She could not believe he was kissing her. And, even more shocking, as if he cared.

Desperate, her tongue tangled with his—and then she was on his lap, legs straddling him, writhing against him, her hands shoving beneath his shirt to touch warm, vital skin.

His body was a perfect fit against hers. Her body on fire, ravenous for every glorious taste of him.

Only to have him break away.

Scarlett whimpered, protesting his withdrawal—except then, face smeared with blood, he began kissing down her throat, beneath the delicate links of the throat chain, and across the tops of her breasts. His mouth closed around the tight bud of her nipple through the fabric covering her breast. His forceful sucks left her breathless. Her body shaking with lust.

Punishment. Caring. Degradation. Worship. She could no longer tell what this was. But she didn't care.

She wanted it all. She wanted whatever he would give.

Her head knocked against the ground as he guided her downward, his body pinning her to the dirt, his mouth never leaving her skin, sliding down her belly. Over the torn fabric, finding every patch of exposed, needy flesh.

Not asking for permission.

But she gave it anyway, her hips lifting.

All she wanted was his mouth between her thighs. His tongue on her clit.

Just like before, four planetary rotations ago, when she was good, and there was nothing but hope and endless possibilities between them, and he'd held her like she was something precious.

His stubbled jaw brushed the inside of her thigh, his breath whispering

across her slick folds, and she moaned, bucking from the sheer force of pleasure and anticipation.

And then his mouth was there, buried in her cunt. Devouring her as if he were starving. Alternating the flick of his tongue against her clit with deep plunges into her slick hole. Driving her wild. His intensity and ferocity as extraordinary as always.

She writhed against him, panting, her memories and imagined fantasies coming nowhere close to the bliss of this moment.

But it had always been that way with Damien.

Everything that had been black and white suddenly erupted into color, her body sparking back to life in a way it did only with this male.

“Oh gods, Damien.” She shuddered beneath his hold. “I-I’m going to come.” It had been so long; she was fucking desperate for it.

He growled low, his hold tightening, his tongue lapping faster. Demanding. Insisting.

It took no more than that.

Brilliant colors exploded behind her eyes, carnal, vivid crimson and violet chased by deep blue and yellow. Her hips jerked as she flew, pleasure cascading through her from head to toe, setting her free in a way she hadn’t been in four planetary rotations. Happy in a way she hadn’t been since he’d last been in the Golden Dome.

She was still soaring, her body tingling with aftershocks, when he flipped her onto her stomach. Two big hands wrapped around her hips and raised her to her knees.

Damien was going to fuck her. Now. Amidst the rubble.

She’d never wanted anything more.

Pressing her hips back, she spread her legs wide as his thick cock notched against her slit.

“They’re coming!” Loud footfalls sounded from beyond the door.

She and Damien froze.

It took a moment for the haze to clear and for her to recognize the now-familiar voice of Damien’s kid brother.

It was right about this time that Damien stiffened behind her, and it dawned on her just what they’d done —and what they’d been about to do.

Not. Good.

“Anya got an alert. They’ve tripped a wire at the far end of the tunnel. We don’t have long.” The door slid open. “Holy hells. What the fuck happened

here?”





## DAMIEN

**D**amien took his time rising, and not only because his dick was hard as granite, the hot-as-hells taste of Scarlett still lingered on his tongue and chin, and his fingers resisted loosening their grip on her thighs.

But also because, for the first time in fucking forever, he'd felt like he was exactly where he was meant to be—and wasn't that just another kick in the balls?

Scarlett, meanwhile, almost struck him in the thigh as she moved at near warp speed, scrambling forward on all fours before popping up some distance away.

The whole mess left him feeling cracked open.

So he did what any self-respecting Alpha would do.

He slammed the door shut on his feelings, told himself it was another one-off, and focused on the business at hand.

As he rose to his feet, he wiped the slick and blood from his face and smeared it across his leathers. "How far out did Anya say the intruders were?"

"They tripped the booby traps on the east side, so they're a few tunnels away at least." Maddox's tone was a mix of shock and what almost sounded like amusement as he took a cautious step inside. "This place looks like a disaster zone."

"There was an incident," Damien admitted. "But the timing's perfect. We're done here anyway."

Scarlett nodded in vigorous agreement, her movements jerky. He didn't know whether it was due to embarrassment or pain from his rough handling.

Both possibilities made his chest go tight.

“An incident?” Maddox eyed the caved-in ceiling, the piles of rocks, the shattered crystal, and the twisted cages and chair, then Scarlett. “Seems like kind of an understatement.” Then the kid’s gaze landed on the taming chain encircling Scarlett’s throat and hips, and his expression went blank.

Damien felt a flare of territorial Alpha pride at the knowledge that it had been seen and its message absorbed. His chest expanded at the sheer fucking stupid thought that she might not wear his fated-mate marks, but Scarlett was claimed nonetheless—by him. And every Alpha in the vicinity should know it.

Hells. He needed to dial that shit way back.

Thank fuck for distractions. “Did Anya get a read on how many?”

“At least fifteen”—Maddox cracked his knuckles— “and they’re definitely Consortium.”

Of course.

“Go!” Scarlett whirled to face him, finding her voice once more. “I’ll stall. You can get away.”

Damien growled low. “Not happening.”

Did she think that because he’d lost his mind and gotten her off, he’d suddenly gone soft? That he planned to be a sucker for her all over again?

His fury returned a hundredfold.

Fuck that.

Scarlett widened her stance. “You’ve seen what I can do.” She gestured toward the debris from the section of collapsed ceiling. “It’s too dangerous for me to be near you or your brother. I am *not* coming with you.”

Maddox’s gaze bounced back and forth between them, his eyes growing rounder.

Nostrils flaring, Damien drew the cuffs that connected to the taming chain from his belt. “Maddox, turn and watch the door.”

The kid turned.

Scarlett tried to run.

Less than thirty heartbeats later, he had her restrained, her wrists locked to the throat chain. He tossed her over his shoulder, the taming chain slapping against his skin as it rode up on her ribs.

Fuck him. After tasting her, he wanted to rut her more than ever.

“Put me down.” She kicked against his hold.

“No.” He barely felt it. She really was a tiny thing. But she had so much

spirit—and power—coursing through her that he sometimes forgot.

Interestingly, though, he didn't feel the surge of her gift as he usually did.

He'd seen the faint colors splash across the wall when she came on his tongue, but no shadows. Plus, despite his rough handling now, there wasn't even a tremor of the walls or a plink of a pebble. As if the force of her earlier outburst had sapped her energy and made her ability go dormant.

That this could happen with her gift was useful to know.

He had no doubt her ability would eventually return. If he knew one thing about Scarlett, it was that she'd not stay down for long.

As if to prove his point, she squirmed against him, fighting to roll off his shoulder.

“Quit it before you hurt yourself.” He gave his prisoner's pert ass the spank he'd been promising, smug satisfaction coursing through him.

Until she bucked, and her thigh slapped his cheek, reminding him of the sweet, juicy pussy he'd tasted, his cock about ready to burst from the perfection of that memory alone.

*Pull it together, idiot. She dumped your ass.*

“Settle.” He kept his voice low as he communicated his message just to her. “Or I'll turn on the taming chain and leave it humming until you're squirming against my shoulder and begging me to let you rub against my thigh to get even the slightest relief. Then I'll toss you to the dirt, spread those legs wide, and tongue-fuck you over and over.”

He chose this threat because, unlike him, he suspected she had no interest in a repeat.

As predicted, she stopped fidgeting.

Good. This was not the time for complicated. He needed to keep things simple and focus on the mission. “Maddox, tell Anya to stay put and keep monitoring.”

“She hears you and is on it.” Back still turned to him and taser leveled at the door, the kid nodded. “In the meantime, we'll kick some overgrown Consortium ass.”

“Wrong.”

“What?” Maddox spun to face him with a scowl.

“I've got another plan in mind.” Despite admiring his younger brother's can-do attitude, for once, Damien knew a brawl wasn't the solution, satisfying as it might be.

Also, his sister's cooperation had come a little too easily, but that was a

worry for another moment.

First things first, salvage the situation.

And Scarlett was right: Damien didn't want her around the kid too much until he understood her new gift better.

"I need you to grab the healing gel from the med kit. Then I want you to go on a little field trip." He dug in his pocket and pulled out the trackers he'd taken from Scarlett, who, fortunately, was still obeying his dictate to remain quiet.

After turning the trackers back on, he tossed them to the kid. "Take these and run the search party around on a nice chase through the tunnels. Then dump the trackers in a flowing water source and let them chase that for a while." He leveled his brother with his most terrifying Enforcer stare. "Above all, do not get caught."

Maddox just smiled. "And you?"

"I'll take the omega and head to Consortium headquarters. Hopefully, for a family reunion."

Scarlett squirmed in his hold before remembering his threat and stilling once again.

Damien returned his focus to Maddox. "Until we're back together, I want you to wear one of Maxheim's cloaks at all times."

They'd already established a second meeting place, but he wasn't stupid enough to mention it aloud. He might be idiotic enough to tongue fuck his captive, but that didn't mean he was dumb enough to trust her.

"Yes! Didn't get to turn it on before at the coliseum. Can't wait to take it for a test drive now." Maddox started pawing through the mess around them.

Thankfully, Scarlett's cave-in had been on the opposite side of the room, leaving a bunch of their supplies scattered around the place but still intact.

It took the kid only a few heartbeats to locate the dry bags he needed and shake off the excess dirt and pebbles. He grabbed the less dirty cloak and tossed the other Damien's way. "Maxheim's toys are next-level nebular."

"Yup." Damien was only twenty-two planetary rotations. Why the fuck did he suddenly feel old?

"Let's make sure it works right after the last scuffle." The kid tossed it over his head, yanked down the hood, tugged a small flap at the inside sleeve, and backed up against the nearest wall.

A heartbeat later, his shape was almost impossible to discern, his body blurring until it was difficult to distinguish him from the shadows and dirt

behind. Just as good, while the cloak made its wearer virtually invisible, it was still possible to see everything going on while underneath the fabric.

Scarlett twisted her upper body to stare at where Maddox had stood. “How is that possible?”

Since she wasn’t fighting him or demanding to be put down, he let her question slide. Plus, who wouldn’t have questions? The cloaks were incredible.

“My brother Maxheim made it.” Damien put her back on her feet so she could get a better look at it. “He’s a damned genius.” He was well aware of the pride in his voice.

At one time, he’d told Scarlett all about his family, excited for her to meet each of them. He’d been certain they’d love her too.

Clearly, he was not the visionary Maxheim was.

“Here.” Maddox eventually shoved the requested tube of salve in front of his face.

Damien took it with a grunt and smeared a respectable amount on his cut. Then, gaze not on the kid, he did the same with every cut and scrape he found on Scarlett’s skin.

Mindful of the kid’s stare and her stiff state, he was efficient as hell. He definitely didn’t linger over the softness of her skin as he applied the healing balm. Or consider how his lungs were working overtime thanks to the taming chain, their recent activities, and the scent of slick that kept sending messages to his dick that she was primed to be fucked and rutted.

So, after applying the gel, he broke out another cleaning capsule and used it on them both.

The entire process seemed to take way too long, yet not nearly long enough, but he got it done without fucking her, so he’d call it a success.

“Time to go.” He’d mapped out the usable tunnel passageways the last time he was in the Golden Dome, then given himself and Maddox a refresher on this return trip.

He grabbed his go-bag, which was also intact and covered in debris, and then, despite her effort to evade him, hefted the omega back on his shoulder, immediately regretting it when her thigh brushed his cheek.

“Damien, please.” Scarlett thrashed in his hold with renewed vigor. “You don’t know what you’re getting into. They’ll catch you. Don’t do this.”

“Such vehemence. I might almost think you cared.” Except she’d drugged and dumped him and chosen to work with his greatest enemy.

She sighed. "I don't remember you being this stubborn."

"I don't remember you being this mouthy."

She dug her knee into his chest.

He tugged on the taming chain, then slapped her ass. And wanted to do it again, or at least keep his hand right where it was and squeeze.

Instead, he called out to Maddox, "One more thing, kid." He cleared his throat. "Before you go, toss a couple of my extra shirts this way." Each time he caught sight of that taming chain, it made him harder. And each time he saw her bare skin, all he wanted to do was lick it.

But he was done playing around. Done with distractions too.

He'd figure out how to eradicate her from his system as soon as he had the time. Right now, he needed to think like the predator he was. "And tear me off a strip from the bottom of one. I need to make a gag."





## SCARLETT

**W**ith each step Damien took, Scarlett's fury ratcheted up a notch.

It didn't help that she was slung over his shoulder like cargo. Or that he'd stuffed her into one of his shirts, so his mouthwatering scent clung to every breath she took. Or that she had a gag in her mouth and her wrists secured to her throat, so all she could do was swing against his back, blood rushing to her head with every bounce and jostle.

Though better to have her head swollen and throbbing than her foolish, betraying clit.

She knew better than to spread her legs for Damien.

But, apparently, knowing better didn't seem to do her any good when he stared at her with that raw, hungry look.

She was a fool.

Damien ducked as they reached a lower tunnel section. White dots flashed in front of her eyes, muddying her vision.

They'd walked for a while now, the dim glow from the crystals embedded in the ceiling and walls lighting their way, and she'd been trying to follow the route in case she got an opportunity to escape.

She'd heard voices here and there, filtering through the grates from above. Cheers at one point, indicating they were below the stadium. Smells at other times suggested they were passing below eating areas and that sometime since she'd been taken, the suns had risen, and the morning meal was being consumed. But after twisting and turning down tunnels for so long, truth be told, she was beyond lost, with no clue which specific part of the Golden Dome they traveled beneath.

Damien, however, didn't seem at all confused. Per usual, he powered ahead, moving with irritating confidence and grace, securing her to him with one hand pressed to the spot where her thigh met her ass as if it was his right. She wanted to scream.

But she couldn't because he'd shoved a gag in her mouth.

So instead, she let her gaze drift to the cuffs magnetized to the taming chain. The entire time he'd carried her, she'd been trying to focus her gift to see if she could work the same miracle she had on the manacles earlier. No luck.

They came to the end of the lower ceiling, and he shot up again to his full height, taking her along for the ride. White dots danced in front of her eyes again, and this time, her stomach lurched.

She fought the urge to throw up.

"Scarlett?" As if attuned to her, Damien stilled.

In the next heartbeat, her world turned upside down once more.

She was on her feet—she felt the ground beneath her slippers—but everything else tilted on its axis.

"Whoa." Strong hands steadied her. "Give it a moment."

He removed the gag from her mouth.

Wriggling her jaw, she tried to wrestle out of his hold. She didn't need him pretending to look out for her. Especially not when he was the reason she was in this state.

"Settle." He tightened his grip, keeping her right where he wanted her.

She glared up at him. Or at least tried to. Even tipping her chin made those damned white dots return.

"When was the last time you ate?"

Scarlett blinked. Not the question she'd expected.

His scowl deepened. "Answer me."

"I-I don't remember." She'd been entertaining the elites before Damien showed up, and an omega didn't eat at such things; she served others, sparkled, and flitted around, ensuring the needs of every Alpha in attendance were satisfied. Prior to that, there'd been arrangements to make for the tournament, time spent with the omega prizes, and the fitful sleep that had claimed her after following Darvish's orders.

She shook her head, trying to clear it. "I'm not sure."

"Think harder."

Her mouth was so dry it took her a moment to get her tongue working,

but she hoped she sounded suitably disdainful when she finally answered. “I don’t recall being fed anything while imprisoned in your little welcome cell.”

His sigh was long and low. As if it were her fault that he had to deal with this. “No wonder you look pale as hells.”

Great for an omega’s ego.

“You”—his hand landed at her collarbone, gently pinning her to the wall behind while his other hand rummaged in the pocket of his cloak— “stay right there.”

Her glare deepened.

She hated how easily he pushed her around. Except, a traitorous voice whispered, she hadn’t hated it so much when he’d done it while fucking her with his tongue.

Hells. She wasn’t meant to be thinking of that.

“Eat.” Something dark that scented of chalk loomed in front of her face.

She sniffed it distrustfully.

The chalky square pressed up against her lips. “You’ll eat this now, Scarlett, or I’ll turn on that taming chain and work you up until you’re moaning and begging me to put anything I want in that stubborn mouth of yours, and I will. I’ll feed you my cock. After I ensure you eat every last bite of this energy bar.”

She snarled at him. “So quick to hurl your threats. I was just trying to figure out what it was.”

“Well, now you know. It’s a ration bar, and you’re about to stop wasting my time and eat it.”

Had he always been such an Alphahole? Probably. But he’d liked her before, so he’d directed it at others. It was a lot less pleasant to have the full force of his personality now aimed at her.

However, she was no longer some cowed little prize. “Yes, thank you. Now that I know, I’d frankly like to eat it. After all, without energy, how can I eventually kick your ass and get away from you?”

She’d hoped to piss him off. She hadn’t expected a flash of amusement. It knocked her off balance, reminding her too much of the old Damien, but she recovered fast.

“What I’d like to know, oh great Enforcer, is how you expect me to eat it with no hands?” She wiggled her fingers, still latched to her throat, and raised an eyebrow.

“Watch the smart mouth.” Amusement successfully removed; he glowered down at her. “You don’t need your hands. You’ve got me.”

Scarlett opened her mouth to protest.

“Not up for debate.” He shoved the end of the bar in her mouth, giving her no choice but to bite down or gag.

Imagining it was something altogether different, she chomped down, and saw another flash of the playful amusement that had made her fall for Damien in the first place. He knew exactly what she was thinking of biting, and found it funny.

Cursing herself, cursing him, she chewed slowly. The chalky taste was as unappealing as she’d imagined, but the instant energy boost when she swallowed was wonderful.

She opened her mouth for more.

“Good girl.”

Her clit reawakened and throbbed, every cell suddenly tingling to attention as her gaze locked with his.

Damien slid the bar between her lips.

She pressed her thighs together; afraid she might combust on the spot.

*Why, why, why?* She needed to be strong. To keep her emotions from becoming any more erratic than they already were, but with Damien around, that was proving near impossible. Next time, she doubted it would just be a portion of the ceiling that came down.

With that thought at the front of her mind, she took another bite. Then another. Careful to keep her gaze from his. Until the whole bar was gone, as were the white dots in front of her eyes.

“Now this.” He pressed a small skin to her lips, and her nostrils flared as the scent of fresh water hit. “It’s not *rالي*. Don’t worry.”

He remembered. He’d been the only one ever to realize she didn’t like the energy drink favored by most fighters.

The tightness in her chest returned.

Mouth closing around the funneled edge of the waterskin, she sucked hard, trying not to ignore how the surrounding air grew charged, Damien’s grip white knuckling as he stared at her lips.

She drank heartily, a few droplets escaping down her chin and onto the oversized shirt she currently wore over the scraps of her clothes and the taming chain.

“That’s enough.” He lifted the skin away, his dark eyes tracking a single

drop as it rolled down the column of her throat.

Scarlett swallowed hard. She could only imagine what she must look like, hair wild, face bare of adornments, drowning in a male's shapeless shirt. "Guess I'm not so perfect or golden now."

She thought she'd offered him an easy strike.

But he surprised her, his eyes streaking red as he swiped the pad of his thumb across her lower lip. "Honestly?" His voice was a deep rumble she felt to her toes. "I didn't think it was possible, but you've grown even more beautiful."

Her stupid heart skipped a beat. "Damien—"

A crash overhead cut off whatever else she might have said.

Gaze shooting upward, she caught sight of a nearby grate. "What—"

He clamped a hand over her mouth. "Quiet."

Emotions swinging in the other direction, she glared his way, unhappy with his return to bossy.

Another crash.

Then screams, voices high and shrieking.

"No, I don't want to go."

"This is a mistake."

"Let me go!"

Scarlett's stomach pitched.

She knew those voices.

Her fingernails clawed at Damien's hand.

He pressed his palm harder into her skin. "They can't help you, so don't even try."

Did he think she wanted to escape? She shook her head but got nowhere.

"You'll do as you're told, prizes," a harsh voice barked out above. "Or it won't go so well for you when you arrive. Troublemaking whores never last long in the outer-rim brothels."

More cries greeted his words.

Scarlett's breath turned to sharp, painful pants.

Ebony. Amber.

She might have left the position of prize behind, but she well remembered the powerlessness, the horror of anticipating her upcoming fate.

And now it was happening to her friends. They and the other prizes were being transported to the cargo hold for processing off-planet.

She'd gone missing, and Darvish was making good on his threats.

Oh Goddess, everything she'd done, everything she'd sacrificed, was unraveling.

She'd skirted the edge of disaster for a while, the ground beneath her feet far from steady, but appeasement had worked. Kind of.

Darvish had long ago sent Rose away as a lesson to Scarlett on the consequences of not following his demands, but she'd managed to keep her other two friends, and everyone else she loved, protected—until now.

More screams, more shuffling, and then, worst of all, silence.

Scarlett was shaking by the time Damien lifted his hand away, his expression angry again. "If you try that again—"

"We have to go after them."

"Right." He scoffed as if she'd attempted a bad joke. "You want me to expose myself and risk capture while returning you to the very guards searching for you. How stupid do you think I am?"

"I mean it, Damien." She spoke fast, desperate to make him understand. "I-I'll do whatever you want. But those are omega prizes, my friends, and Darvish is following through on a threat he made by sending them away. He knows I've been taken, and I don't know if this is simple retaliation or the beginning of his efforts to tie up loose ends, but he's having them shipped out of the Golden Dome to the brothels. We can't let that happen."

Damien studied her, and for an instant, heart slamming against her ribs, she had hope.

His features hardened. "You are unbelievable. Do you honestly expect me to give up my mission and help you, especially when all you've done is lie? Do you really expect me to believe in this sudden altruism of yours after what you did to me and Crex?"

Her head jerked back as if he'd slapped her, but, leashing her guilt, she focused on the matter at hand. "I don't care what you believe. If you won't help, let me go after them."

"No."

The extent of her helplessness—so familiar, so enraging—left her trembling, the darkness inside swirling back to wakefulness with a vengeance.

Scarlett strived for calm. "Damien, please."

"I do like it when you beg." He kept her pinned in place. "I'm curious to know, too, how you plan to stop them."

What *would* she do? "I-I'll talk to them. I'll say that Darvish rescinded

the order. They know me. They'll believe me."

Damien's expression grew uglier. "I bet they *know* you."

Hells. It had been the wrong thing to say, but she wasn't thinking clearly. Those were her friends, and she'd promised to keep them safe.

"No, what I mean is—"

"I think you said exactly what you mean, lying, faithless omega."

She barely maintained her cool. "If you refuse to help, I'm not sure I can ever forgive you."

He froze as a flash of shock, then pain, then white-hot rage flashed through his eyes.

"*You forgive me?*" He grabbed her by the taming chain at her hips and yanked her forward and up until she barely stood on her tiptoes. "I don't want or need your forgiveness. Because I already know I will *never* forgive or forget what you did."

He shoved her backward, sending her stumbling, though she managed to remain upright.

Pain washed through her. Followed by bleak resignation. And sheer, primal fury.

That was it. She was done.

She understood his hatred. Even accepted why his taming chain sat around her hips. He might be a little younger than her, but he was an Alpha and had his pride. She'd hurt him. Maybe even decimated him for a time.

But she'd told him the truth. She'd never stopped caring about Damien. Not one rotation. Not once through everything Darvish inflicted on her. Not even since he returned, imprisoned her, spanked her, locked her in his taming chain, and gagged her.

She'd always believed Damien was different from the other Alphas who came to the Golden Done. He'd been her champion. Even more upset than her by the way they treated her as a Consortium prize.

Turned out, four planetary rotations later, he'd grown as indifferent to the plight of the omega prizes as any other Alpha. Or maybe he'd always been as selfish and hard as all the rest, and she'd just been dazzled by his good looks and incredible tongue.

No more.

Her rage crested higher until it finally outweighed her guilt. It surpassed even the protective bubble she'd built around Damien and the memories of what they'd once shared. Slammed past the love she'd once felt for him and

shattered the tenderness she'd guarded so carefully this entire time.

She felt the rip to her soul.

"You hear me, Omega?" Arms crossed over his chest, Damien glared at her; no clue he'd just lost something he'd never cared about in the first place.

But she did. And it hurt.

"Understood." She righted herself and stood tall. She'd survive this and find another way to save her friends. All of them. She refused to give up. "Thank you for the lesson."

Damien's eyes narrowed. "Just what are you thanking me for, Omega?"

"For the reminder that the past is in the past. I guess a small part of me was holding on to the memory of what was, but"—her voice shook, but she pushed on—"I see that's gone now. For both of us. You were once my home, my shelter, my future. You were once someone who mattered to me." She fired out the words: "Not anymore."

Damien rocked back as if struck.

But he recovered fast. "Exactly. I'm just your captor—and you're nothing to me but a means to an end." He shoved the gag back in her mouth and, ducking low, threw her over his shoulder.

His hand clamped once more against her thigh, and this time, she was so numb, she barely felt it resting there.





DAMIEN

**S** *he wouldn't forgive him? Un-fucking-believable.*

Jaw tight, Damien marched along the tunnel, gaze shifting left and right, on alert for any ambushes.

They were halfway to Consortium headquarters, and he expected to encounter some kind of patrol or activity soon.

Too bad he couldn't engage unless absolutely necessary, as he was definitely in the mood to rip something apart.

*You were once my home, my shelter, my future. You were once someone who mattered to me. Not anymore.*

Blatant manipulation. Utter bullshit.

He'd fallen for her words of affection once, taken drugged water from her, and gotten his friend killed. He'd tongue fucked her in the middle of a mission because she'd seemed worried about a little blood over his eye.

He wasn't about to make another mistake like that.

Nor risk exposure.

He needed to focus on one thing: getting to Darvish so he could save Zaya.

Nothing was more important than that.

So why was there a tightness in his chest that hadn't been there before? Why did it bother him that she hadn't struggled or squirmed or kicked since he'd started moving again, her withdrawal a physical absence pressing against his ribs?

*Stupid.*

All he'd lost was the fantasy of a female and a love that hadn't been real

in the first place, and he'd come to grips with that long ago.

Plus, having a compliant prisoner was far easier than carting around a pain-in-the-ass wild thing who argued and lied at every turn.

He should be pleased that all the back-and-forth bullshit between them was finally settled.

No more temptation. No more confusion. His shit together once more.

He'd already decided to let his brothers know about the Golden Dome shuttle containing the prizes the moment he had a comms at his disposal. He knew Dahlia, Tess, Keira, and Anya would be pissed if he didn't. All four were actively involved in resettling the omegas he and his brothers had rescued while in pursuit of Darvish, and they'd do the same with those poor prizes. It didn't matter to Damien that they were tainted by an alleged friendship with Scarlett. The females he'd heard screaming to be free would never see the inside of an outer-rim brothel, not if he had any say in it.

But his immediate focus was the mission.

Only a few more turns, and they'd be in front of Consortium headquarters.

He was ready.

For Zaya. For his family.

The sound of boot falls echoed along the tunnel.

Scarlett stiffened and then struggled in earnest.

"Don't get your hopes up." Damien hustled a little faster toward the oncoming footsteps, his shoulders brushing the walls before the passage opened into a wider section.

He'd not only reacquainted himself with the flow of the tunnels but also with a few of the more useful hiding spots—and while Maxheim's cloak would do in a pinch, he preferred a space where he wouldn't have to worry about his captive's wiggling undercutting the cloak's abilities and spoiling his plans.

Damien crouched and wrapped the fingers of his free hand through the old stone bars to slide aside a grate between the ground and the wall, widening it just enough for his shoulders to fit through what had once been a dumping point into the old city sewers below.

"We'll go one at a time." He tossed his go-bag in first.

Scarlett shook her head.

He put her down anyway. Then forced her to her knees. "These sewers dried up long ago." After lowering himself halfway into the space, boots first,

he caught her by the taming chain at her hips—she'd been in the process of trying to crawl away—and reeled her back to him.

She growled.

Damien suppressed a smile. While he might be furious at her earlier words, some fucked-up part of him would still take her anger over indifference any rotation.

He tugged harder, and the shirt he'd put her in rode up her thighs, gifting him with a flash of her perfect ass and making his dick go hard.

So much for no more temptation. No more confusion.

They dropped together, his feet hitting the ground, his arm wrapped around her, her back pressed to his chest. He pretended not to notice how his need to protect her was as instinctive as breathing.

Or the way she held herself stiffly—as if touching him revolted her.

The old sewer wasn't deep, leaving him with a clear sight line of the tunnel above. Nor was it roomy; his knees bent, his body curled around hers to fit into the space.

With one hand still holding her securely, he slid the grate back over the opening.

Just in time.

He slapped his hand over her mouth. Even with the gag, it paid to be careful.

“This way.” The shout rang down the tunnel.

Damien's fangs punched through his gums before he could stop them, every muscle tensing to attack.

Scarlett stilled as well.

He recognized this new voice.

His claws pushed against his nail beds, the bitter taste of jealousy and hate burning at the back of his throat.

Fucking Kadon Stormhart.

The shit who'd delivered the final punch in the tournament and knocked him out—taking not only Damien's pride but also the money and, most significantly, Scarlett.

Of course the bastard was on the hunt to reclaim his golden-girl prime omega.

Damien pulled Scarlett tighter against him and imagined giving Stormhart the same treatment he'd given Prince Jai.

“I want every inch of this tunnel system searched.” Kadon's orders rang

out.

A nervous voice piped up: “But the trackers indicate—”

“Could be a distraction.” Kadon dismissed the other male. “Plus, I’ve assigned another team to follow those signals. Just do your fucking job.”

“Yes, Alpha Lord, apologies.”

Damien wasn’t sure of the full count, but at least thirty pairs of boots rushed past.

“Quiet!” Kadon’s voice rang out again.

Silence fell, making it easy to discern another set of footsteps approaching.

“Who the hell’s is that?” Kadon growled. “I told the other team to tackle the northern tunnels.”

The hum of lasers firing up filled the air, indicating that these arrivals were armed with more than just basic tasers.

Damien knew it couldn’t be Maddox.

The power inside Scarlett seethed, apparently recharged enough to cause trouble at the worst possible moment. It sent those damned pulses straight to his dick and shot splashes of black along the wall, and all Damien could do was hope that her gift wasn’t strong enough yet to trigger another collapse.

“Stand down.” A new voice echoed through the tunnel. “I’m here for the same reason you are.”

Though he couldn’t see him, Damien recognized the new speaker too.

He’d never forget that deep voice, especially since he could still hear the male it belonged to saying he preferred Stormhart to win the tournament.

The new arrival was none other than Luc, Scarlett’s brother.

Realizing who it was, Scarlett went feral in his arms, trying to get to her brother.

*Fuck. That.*

Damien held tight, her heel kicks against his shins barely noticeable.

“Stop.” He kept his voice low. “You’ll hurt yourself.”

She struggled harder.

“Don’t.” He whispered the word against her ear. “If they come for you, at least one of them dies, just like Prince Jai.”

She stiffened, then the fight went out of her, her body going lax against his.

He couldn’t dredge up even a sliver of guilt. No one was taking her from him.

He shifted to get a better view from his small lookout.

Stormhart stood at one end of the tunnel, Luc at the other.

“Lasers off now,” Stormhart shouted at the guards.

Luc, who’d come from the south tunnels alone, appeared to have been in a scuffle. Blood dripped from a cut near his lip, and there were slash marks across his chest.

Meanwhile, Golden Boy Stormhart looked as put-together as ever, with at least thirty guards in tow, all wearing the shiny, golden uniforms of the Golden Dome’s official security force. The difference in status between the two males was stark.

For a moment, neither Alpha spoke.

Even more interesting, Scarlett tensed in his arms, as if waiting for something. But what?

Tension laced the air.

“Y-you’re alone.” Stormhart’s shocked whisper broke the silence. “Where are the others? What happened to you?”

“I’m fine. A minor disagreement.” Brushing off his injuries, the other Alpha flicked his gaze to the Consortium guards before returning his attention to Stormhart. “I... we decided I’d move faster on my own. It’s Scarlett I’m worried about. What the fuck happened? You were meant to be watching her.”

“I was”—Stormhart’s hands fisted by his sides— “as much as I could. As much as she’d let me.”

“Don’t give me your bullshit excuses.” Luc’s anger was palpable as he stomped closer.

“Fuck you.” Stormhart’s nostrils flared. “I’m trying to explain.”

Holy shit. Damien braced himself. Were these two fuckers about to come to blows?

Scarlett squirmed in his hold.

He tucked her tighter against his chest.

The two snarling Alphas took a final step toward each other. Both were huge and well-trained, Luc slightly bulkier, Stormhart taller.

They looked a heartbeat away from lunging at each other.

“You lot, continue down the corridor.” Stormhart’s gaze never wavered from Luc, even as he issued his barked command to his guards. “I’ll catch up.”

His troops knew better than to argue. In no time at all, the two males were

the only ones left in the tunnel.

Scarlett's breathing picked up.

Stormhart broke the silence, his hand rising toward the cut on Luc's lip. "You shouldn't be here. Are you hur—"

"I'm fine." The other Alpha batted his palm aside. "I don't want to get into it. Focus on Scarlett. She's all that matters."

Stormhart reeled as if he'd taken a hit but recovered fast. "It was Damien."

"What?" Luc's confusion was priceless.

"Damien Skolov." Kadon's scowl deepened. "He took your sister."

"No."

"Yes. I saw him with my own eyes." A hesitation. "Along with Scarlett rubbing herself all over him while he gripped her ass and bounced her on his cock. If not for her flimsy dress and his leathers, she'd probably already be breeding—that's how hard they were going at it."

Luc growled low. "That's more information than I needed."

Damien could almost taste Scarlett's embarrassment on his tongue.

Not him. He wanted to pound his chest.

*That's right, pretty boy. It was me, not you, she was writhing against and getting slick for. Me.*

"Why didn't you stop him?" Luc was agitated again.

"I couldn't. Someone sucker tased me from behind before I could get to them." Stormhart blew out a breath. "Plus, your sister was worked up herself, those shadows of hers everywhere."

"Fuck." Luc eyed the other male. "But you came through it okay?"

Scarlett shifted in his arms, her body tensing as if she feared Stormhart's answer.

"Yeah. Because that's what I do, right? I survive, whatever it takes." Stormhart sounded bitter. "Look, the only reason I told you the details about your sister is so you'd stop worrying. Damien Skolov won't hurt her. He's still head over heels for her."

Now it was Damien's turn to squirm.

"You think?" Relief tinged Luc's voice.

"I know flat-out crazy possessive and protective, obsessed, and in love when I see it." Stormhart nodded with assurance.

Heat climbed Damien's neck as he mentally willed the talkative bastard to shut the hells up.

“Damien Skolov’s still totally gone for her.” Stormhart kept right on speaking. “There’s no chance he’ll harm a hair on her head. Worst kind of intense feeling she’ll experience at his hands is the kind that hurts so good. He’s probably rutting her right now. So at least she’s getting well fucked before we all end up being fucked over.”

Damien lurched forward, and this time, it was Scarlett who got in his way, throwing more of her weight against him.

*That fucker.*

If an omega he was responsible for was in another Alpha’s custody, Damien would be losing his mind. Not talking shit about her getting rutted and knotted by this other Alpha as if it were no big deal.

He was going to rip Stormhart apart—and then do it again.

“Don’t talk about my sister like that.” Equally aggravated, Luc spun away.

Kadon grabbed his elbow. “Wait.”

“Get the fuck off me.”

Stormhart’s hands shot into the air, palms facing out. “I’m just trying to keep you from worrying. Or doing something even more rash than deciding to set out on your own.”

“I had to ditch the guards. They were holding me back.”

“What you need to do is return to the training center before this all blows up in our faces.”

“It’s too late for going back.” Luc plowed a hand through his hair. “Scarlett’s abduction changes everything.” He paused, and when he spoke again, his voice was tinged with what almost sounded like guilt. “It wasn’t working anyway. Not for any of us, and you know it.”

After a long silence, Stormhart’s shoulders slumped. “You’re right. Maybe it’s for the best she’s been taken.” He swallowed hard, as if unwilling to say what came next. “She was on her way to see Darvish when Damien got to her.”

“What?” Luc’s frown deepened. “But it wasn’t the usual time. And I wasn’t summoned.”

“Exactly.”

Damien’s ears pricked up while Scarlett tensed.

He was missing something here, but at least he had confirmation that Stormhart and Scarlett’s brother were involved in this mess. Yet another reason to personally fuck them up when the time was right.



“She seemed eager to go,” Stormhart continued.

The color drained from Luc’s face. “Why? Do you think...? No. She wouldn’t do that.”

“Calm down.”

“Fuck calm. I never should have done as you guys asked. She’ll get hurt. Darvish is going to be pissed, and everything will have been for nothing. This won’t end well.”

The tightness in Damien’s chest dropped to his gut. Something wasn’t right.

Stormhart stepped closer to Luc. “We can still turn this around.”

Scarlett’s brother shoved him back. “Bullshit. I need to find her. I’m done asking her to pay for others’ mistakes.”

What in the hells?

Damien had been so sure Scarlett’s life had gone as she wanted. That she’d used her beauty and false innocence to secure a prime omega contract with a golden boy Brotherhood Alpha whose bloodline and fortune propelled her above her prize status.

He’d assumed too, given what he knew, that she and Darvish had some kind of mutually beneficial interaction going on, two users taking what they could.

But what if he was wrong?

The sick feeling in his stomach grew.

“You can’t just go off half-cocked.” Stormhart sounded even more worked up than before. “You need to be smart.”

“I’ll worry about it once I know Scarlett’s safe.”

As if reading Damien’s thoughts, Luc let out a long sigh. “This is so fucked.”

“Skolov will keep her safe.” Stormhart took a step closer to Luc. “It’s you I’m worried—”

“Alpha Lord, we’ve found something.” A Consortium guard popped into view. “There’s clear evidence of tampering in the cargo bay’s main docking area, as if someone’s tried to leave without permission.”

Stormhart and Luc exchanged a look.

“We’ve been ordered to investigate,” the male finished.

Damien’s scowl deepened. He hadn’t tampered with anything, and Maddox was in the northern tunnels, so it couldn’t be him. So, if it wasn’t either of them, who in the hells...?

*Oh, fuck him.*

When he found Anya, he was going to paddle her ass. Then take away her eye-scan access to his damned shuttle.

Then give her a huge hug.

That female took far too many risks, but she was probably the biggest badass of them all, and she'd come through yet again.

So clever to think of the cargo bays. Darvish would be too paranoid not to investigate.

Five heartbeats later, the success of Anya's plan was clear.

The tunnel was empty, leaving Damien's path to Consortium headquarters clear.

He leaned down to whisper in Scarlett's ear, "Your family is confusing and fucked up."

Gag in place, wrists magnetized to the collar at her throat, she simply tilted her head and stared up at him, and his gut clenched at the detachment—and emptiness—there.

He'd thought he wanted that. But no. He fucking hated it even more than he'd thought he hated her.

"Mine can be too." He didn't know what to do with the mess swirling inside him, but he did know he wouldn't stop until he got to the bottom of whatever was going on with Scarlett.

He could *not* afford to screw up again or trust this female without question. But he had a strong suspicion that breaking into Consortium headquarters was the first step toward finding *all* the answers he needed—not only to his sister's whereabouts, but also to Scarlett's situation.

The past might be the past, but it seemed he wasn't nearly as finished with it—or Scarlett—as he'd once thought.

"Let's do this." He slid the grate above them aside. "Forgiven or not, you and I have a reckoning coming."



## SCARLETT

“**R**eports of another one in this direction!” A flustered guard ran by; laser gripped tight. “Hurry.” Two more sprinted past right after.

Scarlett didn’t bother struggling or shouting. The gag made it impossible to be heard, particularly above all the chaos.

Moreover, Damien’s cloak provided excellent camouflage, concealing even his massive bulk, effectively blending them with the headquarters’ outer wall.

And finally, struggling only made it more likely that Damien would smack her ass—a scenario her stupid body liked more than it should, especially now that she’d decided she was done feeling anything for him.

“One more to go, Omega.” Damien’s deep voice pulled her from her thoughts, her stomach dropping as he crouched low. Her hair brushed the ground as he set another of his so-called “toys” in place.

Five heartbeats later, they were out of range as his distraction detonated.

She’d caught a glimpse of one; they looked like mini electron bombs, small enough to fit in a pocket or tuck into one of the cracked outer tiles of the headquarters building, but they packed a powerful punch. In addition to those, he was, thanks to his supply pack, armed with a laser and goddess knows what else attached to the holster at his hips.

Clearly, he wasn’t a newbie to this whole breaking-and-entering thing.

Still, it was all going a little too well.

Which left her with the growing suspicion that this was a trap, that Darvish had already vacated the building and hoped to draw his attacker—and her—to his waiting guards. Fortunately, her employer hadn’t anticipated

the extent of Damien's firepower or a miracle cloak that allowed him to slip through any trap.

More guards streamed past, and this time, her wily captor waited until they'd gone, then... just like that, walked through the front entrance of the most heavily guarded building in the Golden Dome.

Darvish would be furious.

And Damien would have been surprised to discover she was okay with that.

Trap or not, she wanted inside Consortium headquarters and Darvish's private room as badly as her captor.

Yes, it was a change in strategy, but a necessary one.

Encountering Kadon and her brother had been hard, but it had also been a gift.

Scarlett hadn't been allowed near Luc without his guards in four planetary rotations. So when she'd first heard his voice, she wanted nothing more than to run to him and hug him tight. Hold him close and breathe in his familiar, comforting big-brother scent.

Then rational thought had kicked in, and she'd realized Luc was now free of his guards and better off with Kadon and away from her.

Until that moment of clarity, she'd held on to the idea that escaping Damien and trying to salvage her old life as Darvish's little pet was still the best plan.

But the truth was, Luc was right. Damien's arrival and her abduction had changed everything.

Her employer Darvish was already following through on his threats.

Ebony and Amber were involuntarily on their way out of the Golden Dome.

Luc was momentarily free of his captors.

Kadon's outbursts indicated he was spiraling.

She needed to form a new plan—and fast.

As far as she could see, there were only two ways to salvage this situation.

One, find the vids Darvish had used to blackmail her and destroy them: a long shot since her employer likely had copies on him wherever he was.

Two, and more feasible, find something useful to draw him out—then revive her ultimate plan: use her gift to rid the galaxy of Darvish so both he and those incriminating vids would be gone forever. The growing darkness

inside her was confirmation that she'd be doing everyone a favor by taking out two monsters, Darvish and herself, in the process. It would free her brother to truly escape as well.

The only snag? Enacting her new plan entailed taking Damien up to Darvish's private room, which meant going against every instinct shrieking inside her to keep him away from the ugliness connected with Darvish and that place.

Given Damien's refusal to help her omega friends and the ease with which he'd threatened her brother, she should be done protecting Damien from what he'd discover.

She wasn't.

Truth was, she wasn't sure she'd ever rid herself of the impulse to watch out for him.

But Damien had left her with no choice but to find out. He was headed up to Darvish's private suite and was taking her with him, and if she wanted to see her plan through, she had to risk exactly what she'd been trying to avoid for so long: exposure.

"This place is insane." Damien shifted, and suddenly she was on her feet, all the blood rushing south. He kept hold of her so she wouldn't topple over, his somber gaze sweeping her body before locking onto her eyes. "You good?"

No, she wasn't.

Her stomach contracted at the thought of all he might learn once they reached the top floor.

Furthermore, she didn't like the almost gentle way he'd handled her since their almost run-in with her brother and Kadon.

It made those jagged, shattered pieces inside her cut deeper.

It also made her wish anew that she could have reached out to Damien sometime over the past four planetary rotations and maybe prevented them from being where they were now.

Her employer, however, had made that impossible. Darvish had monitored all communications and activities, even while she slept. She'd lived as a prisoner, well aware that if she was caught reaching out to Damien, Darvish's vengeance would be swift and brutal—and directed at someone she loved.

But none of that mattered now. There was no point in wondering what might have been if she'd managed to get word to him, if all the ugliness of

the past four planetary rotations had never happened. It had occurred, and those secrets wouldn't remain buried for much longer.

So, no, she wasn't good, and she never would be.

But since the damned gag was still in place, Scarlett simply nodded in answer to his question.

Then, because she'd learned to stand on her own two feet long ago, she pulled away and steadied herself.

Damien's scowl deepened.

She took the opportunity to restudy the lobby.

When remodeling the space four planetary rotations before, Darvish had wanted it to inspire shock and awe. Massive gold panels depicting historic cage fights swept five stories upward toward a central floating chandelier that was almost as wide as a small planet, each crystal so shiny that it dazzled the eye and reflected the surroundings over and over, making arriving guests feel as if they were under a giant microscope.

Which was accurate. Since the recorders concealed high in the ceiling were constantly operating, picking up every innocuous exchange, plus many that were not so innocent.

Unless you had a next-level cloak that obscured your form.

"Let's do this." Beneath their covering, Damien pressed something on his wrist.

Nothing happened. Not even a beep.

Scarlett both feared and hoped the equipment had failed, and whatever he'd wanted to do was a bust.

But then he gave a satisfied grunt. "Another win for Maxheim."

He didn't bother to explain. Instead, he scanned the area once more to ensure no guards were nearby.

"Your turn." Damien spun her to face the elevator, one hand heavy on her shoulder. Warm, rough skin brushed against her throat, followed by the *snick* of the cuffs releasing.

He'd freed her hands from the taming collar.

Unfortunately, his palm encircled her right wrist in the next heartbeat. "Now's not the time to screw with me, Omega."

*Funny, he'd once wanted to screw her more than anything.*

"Omega..."

She jerked her hand free and slapped it against the scanner.

Light flashed, the needle jutting out and retracting so fast her eye barely

caught it.

She pressed her lips tight against the gag and trapped in the hiss. She'd been in this position a thousand times. The sting of the sharp point driving deep never lessened.

Blood welled on her fingertip.

Again, nothing new.

Except, in the next breath, her wrist was caught. A low, angry growl issued from the male at her side.

One glance and her heart slowed.

He looked feral, outraged, his red-streaked amber eyes glittering.

"No... pain." He guided her fingertip to his mouth and sucked gently, the slight pressure chasing away the sting.

Her breath hitched.

The wounds inside her deepened, the darkness inside awakening as if it wanted to claw its way out and exorcize this new pain as he stood there looking at her as if he actually cared. As if it bothered him that she'd bled to gain them access to the elevator.

They were over and done.

So why did every cell come alive at the warm, sweet sensation of his mouth on her? At his obvious distress over the scent of her blood?

Their gazes locked.

His grip tightened as his tongue flicked out to taste more, and the shadows inside her slid into something else. Something reckless and wild and far from wise.

Scarlett watched, breathless, as her finger slid deeper into his mouth.

Heat coiled between her thighs.

"Access approved." The elevator doors slid open. "Scarlett Stormhart, prime omega to Kadon Stormhart, you are approved for entry."

She froze.

As did Damien.

Then, expression hardening, he withdrew her finger with a popping sound, the shock of cold air against her skin something she felt all the way to her heart. "Scarlett Stormhart. Right."

It was just the reminder they both needed.

Chin tipped high, she returned his stare, cursing herself for forgetting that they were not who they'd once been. That this was a male who'd done nothing as her friends were taken away. One who cared more about his own



selfish revenge than protecting omegas caught in the crossfire of a war between Alpha brutes. And, in the process, extinguished the tiny flame of light and love she'd guarded safely inside herself for the past four planetary rotations, casting her into utter darkness.

It all hurt. That last blow, perhaps most of all.

“Let's go.” Shoulders tight, Damien turned toward the open elevator and gestured for her to enter.



## SCARLETT

Their ride up was no less awkward.

“Next step.” The instant the doors closed, Damien removed the cloak and threw it over his shoulder; two heartbeats before palming her neck so she stared straight at the eye scan until it beeped.

Then they were on their way, rising fast.

“You can take that off if you want.” He’d stood on the other side of the elevator, studying her warily. With his arms crossed over his broad chest and the cloak slung over his shoulder, he looked way too mouthwatering for someone she’d hardened her heart against.

Which was why it took her a moment to realize he meant the gag and not her clothes.

Irritation spiked, mostly at herself.

Of course she could get rid of the disgusting gag. Her wrists were no longer bound, and she didn’t need his permission. She certainly hadn’t been waiting for it.

Scarlett ripped the strip of fabric from between her lips and wiggled her jaw. “How did you jam the recorders?”

It was the only explanation for his willingness to show his face now.

She’d have given her left arm for the ability to do that these past four planetary rotations.

Damien shrugged and held up his wrist, revealing a band. “Another Maxheim toy. He’s brilliant, remember?”

“But not brave enough to come here himself?” She wasn’t sure why she pushed, but Damien’s admiration for his brothers at the expense of his own

abilities had always irritated her.

His gaze narrowed. “He’s busy protecting his breeding prime omega.”

“I see. That’s... nice.” Another Skolov development she hadn’t been aware of.

With Darvish restricting her access to anything of note, the only gossip she’d picked up during elite events was mostly about Damien’s feats as a fearsome Enforcer and the Skolov family’s rise to the top.

His brothers had all been unattached when she and Damien were together, and from what Damien had told her about Maxheim’s workaholic tendencies, she’d have expected him to be the last one to distract himself with an omega and young.

But so much had changed.

At least somebody had gotten their happily ever after.

Scarlett cleared her throat, her gaze shifting away. “How about you? You settled down yet?”

There was way too long a pause, and she wanted to smack herself. That question didn’t come across as distant or disinterested at all.

Heat prickled across her cheeks.

He spoke at last. “I keep myself busy.” Another weighty pause. “But if I was with someone long-term, I wouldn’t have touched you.”

She choked out, “Good to know.”

Why was this elevator suddenly taking longer than usual? She rubbed her hands down the front of the shirt Damien had put her in over her torn dress, the bumps of the taming chain oddly comforting beneath her palm.

“I’m my family’s Enforcer now.” Damien’s chest puffed wide. “It’s a huge responsibility.”

“Just as you wanted. I always knew you’d show those brothers of yours just how much of a force you could be.”

She wasn’t sure why she said it. Perhaps because she suspected her time with him was coming to an end. Or maybe because old habits die hard, and his flash of vulnerability affected her despite herself.

“You did, huh?” He was across the elevator in a heartbeat, his hands slamming down on either side of her head, caging her in. “So why’d you betray me and choose someone else?”

She sucked in a sharp breath. He’d never asked before. Just assumed the worst.

“We’ll never get anywhere”—his gaze never left hers— “until we stop

slinging insults and start telling each other the truth.”

“You first.”

His frown deepened. “Whatever this is between us, it can’t get in the way of my primary mission.”

“Us? There is no us anymore.”

Damien ignored her. “You want me to go first? Fine. I came here to find my sister.”

“Anya?” Scarlett’s breath stuttered in her chest.

“No. Zaya. The one I thought was dead.”

Shock slammed through her. He’d told her just once, voice rough and raw, about the tragedy of losing his mother and youngest siblings in a fire.

She’d missed so much.

“Scarlett? Are you listening? Darvish Sartin and his accomplices were behind the fire. They took Zaya, and I’m here to make him tell me where he’s hiding her.”

“She’s not in the building. I’d have seen her.”

“Maybe not, but he knows where she is.”

“He really has your sister?” Horror swept through her at the thought of poor Zaya surviving a fire only to endure a different kind of hells. “Are you sure?”

“You think I’d have returned to this miserable fucking dome for any other reason? Yes, I’m sure.”

She ignored the sting. No wonder he’d been unwilling to disrupt the transport of her friends off-planet. She’d assumed it was pure selfishness, a decision to prioritize his revenge over the plight of the omegas. But he was here because he was trying to save one.

And she’d been hindering his efforts. Protecting her own ugly secrets.

“I didn’t know.” Of course she hadn’t. Her employer was a male with a thousand schemes, and she was only one pawn among so many.

“I can see that now.” Damien blew out a loud breath. “Darvish is my half brother.”

She nodded.

The creases around Damien’s eyes deepened. “You don’t seem surprised.”

“That part, I suspected. His... obsession with you and your family is obvious. Plus, he has the same eyes, skin color, and build.” It had made what he’d done to her all the harder to bear. Seeing familiar features staring back at

her with such cold cruelty had been yet another mind fuck.

“My father sired him.” He continued, and the disgust in his voice affirmed what she remembered: Damien hated his father. “True to form, the Alphahole rejected Darvish when he was born. His mother, who’d been about to become someone else’s prime omega, was denounced and disowned by her family, and she and her young were left to fend for themselves. It was ugly. Meanwhile, my selfish, horns-up-his-ass father moved on and created a new family for himself. Apparently, Darvish holds a grudge, and it extends beyond our bastard of a sire to anyone with the Skolov name.”

It was tragic all around. She even felt sorry for the youngling Darvish had once been. But not for the monster he’d become. That was his own choice.

“We only just found out about his existence and his schemes,” Damien added.

Scarlett nodded again. That made sense too.

No wonder Darvish had been so tense lately. No wonder he’d grown less careful about covering his tracks, ordering her to steal larger amounts that might more easily be noticed. He and his ugly schemes were finally being dragged into the light, and he was afraid.

The notion was glorious.

“Now that we know of him,” Damien was still talking, his expression hard, “we’ll stop at nothing to get Zaya back and take him out.”

Another piece of the puzzle fell into place, and she understood Damien’s actions in a way she never had before.

“I’m sorry.” Her fingers twisted in the fabric at her belly, shoulders hunched, as if she could somehow shield herself from the blow of yet another way she’d failed. “Sorry your sister’s missing. Sorry she was stolen. I had no idea. If I had—”

“What the fuck?” His expression enraged, Damien’s hand shot up and then froze, hovering just above her top rib.

His sudden fury frightened her; until she glanced down.

All her twisting had pulled Damien’s too-big shirt off her shoulder, exposing an ugly bruise on her ribs, visible through one of the many tears in her dress.

Embarrassment replaced alarm. She yanked the shirt back into place. “I’m fine.”

“You’re not.” His hard expression had disappeared. Instead, he appeared almost... gutted. “Did I do that?”

“No!” She looked away. Oh Goddess. It was beginning already, and they weren’t even on the top floor. Her shameful secrets were coming to light. The ugly pieces of herself she’d never wanted him to see, exposed. “It’s me. I’m doing it to myself.”

“I don’t understand.”

She forced out the truth. “It’s a side effect of my power. When I get... worked up, it happens. Though it takes a while for the bruising to work its way to the surface and become visible.”

“Your gift did that to you?” Surprise mingled with outrage. “Make it stop.”

“I can’t.” It was bad enough that her colors had disappeared, but to have her own so-called gift work against her only made her more of a freak and an unstable risk.

Just one more reason she’d never wanted Damien to know what she’d become.

“It’s not really your concern.” She tried to regain her footing. “I can still get you to Darvish’s private suite just fine.”

His eyes narrowed, but he didn’t take the bait, his voice a gentle rasp when he spoke. “It looks... painful, baby.”

*Baby?* Her heart clenched.

“I barely feel it.” Lying, she tilted her chin upward. “Don’t go soft on me now, Enforcer. You’ve got a reputation to uphold.”

Still glaring at her bruises, a surprise chuckle erupted from him. “Such a damned mouth.”

She stood taller. The last thing she wanted was his pity.

The elevator came to a stop. Its doors slid open.

Relieved, she leaped out.

“Wait.” Damien appeared in front of her, his laser raised before she’d even blinked.

Her heart gave another one of those irritating skips, and this time, she didn’t hate it as much as before. The guy had come searching for his sister, after all.

That stupid light—the one she’d been so sure was extinguished for good—flickered back to life inside her chest, despite her earlier assertion that she’d never forgive him: a tiny vivid purple and yellow flame amidst the darkness.

“No one’s here.” Damien voiced what she’d already sensed. He turned

her toward him and studied her expression before dropping his gaze to her torso. “You sure you’re okay?”

“I’m fine.” She tugged at his hold. “Darvish may be gone, but that doesn’t mean he or his minions didn’t leave behind something of value. We still need inside that private room.”

“Me, first.” Hand encircling her wrist, Damien strode forward, gaze shifting from side to side, scanning for an ambush. “Stay alert.”

Scarlett braced herself and let him drag her forward.

She’d never been on this level without supervision. Or restraints. And with every step she took, the bad memories just kept on coming.

“What’s behind this?” Damien stopped in front of the formidable, oversized door at the end of the corridor.

“Hells.” She didn’t bother pretending.

He didn’t bother hesitating. “How do we get in?”

Unlike the elevator below, there was no obvious keypad or eye-scan device.

She could have lied, told him it was impossible to access, and kept the rest of her secrets to herself, but she needed to get in there too. And even if she hadn’t, his explanation changed everything.

A missing sister.

Scarlett knew better than anyone just what Darvish was capable of. If there were answers about Damien’s sister’s whereabouts, they’d be behind this door.

She couldn’t keep that from him, even if it meant there was a good chance that before they were done, Damien would hate her more than he already did.

But this wasn’t about her. It never had been. Plus, she’d hidden away in the dark for too long.

“Step aside.” She brushed past him. Dropped to her knees. Then rested her bottom on the back of her heels, head bowed slightly.

Damien shifted behind her. “What are you doing?”

There was no time to respond. Instead, positioned as Darvish liked—submissive, cowed, his little pet in her proper state—she held still as the hidden compartment opened, and the familiar eye scan and blood marker flickered out.

Nothing had given Darvish more pleasure than to record her on her knees before him.



The process was over in an instant, with Damien witnessing it all. Heat prickled across her cheeks and chest as the door slid open.

Before she could rise, two strong arms lifted her back onto her feet and spun her to face him.

“I don’t know what the fuck’s going on here, but I don’t like it.” Damien hesitated, an aggressive sound rattling from his chest. “You get down on your fucking knees again? It’ll be for me alone.”

His words sent a shiver cascading through her, a surge of sensation that had nothing to do with bruises or pain or the memories of humiliation that usually accompanied what she’d done.

Damien didn’t look disgusted. He looked pissed. On her behalf. Somehow, that made everything a little better.

“Let’s go.” She squared her shoulders and turned to the open door. “We don’t have long before the open-door alarm triggers and the self-destruct sequence initiates, blowing up the room.”

“Are you fucking kidding me?”



## DAMIEN

“**Y**ou didn’t think to mention that sooner?” Damien stood in the center of the weird-ass room and rotated slowly; the laser raised to counter any surprise threats.

“Would it have made a difference?” Way too calm, Scarlett pressed her hand to the keypad, and the door slid shut.

He scowled. “No.”

“Then here we are.” She crossed her arms and stared at him in a challenge.

His hand itched to spank some self-preservation instincts into the stubborn female, but a fast-approaching self-destruct outcome meant prioritizing, and those bruises on her... they haunted him. “What are we dealing with?”

A sexy-as-hells sly smile appeared on her face. “The good news is Darvish doesn’t realize I know his protocols.” Her smile widened. “Luckily, he’s not the only one skilled at finding out secrets.”

Damned, Damien liked this side of her.

“The moment the cameras went down,” she continued, “security went on high alert. When I used my eye scan and DNA to open the door without Darvish or his assistant present to approve my access, the next level of security protocols was triggered, and the self-destruct countdown began.”

“Shit.”

“Exactly. When security doesn’t receive a false-alarm countermand, they’ll sweep the floors from top to bottom, searching for intruders. According to protocol, any unsanctioned personnel found in the building will

be instantly terminated. Once they've searched the entire building, the guards are then expected to evacuate and block all exits to this floor. The air will be sucked from the space and a highly flammable gas pumped in, causing an explosion that will destroy not only any living thing in the room but also every piece of tech and innate material as well."

"Why the hells would the guards follow an order like that?"

"Few are willing to challenge a monster."

Damien's gut clenched as that sense of foreboding reared its head again.

He had an uncomfortable suspicion he should have returned to the Golden Dome far sooner.

But he was there now and wasn't leaving without getting to the bottom of what made Scarlett tick, just as he should have done the first time.

"There's still a chance Darvish will issue the counterorder." A tiny V formed between her perfect brows. "I get the impression he doesn't want me dead."

Damien got that impression too, and he had a bad feeling he knew exactly fucking why as well.

"But if you know Darvish at all," Scarlett continued, "you'll know he'd prefer to have every scrap of information destroyed rather than have it end up in the hands of an enemy. That goes for loose ends too." She gestured to herself.

*Knot him.* Damien snarled low. He'd dragged Scarlett into a fucking war zone and put a target on her back. "We are *not* dying. Nor are we letting any important intel be destroyed."

"We'll see." She appeared disturbingly unfazed by the possibility of her own death.

It made him angry and even more determined to find what they needed and get the hells out of that room so he could figure out what was really going on with Scarlett.

The alarm in his gut, which had only gotten worse since they'd encountered Stormhart and her brother, was now at an all-time, churning high.

But if the guards were coming soon—and the flammable gas not long after that—he needed to make good use of what time they had.

"What is this place exactly?" He spun in a slow circle once again. No guards had jumped out at them, but that didn't mean someone wasn't lurking. He'd already identified two potential ambush sites.

But it was hard not to get distracted.

There were vid screens everywhere. Crammed onto every wall, the ceiling, and even above the huge, sleek desk in the middle of the room.

Thousands of small black square screens, each beaming out a scene in a different setting.

He scanned one wall and caught sight of a yellow-skinned Alpha hunched over a bench, peeling a *larnig* fruit in a sad, derelict room. In a different vid frame, he saw two security guards rutting an omega in a dark alley. In another, a furry male with blue skin was taking a shit while another stood by some fancy sink brushing his fangs. Other monitors showcased an omega sobbing in the arms of another behind a curtain, a crowd walking through the market, six lumps sleeping in a narrow bed, one Alphahole beating another in a backroom, four cage fighters thrashing each other on some mats, and a six-armed dealer at some busy gambling den, swiping a fallen chip and slipping it into his back pocket.

From the mundane to the miserable to the sinister, every spectacle of Golden Dome existence was on display.

It was obvious, too, that no one on the vids had any idea they were being recorded.

“I already told you.” Scarlett crossed the threshold and moved toward the desk. “Hells.”

The tightness in Damien’s chest traveled down to his balls. He didn’t like this one fucking bit.

Same went for the “I’m determined to be strong” look Scarlett fixed on her face the moment they stepped onto this floor.

As if she could fool him.

He could tell being here scared her.

He grabbed her around the waist and, as gently as possible, pinned her to his chest.

“Hey!”

“You stay with me until this room is secured.”

She sighed but didn’t protest. Probably because she realized it was futile.

Doing his best not to let the softness of her ass against him be a dangerous distraction, he moved in front of his first target area.

There were two other doors in the room: one on the wall to the right side of the desk, another behind it.

He thrust Scarlett behind him, ensuring his body blocked hers, then, one

hand holding her wrists, he slammed his palm on the keypad and brought his laser back up.

The door slid open with ease.

Peering inside, he found no live threats, only four walls lined with floor-to-ceiling storage units full of drawers.

Damien stepped into the room and tugged at one of the drawers. It opened easily, revealing slots for at least a thousand vid sticks, each filled and labeled with a number and letter code.

Numbers weren't his thing, but he estimated there must be at least a million vids stored in this one wall unit alone.

The whole Golden Dome was one giant spy network.

"These are his less important vids." Scarlett spoke from behind him. "You won't find anything of use to you here."

Truth? Or more subterfuge? He had no idea, but they were under a time crunch, and he needed to check out what was behind door number two before determining how best to spend his time.

Plus, the dust covering many of the drawer pulls supported her claim.

He dragged her with him and moved to the door behind the desk. Unlike the first one, it did not slide open at his touch.

"Private elevator." She spoke once more. "The exit Darvish likely used the moment he realized you were back in the dome."

Damien clenched his laser tighter, trying to manage his disappointment. "Another critical detail you omitted. Thanks for letting me know about the layout—*after* the fact."

Scarlett scowled right back at him. "Would you have taken my word? Or needed to check it out for yourself anyway?"

"No comment." *Damned.* She knew him too well.

"We need to start with that." She tilted her chin toward the desk in the middle of the room. "If there's anything important left in this room, it will be there."

He strode to the desk and tossed Maxheim's cloak over one corner. "You're being awfully accommodating all of a sudden."

She shrugged. "I'd rather not implode if I can help it. Plus, the sooner I find you something useful, the sooner you leave."

*Ouch.* "Got it."

Scarlett blew out a long breath. "Also... you mentioned your sister. Whatever you might think of me now, Damien, I hope you remember enough

of the girl I once was to know I wouldn't deliberately allow any female to be hurt."

She studied the desk.

Damien studied her, feeling as small as an electron particle.

He'd let anger and hatred color his memories, mostly because it had been easier.

But being with the real Scarlett made it much harder to wallow in righteous disgust. The truth was, until she turned on him, Scarlett had always struck him as kind. Loyal. And as wildly in love with him as he'd been with her.

Which was why what she'd done to him had made so little sense.

Shackled and disgraced, a tournament loser, he'd decided on that miserable shuttle ride back to Abzal that falling for her was proof of his impulsive, hot-headed, act-without-thinking-it-through tendencies. He'd reasoned that everything he'd felt for her must have been wrong as well.

Mostly because there was no changing what happened. She'd fucked him over, a good friend had died, and then she'd tied herself to someone who wasn't him.

He'd lost her in every way possible, and it had fucking ripped him apart. Hating her had been the only way to lessen the agonizing pain, to make sense of a loss so vast it all but destroyed him.

But what if consigning her to his long list of mistakes had been the error?

Damned it, he didn't like doubt. Or waffling. He preferred to keep it simple.

However, what he felt for this omega was anything but.

Still, after four planetary rotations of believing one thing, telling himself one thing, it was hard to shift gears. Trust had never come easily to him. It came harder after what she'd done.

But even a hothead Enforcer could pivot when necessary.

Damien turned his attention to his wrist comms and started typing.

"What are you doing?" Scarlett's voice was tight. "We don't have much time."

"This will only take a moment."

A long pause. "What exactly will only take a moment?"

He hid a smile. Still curious; at least that was something that hadn't changed. "I'm sending a message through my comms. I couldn't do it before in the tunnel, but here I have a signal and the ability to cloak where it's

coming from.” He finished typing. “Done. I’ve notified my brothers about your friends. That shuttle will never make it to the brothel. It will be picked up, the guards dispatched, and the omegas rescued and resettled.”

Absolute silence.

He looked over to find an expression of pure shock—and wariness—on her gorgeous face.

That’s when he realized how badly he’d fucked up. Her expression said she hadn’t expected anything like that from him, and even now wasn’t sure what to make of it.

He used to be her hero. She used to look at him as if she never doubted that he’d take down every fighter he faced and conquer the galaxy for her.

Not anymore.

He knew exactly what he’d done to deserve that in the short time since they’d reconnected.

And how much he regretted it.

“They’ll be safe,” Damien assured her.

Her wary expression told him everything.

“It’s a done deal, Scarlett. Your friends will never reach that fucking brothel.”

“I-I don’t know what to say.” She nodded, blinking fast. “Thank you. I can’t tell you how much I appreciate it.” For once, she didn’t try to hide what was in her eyes, and he saw it all: disbelief, relief, gratitude, and the lifting of a weight she never should’ve had to bear.

It made him want to hold her.

But she wasn’t looking at him as if she wanted to be held, and besides, they were up against the clock. “What’s next?”

Scarlett tore her gaze from his and pointed to a keypad at the far-right corner of the desk. “This is our next challenge.”

The keypad was the only discernible item on the desk. Small seams across the top and sides indicated drawers, but there was no obvious way to access them.

She nudged the cloak aside and studied the keypad. “Type in the passcode and the drawer openers slide out. The problem is that Darvish—or, more often, his assistant—uses three different eight-digit combinations. Luckily, he doesn’t change them often. I saw what it was last time I was here, but... there’s a chance he could have changed it since then.”

More complications. Fortunately, Damien knew exactly how to deal with



this one.

He pointed his weapon at the keypad and flipped off the safety. “Stand back.”

“No.” She gripped his arm. “The desk is equipped with another fail-safe. Disrupt it by trying to go around the system, and it will only speed up the timetable, activating instant self-destruct mode.”

*Fuck.* Even this couldn’t be simple. Right now, he just wanted to break or shoot something.

“It’s the truth.” She blew out a breath. “Darvish’s assistant made sure I knew it every time I came up here.”

“Why?”

“Because he’s an Alphahole like his boss.” She hesitated. “And because he knew I wanted in that desk as bad as you do now.”

Damien stilled. “What does that mean?” That bad feeling in his gut worsened.

“It means,” she said at last, “he and Darvish are hiding something I want too.”

“What?”

“A vid. Or two.”

“Of what?”

“Of some things I don’t care to have shared with the galaxy. Or you. Hence why I want them.”

“So you’re suggesting Darvish has some kind of hold over you?” She wouldn’t be the first captor to try to excuse their behavior and buy sympathy by pretending to be the victim, but he got the worrying sense she was telling the truth.

“I am not *suggesting* anything.”

“You’re a lot mouthier than you used to be.” He’d meant it as an insult. But instead, his voice emerged way too husky for it to be anything but approval. He liked that she was finally opening up to him a little.

Before he was done, it would be a whole lot more.

Then, because he knew he’d have her on her back, his tongue in her pussy if his thoughts kept moving along as they were, he returned his attention to the keypad. “So, if I can’t shoot it, what can I do?”

“Sit back and hope.”

Not exactly his forte.

She squared her shoulders. “If Darvish changed it, we’re screwed.” Her

fingers hovered above the pad. “But if the assistant was his typical lazy, cutting-corners self, we’ll be good.”

The thing beeped. Numbers flashed on the screen.

“Standard operating procedure.” She didn’t look up.

Damien remembered the same determination and grace when she’d danced, though she’d seemed such a sensuous, harmless creature back then. Sexy as fuck, sweet too. But someone he needed to protect and care for. The female staring at the keypad with such fierce focus reminded him more of a warrior.

She’d become so resilient. So fearless and bold.

Pride swelled in his chest.

Then he remembered she wasn’t his to be proud of anymore.

His heartbeat slowed—just as the numbers on the keypad sped up.

More loud beeping.

*Fuck him.* It looked as if the countdown had started.



DAMIEN

“Don’t panic.”

“No problem.” Damien might be impulsive. But he was Alpha. Panicking was for pussies.

Scarlett continued tapping away. “This is just a scare tactic. I’m on to the third sequence now. This is the one Darvish changes most often. I’ll get a few tries before it self-destructs.”

“Comforting.” Damien readied himself to grab her and run from the room. He had no idea if that would be enough, but he refused to go down without a fight.

The numbers dwindled.

The monitors surrounding them flashed, going blurry for a moment before returning to clarity.

Scarlett appeared calm as she worked, but he could feel the darkness inside her growing, seeping out and sweeping against his skin—like a soft hand gliding across his flesh. Shadows flickered on the walls, and the light fixtures rattled.

The evolution of her gift was fascinating—and hot.

For now, though, he preferred not to draw extra attention from the guards. “You need to calm down.”

“A statement that only makes me less calm.” She typed faster. A series of three beeps issued from the desk. “Got you, you knothole.”

The numbers froze.

Damien grunted a half-laugh and, as subtly as possible, readjusted his junk. The old Scarlett never cursed. And rarely called him out on how he

handled a situation. Damned if he didn't like this new side of her too.

It helped that she'd saved them both from becoming over-cooked Golden Dome delicacies.

The keypad retracted into the desk. A heartbeat later, its glossy surface split into twenty vid screens, each featuring a different scene from somewhere in the Golden Dome. Only this time, it wasn't just images but a cacophony of sound as well. Confirmation that the desk's owner was committed to a full surround-sound surveillance experience.

"These guys are serious voyeurs."

"You have no idea." She wasn't even paying attention to the vids themselves, her fingers already busy grabbing at the first drawer pull that had emerged on the side of the desk.

"I estimate we have only a short time left before the guards finish sweeping the lower levels and reach this one. We need to make the most of it." She yanked the top drawer open. "Hells. He's already cleared a lot out."

Damien peered over her shoulder and saw row after row of mostly empty slots.

She snatched up the few vid sticks still in there, each no bigger than an omega's fingernail. "Take what you can," she prompted. "We'll check them to see if you can find anything related to Darvish or your sister's location later."

He grabbed her wrist. "I've got a better plan. Leave them." He let go and held up his comms. "This will scan them with just a tap of the wrist. The intel will go straight to Maxheim, who can analyze it and let us know what he finds. There's no one better than him to get this job done well—and fast."

A beat of silence. Scarlett's expression turned wary. "He'll watch them all?"

"He'll have to."

Her gaze shifted away. Damien gave her the time, though they both knew she had no choice.

Faster than she'd expected, she squared her shoulders, her gaze finding his. "Okay, right." She stepped back to give him easier access. "Some part of me knew this rotation would come eventually. Scan away."

Her easy acquiescence was just one more death blow to the internal narrative he'd played over and over these past four planetary rotations.

He'd been so sure he understood the situation with Scarlett. Guy meets girl, and they fall hard. Except the girl then realizes that love doesn't conquer

all—or give an omega money, status, and security—so she wises up, dumps him, and goes for the safer, wealthier, prettier option. A story as old as the solar system—and just as dark.

However, the hints he was getting now weren't adding up to the neat picture he'd formulated in his pissed-off, ego-hurt, eighteen-planetary-rotations-old mind and nursed as fact ever since.

“What's your story with Darvish?” He spoke as he worked, tapping his comms against each vid until it beeped, and he knew the scan was complete.

Not looking his way, Scarlett opened more drawers so they'd be ready for him. “Now you're asking?”

Damien winced. “Yeah.”

He should have asked earlier. Before he tried to fuck her up against the wall or imprison her or throw her over his shoulder and threaten her brother.

But he'd just been so pissed and angry and, yeah, if he was being honest with himself, led by his dick and his ego.

Same way he'd been the last time he and Scarlett were together.

Heat prickled at the back of his neck.

*Knot me. I really am a stupid Alphahole.*

He kept saying he'd changed. Grown up. And yet... he was behaving exactly as he had before. Barreling in and assuming he had a handle on the situation.

Payback was a bitch.

Because he was fast learning that he didn't know shit.

He cleared his throat and worked faster, already two-thirds through the vids left behind. “I, ah, should have asked before. I'm...” He choked out the word, having seen it work a time or two for his older brothers with their omegas, “Sorry.”

Her head snapped up. “Excuse me?”

Hells, he should have paid more attention when his brothers fucked up. Did they have to apologize to their omegas more than once too? Still, if that's what it took, he'd suck it up and—

His attention caught on one of the feeds on the desk, partially covered by his cloak. He shoved the fabric off the top. “Holy hells. That's Stormhart.”

“No.” Her palm slammed down on the screen. Except her hand was so small it covered only a portion of the monitor, leaving half of Stormhart still clearly visible, his pretty-boy face and swagger unmistakable as he marched briskly down an alley.

Wasn't he supposed to be searching the cargo bay for Scarlett?

Damien's benefit-of-the-doubt attitude toward Scarlett took a hit as it sank in that she'd flat-out lied to him.

He nudged her hand to the side. "Want to try another answer?"

"I thought you were here to find something about your sister." Discomfort poured off her in waves. "Watching Kadon will tell you nothing. What matters is seeing if Darvish left behind any files or vids that might provide clues. We should check the storage unit in case he left any important ones there."

So she'd gone from flat-out lying to deflection. Not much better.

Damien plucked her hand from the screen. "Yeah, I don't think so."

Stormhart reappeared, moving fast, his body tense and purposeful. Definitely a male on a mission.

Damien's shoulders bunched, fury washing through him.

Had this been a fucking ploy the whole time? A delaying tactic to allow Stormhart to come after them? Was Scarlett's claim that she wanted to help find his sister nothing more than a lie meant to distract him until help arrived? Had she fucking played him again?

Damien didn't recognize the alley Stormhart was charging through, but he didn't like the intense, aggressive expression on the other male's face.

If the bastard was hustling to get Scarlett back, he was in for a serious disappointment.

"We don't have time for this." Scarlett tugged at Damien's hold. "Darvish has begun tying up loose ends and erasing evidence of his identity and activities here. That means you and I are not the only ones in danger. Luc, Kadon"—she swallowed hard—"the whole dome could be at risk."

Damien didn't budge, his gaze following Stormhart's advance. "I can scan and watch." Every word she uttered might be true, but he also recognized an attempt at distraction when he heard it.

Which only made him more determined to stay right where he was.

She had so many fucking secrets, and he wanted to unlock every single one.

On the screen, Stormhart glanced over his shoulder before ducking down another narrow alley. Luckily, there was a recorder there too. It picked him up only a few heartbeats later, only this space was much darker. As a result, the monitor only displayed glimpses of his face and form, smudges of movement and shadow rather than actual detail.

Then Stormhart disappeared from the frame altogether.

Damien cursed.

He'd finished scanning all the remaining vids but still didn't move.

He wasn't even sure Stormhart was still there... until he spoke.

"Thank fuck you got away." The voice of the male just out of sight was thick with emotion, but it was definitely Kadon Stormhart. "Thank fuck you're safe."

Unlike the visual from the feed, the audio remained crystal clear.

"You shouldn't listen to this." Scarlett reached around him, interrupting his speculation as she slapped at the buttons next to the screen.

"But I want to." Damien grabbed her hands and pinned both to his chest. If he was about to overhear strategies to help him get Scarlett back or intel on Darvish, he'd absorb every syllable.

"We don't have much time, and everything's gone to hells." Stormhart growled low, but again, the mic picked it up with ease. "I just..." He sounded almost defeated. "I just... need you so damned bad."

Too late, Damien realized what this was. Not a trick or a planning session, but a secret rendezvous.

His gaze shifted to Scarlett, bracing for her upset, her hurt.

Except Scarlett didn't look devastated.

Instead, her stare was locked on him, her expression inscrutable, as if she was studying him to see how he'd take it.

Heavy breathing and the sound of flesh against flesh blasted from the monitor. Mouths clinging, the rustle of clothing.

A grunt.

Groans.

Soft moans.

Damien stood frozen, unsure of what to do. A strange sensation for a guy like him.

Mr. Perfect Golden Boy was not so perfect after all. Damien should have been gloating. Vindicated.

Instead, all he wanted was to snap the bastard's neck and tell Scarlett she deserved so much better. The fucker was supposed to be out hunting for her. Not getting his dick wet.

The slap of flesh against flesh amplified. The cadence ferocious. Desperate.

"You know who that is with him, don't you?" Damien watched Scarlett



carefully.

Her gaze flicked away. “Yes. I do.”

The lack of pain in her voice surprised him.

Stormhart wasn't the first Alpha to rut someone besides his prime omega. Damien's brothers were proving the exception, but most Brotherhood Alphas had one omega for breeding heirs and a stable of additional omegas for rutting for fun.

Except, whatever was going down in that alley didn't sound like only fun. It sounded serious. Threaded with deep emotion. Maybe even... love?

The thought raked across Damien's windpipe like cut crystal. Fuck him, he could still remember when he'd sounded that way with Scarlett. When they'd rushed together like two parts of the same whole, as if nothing else mattered but sealing themselves back together again.

“So you don't care that he's rutting someone else?”

“Damien, let it go.” She tugged at his hold. “What's going on there is private. It's not right to listen. I want to turn it off. Please.”

The desperation coating her words made his decision an easy one.

He searched for a kill switch. Only there was no obvious volume control. No clear on/off button.

The sounds increased.

The discomfort in Scarlett's eyes grew as well.

That he didn't like at all.

He slammed his fist into the monitor.

Problem solved; discomfort erased from her stare.

Lines snaked across the desk as it cracked in several places. Smoke poured from beneath his knuckles. The feeds flickered, then faded to static as the sounds disappeared.

Silence filled the private suite.

For all of three heartbeats.

“You hurt yourself!” Scarlett recovered before he did, grabbing his fist and cradling it to her. “You're bleeding.” Cute eyebrows drawing into a worried scowl, she examined the cuts on his knuckle.

“I'm fine.” He was an Alpha and had three older battle-ax brothers. He knew enough to keep the pain to himself. Plus, the bruises across her ribs that she kept saying didn't hurt at all were way worse.

But this feeling in his chest? The way his skin suddenly felt too tight for what was inside? He honestly wasn't sure what to do with that.

He'd been in a thousand fights, split his knuckles raw a million times, and never felt more victorious than he did kicking that monitor's ass.

Because the shadows in Scarlett's eyes had diminished. Even better, now her focus was on him.

Her breath whispered across his skin, as soft as a caress. "You sure it doesn't hurt?"

Damien stifled a groan. His hand was fine. His dick, however? Aching like hells. "I'm sure."

He reined it in by thinking about ripping off the balls of a certain undeserving, disloyal bastard named Kadon Stormhart. "He should not be—"

"Don't." Gaze focused on his cuts, she tightened her hand around his. "I don't want to discuss it."

As if she set the rules. "Too bad. He's a selfish knotbag."

"He's not. He's just in love with someone else."

"You're missing. Kidnapped by one of the most feared Enforcers in the galaxy. He should be tracking you down, doing whatever it takes. Not off fucking someone else."

"You heard him. He thinks I'm safe with you."

He grasped her chin, dragging her gaze to his. "There's nothing safe about what's between us."

"Damien..." She swallowed hard.

"I don't get it." He studied her. "You really don't care that he's off banging someone else."

Her gaze sharpened. "I do care. I'm actually happy for him. I don't love Kadon like that. I never have."

He rocked back on his heels, her words striking with the force of an uppercut.

*She'd never loved Kadon like that. She'd never loved Kadon like that.*

Damien tightened his hold on her chin. "So why the fuck did you do it, Scarlett? Why betray me? Did you think the money would make up for it, or was it just the security you were after? Or does Darvish really have something on you?"

She shook her head, her eyes glittering with unshed tears.

"Tell me."

"I can't." She pressed her lips together.

"You won't. There's a difference."

"It doesn't matter. What's done is done. All we're left with now are the

consequences.”

“Bullshit.” That wasn’t enough for him anymore.

There may no longer be fated-mate marks on his wrists or hers, but the pull toward each other remained. Relentless, all-consuming, immutable. Even after all the ways they’d fucked each other over.

And it was true they couldn’t change the past.

But he was beginning to see that *why* those events happened might make a hell of a difference to their present and their future.

“Did you think I wouldn’t be able to take care of you? Is that what broke us in the end?” The suspicion had eaten away at him.

Ever since he was a useless youngling, hiding in that ice cave, unable to do shit while his older brothers hustled and sacrificed, all he’d wanted was to prove that one rotation, they’d be able to rely on him too.

But even after winning thousands of fights, becoming the Skolov Enforcer, and cracking numerous heads to keep those he loved safe, he couldn’t quite shake the fear that he hadn’t done enough to be worthy of their sacrifice.

So even the whiff of a suggestion that Scarlett had seen his failings and dismissed him as nothing more than a useless, immature youngling had struck a chord deep inside.

“Did you think I was too big a risk because I was younger than you and not established?” He pushed when she didn’t answer. “The younger brother who’d never make his mark? I get it. I—”

“No!” She grasped his hands once more. “I always knew you were the one soul in this galaxy who could be counted on. I always knew, too, that you’d do great things. Th-that’s part of the reason I had to let you go.”

One question answered, a million more suddenly springing to the fore.

But that look was back, the one where she stared at him as if he were a hero, as if he could not only crush every fighter in the ring but also conquer the galaxy.

Seeing it now, after so long... he realized he’d missed it so fucking much.

“Scarlett.” He drew her to him, and she let him.

His gaze dropped from the haze of need in her eyes to the pink temptation of her lips.

Footfalls sounded in the corridor outside the room, followed by an unfamiliar barking voice. “You know the drill. Check every hiding place. Our

orders are to find the omega. If you come across anyone else, take them out. Then, with or without the female, we get out. None of us wants to still be here when stage two begins.”

*The guards had arrived.*



## SCARLETT

**I**t took Scarlett a moment to register that her astonishing, heartfelt moment with Damien had been interrupted.

He, on the other hand, reacted immediately.

Moving fast, he grabbed his cloak off the floor, then hauled her to him.

Before she'd even blinked, he'd tucked her beneath his arm as if she weighed nothing. Even lovelier, he was somehow mindful not to hold her around her bruised ribs as he hustled for the best hiding spot in the room.

Being careful with her. After finding out that her contract with Kadon was a sham.

She hadn't dared hope for such a reaction, but it felt real.

Still...

"I can run," she whispered.

"I'm faster," he hissed back.

True. So she shut up.

Not to mention she was grateful he'd chosen this strategy rather than deciding to stay and fight. She knew he didn't like retreating—combat was in a cage-fighting Enforcer Alpha's blood—but neither of them had any idea how many guards were in the corridor.

*Find the omega.*

She should have known Darvish would never let her go so easily. A development that would have worked great for her ultimate plan, except she didn't want Damien killed in the process.

She'd never wanted that. Ever.

Even before he'd done the extraordinary and gotten on his comms to

request his brothers' help in rescuing Ebony and Amber, what she'd wanted was this... Him holding her close. Handling her like she was something precious. The way he used to touch her.

But soon enough, Damien's brother would analyze what was on those vids, and the rest of her secrets would likely come to light.

Then she feared Damien might not hold her at all.

"Not a sound." Interrupting her dark thoughts, Damien slipped into the storage unit and, one arm still around her, manually slid the door shut. Then he set her on her feet, threw the cloak over them, drew his laser, and, before she could protest, slapped his other hand over her mouth.

She got it. He wasn't taking any chances.

They'd moved away from outright hostility to something else, but their past still hung over them. Finding his sister was paramount, and it would take time for them to rebuild trust.

But she also noted that Damien's handling of her remained careful, and for the first time in a long while—despite the danger around them—she felt almost safe.

"Access code was used. She's been in here." One of the many guards who worked for Darvish marched into the room, his aggression palpable even through the closet door. "I can scent it. Sweet omega pussy."

Behind her, Damien tensed as the male inhaled. Without conscious thought, she pushed back into the solid wall of muscle at her back.

"Could be from earlier." The second guard didn't sound as convinced.

"The drawers are open and empty. The screen cracked."

"Yeah, but the vids are still there, so it could have been the boss. He left in a rush, and I saw his assistant and personal guards carrying cargo."

"But what about the screen?"

"You know the boss's temper."

"We need to check it out anyway." The guard's footfalls echoed closer. "Orders are to search everywhere for the female and to initiate protocol only when we're sure she's not here."

The energy around Damien, already tense, darkened.

Scarlett suspected he didn't like knowing how badly Darvish wanted her. She didn't like hearing it either.

The storage unit door slid open.

Three laser barrels pointed inside.

Damien's fingers clenched tight around his weapon handle.

The shadows inside her chose that moment to stir. Her heart pounded fast. If Maxheim's cloak didn't work, they'd be in trouble. Damien could take out these three guards, but more would be right behind, and they might keep her alive, but Damien would be executed.

She would never allow that.

"All clear." The guards' lasers swung away. "Check the rest of the space."

The door slid shut.

*Thank the Goddess for Maxheim's cloak.*

She sank against the strong form at her back, her flares of black trapped safely beneath the cloak.

But Damien remained on alert, his weapon aimed at the door.

"Room clear. She's not here now." Even through the barrier, the lead guard's voice carried easily. "You two, stay with me so we can ensure no one slips in. The rest of you sweep the floor. Be thorough. Make sure she's not here, or I promise you'll be very sorry. But don't take too fucking long. Otherwise, we're all toast."

There was grumbling, then the pounding of boots, the guards' procedures playing out exactly as she knew they would, minus the part about them looking so hard for her.

Next, they'd do a sweep of the entire floor. Then security would haul ass before the air was sucked from the space and the flammable gas pumped in, deliberately destroying everything within.

She needed to ensure she and Damien were long gone by then.

While risky, she'd determined their best plan was to wait until the guards left the room and then use the cloak to sneak into the corridor and down the elevator. It would require some luck, as they'd have to bypass clusters of guards patrolling the floor and hope that none marched into them, but she honestly didn't think there was any other option besides a full-scale battle. The numbers just weren't on their side.

"Come on." The lead guard addressed his associates once more. "Let's wait outside in the hall for the others to finish their sweeps. I'm not interested in spending any more time up here than necessary."

*Oh no.* They were lingering in the corridor. Which made sneaking out of the closet and the room infinitely harder, as one couldn't slide open a door without being noticed.

Another, larger wave of panic swept through her. How was she supposed



to save them now?

Not a damned thing came to mind.

This was not good. The darkness inside her kicked out, cracking at her ribs, and Scarlett stifled a pained gasp. But the worry continued to build. A sense of hopeless despair—so familiar after four planetary rotations—blanketed her skin.

Damien had just started to look at her again with warmth in his eyes, and now she had to tell him they'd have to fight their way out and likely not make it.

"It's okay, beautiful," he whispered against her ear as he lowered the laser to his side. "I've got a plan. Maxheim has what he needs. We just have to wait the guards out."

He had a plan? When had that happened?

But she had to admit it was nice not having the entire burden of their survival on her shoulders.

Her brother and Kadon meant well, but they were trapped, just like her. So she hadn't felt right adding to their load by constantly asking for help. Instead, she'd made her plans and shielded them as best as she could.

Still, if it didn't work. Damien would die.

"Settle, Omega." The soft stroke of a calloused fingertip against her jaw made her nipples pebble against the frayed fabric of her gown and his shirt. "I'm not going off half-cocked. It'll be okay."

Longing and need blazed a white-hot path through her bloodstream, no taming chain required. The confidence in his tone and the gentleness of his touch—everything she thought she'd never experience again—clawed at the last of her defenses, leaving her raw and exposed and aching for him.

She shifted restlessly against his solid form. So steady. So sure.

The male who'd bloodied his knuckles for her.

The male who'd gotten on his comms to help save her friends.

The male who'd seen the bruises left by her gift and seemed gutted.

Because that's who he was: bossy and domineering, yes, but also wild, strong, loyal, caring, and protective.

An Alpha willing to do anything and everything for those he loved; no matter what it cost him. The kind of extraordinary male who was beyond rare, and who she'd had the privilege of being loved by... once.

The heedless, reckless part of her that had sparked to life the moment they met rose to the surface once more.

She rocked back into the hard bulge at her back.

He might not love her anymore, but even with the ugliness of her betrayal between them, even against his better judgment, he did care—and that was a gift she'd never expected.

A silent growl rumbled from him to her and straight to her clit.

She whimpered in need.

“I got you, beautiful.” The movement of his lips against the shell of her ear added to the fever scorching her skin.

No one had had her back like this in a very long time.

She knew it would be smarter to remind them both of his anger, the consequences of her betrayal, and all the unanswered questions and secrets that still lay between them.

And she knew it was risky to come together when there were guards so close by.

But the sharp edge of fear, risk, and danger, and the very idea that they might not make it out alive, made her desperate to do exactly what she shouldn't.

“I'm not going to let anything hurt you.” Damien's thumb stroked a slow, sensual caress over the fluttering pulse at the base of her neck, and her self-preservation slipped away altogether.

Foolish or not, she needed him.

So she rocked back against him harder.

“Fuck, Scarlett.” He held her still against him. “Be very sure.”

She knew what he was warning.

But she hadn't been so sure of anything in a long time.

What else could you do with such a magnetic, ferocious storm but run headlong into its fury, throw your hands up, and let it ride roughshod over you, basking in its glory?

*Damien.* Her lips formed his name, a whispered plea against his palm.

That was all it took.

He broke.



## DAMIEN

**D**amien's grip snaked around Scarlett's front, plastering her perfect body to him as his mouth landed against her neck, his fangs dragging along the sweet flesh.

What else could he do?

She summoned, and he answered.

"Not a fucking sound." He growled the words into her ear and thanked the Goddess that the cloak not only obscured sight but also dampened scent because he knew he and Scarlett were drowning in pheromones and the perfume of rut, and he'd never wanted so badly to sink beneath her undertow and forget everything but her.

Scarlett's head fell back against his chest as he rocked her against him.

Then she was pushing back into him, rising onto her tiptoes while her back arched and her nails dug into his hips, pulling him closer.

It felt like a fucking dream.

From outside in the corridor came the guards' faint murmurs, but they were drowned out by the roar of need blasting through his brain.

Scarlett was giving herself to him.

Not because he'd taken her by force. Not because the damned taming chain had her riled up.

But because this was them, the draw between them as strong as ever.

Damien saw red, his hand moving instinctively to return the laser to its holster so he could touch her with both hands.

He wasn't sure what had shifted for Scarlett. Or if what he'd learned about her feelings for Stormhart had set something free inside him, but the

result was the same: Stormhart had ceased to be a concern.

Scarlett didn't love the pretty boy. She never had.

And Darvish was not getting a hold of her.

That was all that mattered.

Damien kept a hand over her mouth to muffle any sounds while his fangs nipped at her ear, the soft hitch of her breath everything.

They'd have to pry him from this space, and from her.

At this moment, nothing was as important as getting as close to her as possible and erasing all the lonely nights, the agony and longing.

Maybe, just maybe, the darkness could erase their sins for just a little while. Strip away everything except this one essential truth: What was between them was unrelenting. All-consuming. Insatiable. Filthy. And never going away.

He slid his free palm beneath her shirt, his hand greedy as it coasted from her ribs to her belly to her hips, gently, deliberately, relearning every curve. Savoring the silk of her skin. So familiar and yet also so new.

His palm slipped beneath the skirt of her gown and reached the V of her thighs—and the ripped panties that offered no barrier at all.

She barely breathed.

He cupped her soaked pussy, feeling one hundred feet tall when she melted against his body.

Fuck, yes. He'd always loved the way she gave herself to him. Unrestrained. Fearless.

Last time, anger and darkness had been the dominant emotion ricocheting between them, their defenses up.

This time, his fortifications lay in rubble. All he wanted was to run headlong into whatever awaited them—good or bad.

He rubbed the flat of his palm against her slick core, creating just the right amount of friction as she stood, caught between his hips and his palm, unable to scream, unable to do anything but feel as he worked her as he wanted.

“You remember just how good I can make you feel even without the taming chain?” he whispered against her ear.

She trembled in response, and his control slipped another notch. The wetness coating his hand and her thighs made his cock as hard as a pike. Dominating her fired his blood as well.

He should have known this new Scarlett wouldn't settle for that.

Before he could defend himself against it, her hand slid between them and over his leathers, her fingers curling around the thick stem of his shaft through the material and tugging upward.

*Fuck. Him.*

Damien shuddered, his head falling back as his eyes rolled, and it took every bit of his willpower not to turn her around, shove down his leathers, lift her up, and slam her onto his cock.

He wanted deep inside her more than ever.

Craved her courage. Her bravado. Her wild, reckless ferocity.

With a silent growl, he slipped a finger beneath the edge of her soaked panties and plunged deep.

She shook. Panted against his palm.

Damien worked his fingers against her clit faster, a little harder. While he might be a bruiser and the last Alpha virgin in the whole damned galaxy, he knew, without ego, that those factors also made him better with his hands.

From working his own cock to exhaustion at the thought of her, he'd learned when to use a light touch and how to add just the right amount of pressure. He used that knowledge now on his Scarlett; until she was the one rocking her tempting hips, begging him for more, spreading those sweet little thighs as wide as her position allowed.

Giving him everything he'd missed.

The scent of her pleasure drowned him, the softness of her skin everything he'd ever wanted.

The fact that they were squeezed into this contained space only made the friction between them all the more intense, the erotic need greater.

All they could do was rub against each other, take from each other. Two bodies writhing in tandem in the dark, propelled by desperate, unrelenting need and regret.

Her pleasure. Her submission. Her scent on his skin. Her fingers rubbing against the ridges of his cock through his leathers reminding him what it was to soar, to feel something besides grief and rage and pain. Those privileges were what he'd tried to survive losing but never succeeded. Those sacred rewards were all he'd lost, and all he was taking back.

"I... missed... this." His whispered confession erupted before he could restrain it.

In the next heartbeat, her breathing changed, her cunt fluttering around his finger before clamping down tight. She came with a silent gasp, her body

pressing so trustingly against his as she soared.

And wasn't that what he'd always wanted?

To be the one who gave her what she needed?

A sense of rightness snapped into place.

Especially as vivid, rich colors ranging from deep purple to erotic red flickered across the inside of the cloak, a dazzling light show he'd thought he'd never see again.

*More.* He mouthed the word against her ear rather than risk growling it aloud.

Scarlett whimpered in protest, trying to close her legs.

That, he would not allow.

He pinched her clit. Used the flat of his palm to deliver a firm tap.

She shuddered, then widened her legs, her hips rolling against his hand.

*Good girl.* Again, he mouthed the praise against her skin.

More slick coated his palm.

A lot might have changed between them but not this. She still liked how he took charge, and he enjoyed doing it.

"Spread." Damien issued the whispered command, and she immediately complied, her thighs widening further as his palm settled more firmly against her swollen folds.

He knew he shouldn't fucking do it. He did it anyway.

Loosening his holster, he shoved down his leathers, grabbed his dick, and guided it between her legs before returning his palm to her mons and trapping her against him once again. "Close 'em. Squeeze me tight, baby."

She rose onto her tiptoes, her slick making it all too easy for him to seesaw his dick back and forth between the soft silk of her inner thighs. Never entering her cunt. Just down-and-dirty dry humping, though she was so damned wet, and he was leaking so much precum that it was far from dry. But it was definitely filthy. Especially with his hand still clamped tight around her mouth.

So. Fucking. Good.

His head rolled back.

The scent of her surrounded him, his knot swelling each time it drove between her soft thighs.

Fuck if he didn't love the sheer filthiness of jacking off between her thighs while she had no choice but to take it.

A part of him wanted to ram inside, claim her fully as he knotted and

rutted and marked her with his bite, but there were about a hundred reasons why that was a bad idea right at this moment, and he managed to hold on to just enough sanity to remember that.

Then she grabbed his hips, her nails digging in as she silently demanded that he move faster, and he forgot everything but how good it felt just like this.

Damien pumped his hips, the fat, round head of his cock throbbing as it rubbed against her. His knot swelled, so close to the territory he wanted to claim forever.

Her little breathy hitches only brought him closer to the edge, his fingers working her clit feverishly as he rocked in and out of those thighs.

A slight sound escaped from beneath his palm. He pressed it tighter against her sweet mouth. “Only I get to hear. Only I get to feel you tremble and rock against me. Because I am jealous of everything when it comes to you, Scarlett. Possessive of every shiver, every sound, every whimper of surrender. Hungry for it all. And I refuse to share.” His rumbled words turned into a growl. “Because you were always meant to be mine.”

She came apart, her pussy drenching his fingers, the vivid flash of iridescent colors even more vibrant than before.

Damien followed right behind, overwhelmed and under siege, sucker punched by a level of intense pleasure he’d never known. His jaw locked down tight as his body jerked in rhythm with hers, and his cum spurted from his cock in ropey waves.

It jetted between her legs, marking her thighs and back, his seed laying claim to the only female he’d ever wanted for his own.

And, Goddess help him, before he’d even realized what he was doing; he dragged his fingers through the thick cream and thrust inside her, her channel squeezing tight as he pushed his cum deep. Stuffing a part of him into the wet little hole still contracting around him.

As before, he knew he shouldn’t do it.

He did it anyway.

Branding her from the inside out. Asserting his place. Maybe even breeding her. Because he might not have put his cock in her yet, but some primal piece of him had already staked its claim.

Call it obsession; call it sheer fucking possessive Alpha madness. Everything inside him at that moment knew he’d never feel even one-tenth of this gut-churning need for another female.



The instinct wasn't sweet. It wasn't tender or soft or kind. Perhaps not even wise. But it was impossible to ignore.

He and Scarlett might be all kinds of fucked up for each other, but that didn't mean she wasn't his. Because she was also everything beautiful and wild and right.

He settled as her climax ended and she melted against him, her cunt squeezing his fingers tight, drawing his cum deeper inside.

No matter their past, no matter the betrayal. His pain, his pleasure, his very being belonged to her.

*And wasn't that a brutal kick to his balls after all his bellowing to the contrary?*

His hands were still gripping her, both of them breathing hard and fast, their bodies locked together with sweat and slick and cum, when the guards' voices intruded.

"Floor's clear. We looked everywhere." The guard's shout echoed down the hallway. "She's not here. Time to move to phase two."

"Is that really necessary?" One of his team challenged, entirely unaware of the magnificent powers of Maxheim's cloak. "Whoever used her to trigger the alarm is long gone. Seems such a waste of a good building."

"You want to tell the big boss you didn't follow protocol?" Their voices grew fainter. "His assistant's outside the building right now, watching and waiting to report to the big boss. We stick to orders—or we die."

Scarlett wiggled in his hold. Damien kept her right where she was. "Wait." Again, his mouth moved over the shell of her ear. "I have a plan, but they need to be farther down the corridor and well clear of the room."

And maybe... just maybe, he wanted to hold her for another heartbeat.

To have one more moment before they had to leave the storage unit and face not only whatever lay ahead but also wherever the hells they went from here.

So, he tightened his grip, locking her against him. "This isn't over, Scarlett. Not by a long shot. What happened here needs to be discussed. You got me, Omega?"

She stilled and then nodded. A cautious dip of her head that told him their wild moment of fuckery had only made things more complicated between them, not less.

Perhaps his instincts were shit, his urges when it came to this female all screwed up, but he was following them anyway.

For four long planetary rotations, he'd fought to stay away from her, and it had done nothing but make him angrier, more bitter, and lonely.

Time to try a different tack.

"I don't want to hear any bullshit about this being a one-time thing." He used the outside of the cloak to wipe his cum from her back and thighs. "Even without the taming chain, you let me stroke that pretty little slit, soaked my fingers with that sweet pussy juice, and I want more."

Her chest rose and fell rapidly.

"Nod if you understand."

Scarlett hesitated, then nodded again.

"Good girl."

She shivered, and he suppressed a groan. Whatever else had changed, she still loved his praise, and hells if he didn't love giving it to her.

His dick hardened again.

Forcing his fingers to obey, he let her go. Then he took the time to shove his cock back into his leathers and lace them up before resecuring his holster at his waist.

Scarlett kept her eyes averted as she did her best to readjust her clothing, and he worried he'd been too rough. Or that she was already twisting things and telling herself what had just happened was a disaster she could not afford to repeat.

Not that he'd let that stand.

The hiss of valves brought him back to the matter at hand. A bitter scent flooded the room as they started pumping the gas Scarlett had mentioned into the space.

"We need to hustle." Damien kept his voice low in case any straggler guards remained as he moved to stand in front of her. "But I go first. Stay behind—and close."

Thankfully, she listened, gripping the waistband of his leathers as he opened the door and moved into the main room, laser at the ready. "They'll have blocked the main exits and locked us in." Panic laced her words. "It's part of the protocol."

"I remember." He strode toward the private elevator. "Which is why we're using this."

"I don't have access."

"We don't need it." Damien slammed his fist into the wall near the panel—the noise he made the reason he'd waited until the guards were gone to

undertake his plan—then gripped the wires and yanked, a nifty trick he'd learned from his older brothers.

The elevator doors slid open, triggered by the manual overdrive.

He peered down. No elevator cab and it was a long way down, but the cables would hold.

“That? No, I—” She began to cough, a sure sign the gas was filling the room.

Damien shoved the cloak at her. “Wrap this around you. I'll carry you down on my back. It'll be fine. I just hope we scanned everything of use.” He turned back toward the desk to take one last look.

And his gaze caught on one of the still-working monitors.

The air was ripped from his lungs.

He lurched toward the screen. “What the fuck?”

Scarlett was by his side in an instant, her hands wrapping around his bicep. “We need to go.”

He stayed right where he was.

“Damien, please. We—”

“How?” The roar exploded from him.

She froze. Her mouth opened. No words came out.

“This isn't possible.” His voice didn't sound like his own.

Because despite the fractured monitor, there was no mistaking what he saw.

The same face he'd seen so often in his nightmares.

However, this time, the eyes that stared back at him weren't so lifeless. They blinked, they narrowed, they glittered with rage as the Alpha they belonged to stood outside the headquarters building and shouted at the guards, his tail twitching back and forth.

Crex, his old friend, was alive?

Scarlett's grip contracted on his forearm. “Some secrets I wish you never had to know.”

The hissing grew louder. A fireball filled the room.



## DAMIEN

“**D**amien, you can put me down now. We’re well away from the blast and headquarters.”

Scarlett’s words barely penetrated the clamor in his head.

“Damien!” A warm, soot-covered palm landed on his jaw. “You need to take a break.”

Take a break? There was no stopping now. No rest until he outran what he’d learned and what had almost happened.

Another heartbeat’s hesitation, and he’d never have been able to swing Scarlett up onto his back and leap onto the cable, sliding down with the fireball hot on their heels.

Operating on autopilot, he’d gotten them down to the lobby as the walls buckled and the massive chandelier crashed to the ground. He’d hurled himself and Scarlett out of the elevator shaft just in time. Then it had been all too easy to use the ensuing chaos as cover while he slipped back into the tunnels.

But he wasn’t sure how to settle the turmoil in his head.

Crex was alive.

All these planetary rotations, Damien had watched over Crex’s sisters, blaming himself, and Scarlett, for the male’s death.

Except the bastard lived. He worked for Darvish. And Scarlett had always known.

Each damned time, the cuts she delivered just got deeper.

Damien ran faster, charging around corners, powering through the maze of rubble and twisty turns until he finally reached his and Maddox’s agreed

meeting spot.

The space was an old sleeping quarters where they'd bunked for the past few nights, a considerable distance from their interrogation room.

He shrugged off his pack, the cloak, even his holster and weapons.

But he couldn't put Scarlett down. Or stop moving. Maxheim would analyze the vids for any useful information. Anya would find a way to report that she was safely back at the shuttle, and Maddox would return here as soon as he could. In the meantime, there was nothing to do but wait.

Wait and somehow try to come to grips with what he'd discovered.

"It's not possible." Restless and on edge, Scarlett still clutched to his chest, cradled in his arms, Damien paced past the two sleeping bags and their cache of weapons, then turned and did it again. "I watched him die with my own eyes."

"You were drugged. They made you see what they wanted."

"No. His eyes were empty, his neck twisted to one side."

"They gave him something too. Some kind of unsanctioned, off-market drug designed to mimic death. He walks with a shuffle now because of it."

"No, Crex died. I saw it."

"None of us knew until later, but Darvish had incriminating vids of him stealing from other fighters. Once he found out about your friendship with Crex, Darvish blackmailed Crex into doing his bidding, but the male liked the power. He took to being Darvish's assistant with sadistic pleasure."

"No."

"Damien, please." She gripped his chin. "Put me down, and I'll explain what I can."

He stopped short. "Now you want to tell me?" Rage thundered through him, burning through the numbness and leaving a searing ball of agony in its wake. "How could you keep something like that from me?"

He dropped her to her feet and stormed to the other side of the small room, the top of his horns scraping the ceiling.

Silence descended.

It barely registered over the pounding of his heart.

"All that wasted hate and rage." Restless energy drove his footsteps back and forth. "All the time spent hating myself and you. For nothing."

Scarlett's breathing grew ragged. "I wanted to tell you."

"Yet you didn't." He slammed his fist into the wall, the shredding of his knuckles nowhere near enough to distract from the agony ripping through his

chest.

“Don’t!”

“Don’t what? Keep pretending? Isn’t it time one of us told the truth?” His chest shuddered, rising up and down faster than he could control. “I wanted to come back to you a hundred times a rotation. So many damned suns’ rises I dropped my guard and walked into someone’s fist just to feel something besides the empty, churning rage in my gut.”

Her expression crumpled.

Damien felt the throb of her pain in his chest. Right alongside his own.

He just wasn’t sure he cared anymore.

“Every night, I trained until I was too bruised and exhausted to jump into my shuttle and embarrass my ass by showing back up at the dome and stealing you away.”

“Damien...” A single tear tracked through the soot on her cheek. “All I thought about was you. All I wanted was you.”

He turned away, struggling for control. How many more ways could she betray him?

“Damien, please.”

He shrugged off her plea. “Any time another omega even came near me, I scared them off. Their scent, their smile, their voice, was all wrong. The thought of touching anyone but you, tasting anyone but you, was enough to make me physically ill.”

“I never wanted that for you.” He could sense her behind him now, close enough to touch. “I... I wanted you to be happy.”

He dug his claws into the wall to keep from turning to her. “Happy? The only thing that kept me from coming back and fighting for you, from demanding to know what Stormhart could give you that I couldn’t, was the part you and I played in Crex’s death. So instead, I drowned in guilt. Guilt for trusting you when I shouldn’t have. Guilt for being the reason my friend was dead. Most of all, guilt for still wanting you anyway.”

He struck the rock wall. Then he did it again. And again.

“Stop!” Soft hands wrapped around his bicep and tugged.

Because he’d never risk hurting Scarlett, even in his current enraged state, he dropped his arm and let her turn him around.

“I’m sorry.” A sob was wrenched from her as she gazed up at him. “I wanted to tell you.”

“Then why didn’t you?” He fisted his torn knuckles by his sides, the sting

of the damaged skin nothing compared to the agony inside.

“I was trying to protect you.”

“Protect me?” His fury flared once more, four planetary rotations’ worth of buried torment scratching and clawing its way to the top. “By letting me think a good friend was dead when he was really a liar and a traitor?”

“I had no choice.”

Damien barely heard her, his own pain making him desperate to wound just as he’d been. “There’s always a fucking choice, Omega. And you made yours when you decided to work alongside my half brother and Crex, two males clearly out to destroy me and my family.”

“I had a plan.”

“A plan? To join yourself to some other Alpha and let him fuck you when you’d called yourself mine? If that’s your idea of a plan, I guess I should count myself lucky things ended for us as they did.”

She reared back as if struck. “Don’t say that.”

“Then what do you want me to say, Scarlett? Thank you for the lies? The guilt? The four planetary rotations of sheer hells while jealousy ate me alive?”

He loomed closer. “Did you get off on twisting me into knots?”

“No. Please. It’s not like that. It never was.” She raised her hands as if to touch him, but then thought better of it. “It’s such a tangled mess. I-I did the best I could.”

“And that didn’t include picking up a comms? Asking me for help?” He scoffed. “I call bullshit.”

“I couldn’t. Every movement I made was monitored. Same with Luc and Stormhart. You saw the spyware. It’s almost impossible to evade.”

Damien’s lips firmed. *Shit*. He hated to admit it, but the level of surveillance was unlike any he’d ever seen. Only Maxheim’s tech was better, and their family was the only one who had it.

“I couldn’t reach out to you even if I wanted. But it was more than that. They used Luc as leverage...” her voice shook, and he hated that too. “Made horrific threats against you and others I care about. I thought keeping everyone alive was the best plan.”

He stayed silent.

Scarlett’s shoulders sagged. “But it turns out just being alive isn’t enough. That the ache to be near the one you want strips all the joy and color from life and brings its own form of death.”



His own eyes blurred. He blinked fast.

Because he didn't want to relate to anything she had to say.

But, fuck, that was exactly what it felt like.

The end of them had catapulted him into a suspended state of mourning, an infinite void of jealousy, want, hopelessness, and so much rage.

And it had all been based on lies.

"I thought it hurt when you betrayed me, when you kicked me to the curb and shackled up with Stormhart because you didn't want me anymore." He rubbed his chest. "But it's an altogether different kind of cut to know all of that was just pretend and you didn't trust me enough to give me the truth."

Scarlett sucked down a sharp breath. "It wasn't a matter of trust. It was about survival. I-I truly thought I was doing what was right."

"By shutting me out?" His pain raged on; a seething storm that refused to be appeased. "You could have told me before I left the dome, the very rotation you almost let me fuck you in that guarded room and then sent me on my way with drugged water, but you said nothing. We could have handled it together."

"Together?" She laughed, but there was no humor in it. "We weren't *together* when I waited for you at our secret meeting spot, and my old handler, Egan, turned up instead. We weren't together when my gift erupted when he tried to rape me, and I killed him, and Darvish caught it all on his sick vids, then threatened to show it to the Consortium and have me executed for murdering my superior."

Each of her words hit with the force of a blow.

He hadn't known.

"We weren't together," she continued, "when they showed me the live feed of you lying on that tunnel floor, unconscious, Crex's tail suspended over your skull, ready to smash down if I refused. Or when Darvish showed me his incriminating vids of Luc and told me that he'd share them with the galaxy and destroy my brother's life unless I cooperated. We weren't together when his guards held a taster to Luc's temple and threatened to kill him if I didn't continue to follow all of Darvish's orders." Her eyes looked haunted, as if she were reliving the horror of each moment. "How could I do anything but agree?"

Shock twisted through Damien. He tried to process her words; his rage waning as fast as it came on.

"If I could have saved you from all the pain, I would have." She

swallowed hard, unaware her words had decimated his fury and replaced it with agony—for her. “You may hate me, but the truth is, I hate myself more. Hate what I’ve become.”

Her voice cracked on that final word.

The sound most broke him.

“Scarlett...” He reached for her.

She turned away.

That hurt even worse.

She’d been through hells, and he hadn’t been there.

She’d lied to him. Deceived him. But she’d had no choice. He had, and he hadn’t used it to come back. He left her alone to deal with horrors that would have broken most, and she’d survived. All on her own.

“Every night, I wished for some way to make things right.” Each of her whispered words cut deep. “But... but I couldn’t. I haven’t had a say in what happens to me or those I care about in a long time. I did the best I could to keep you safe.”

At her own expense.

Because he’d allowed himself to think only of her betrayal and stayed away.

A rock the size of his fist dropped from the ceiling and landed nearby.

He glanced up. Froze. For the first time, he noticed shadows flickering across the walls. Pebbles crumbling to the ground.

*Shit.* Her gift was powering up at the worst possible time. He’d initially mistaken the wild, searing storm pounding against his skin as his fury and guilt. Now he realized it was her gift, the hum of it scraping against his flesh, her shame and pain clawing for its due.

Damien got his head out of his ass and pulled it together fast.

He closed the gap between them and spun her around to face him. “Scarlett, you need to calm down. We both do.”

Scarlett shook her head, hair flying around her face. “I can’t control it when it gets like this.” Panic lit her gaze. “You should get back. If the ceiling collapses again—”

“It’s fine.” Palms wrapping around her shoulders, he drew one exaggerated slow breath after another. “Just follow me. Like this.”

Yes, a part of him still wanted to rage and stomp and shout. To demand the rest of the answers here and now.

But he was no longer a kid. He was a damned grown-ass Alpha, and

ensuring Scarlett collected no more bruises on that delicate skin or endured more pain was priority number one.

She'd spent too long without anyone to take care of her, and that's what he intended to do from here on out.

"Keep taking deep breaths." He injected a subtle command into his tone, an Alpha guiding his omega for her own good. "It's going to be okay."

"It's not." The shadows flickered along the walls, cracks spreading across the ceiling. "I can still feel your rage." She dragged her palm over her breastbone. "And my own."

She was right.

He gave her what he could. "I'm not saying this situation isn't fucked up or that all the messiness and pain will disappear in an instant." He kept his voice low and coaxing. The same tone he used with Alexi's pet flufarian when no one else was listening. "We're not the same as we used to be, and uncovering the truths of the past won't magically fix the present. But I understand now, and..." He swallowed hard. "I don't hate you. I hated what you did to me, to us, but despite what I said in anger, I could never hate you. *Never.*"

"Y-you couldn't?" Chest rising and falling, she eyed him warily.

"I couldn't." He ran his palms up and down her upper arms, the skin at his torn knuckles pulling tight, the silk of her flesh centering him like nothing else could. "And even though I deserve it, I hope to gods you don't hate me either. The rage you feel from me is for Darvish." His voice shook, and he didn't even care. "No more bruises for either of us, okay?"

Damien drew her closer.

Thankfully, she let him, her arms wrapping around him, and then, she was sobbing, her body shaking against his. "I missed you so much."

*Hells.* Throat tight, he blinked fast.

He wanted to cry as well. For the time they'd lost. For all the wasted guilt and hate. For the time and energy spent mourning Crex, a bastard who clearly didn't deserve it. For Scarlett, whom he'd unwittingly left to suffer at the hands of his half brother. For his own foolish pride and ego and his refusal to return sooner and take back what was his.

"I missed you so fucking much too." It felt good to admit it out loud. "But I'm here now."

He repeated the words over and over, rocking her until her sobs quieted.

The broken pieces inside him clicked back into place as her body molded

to his, and he pressed his cheek to the top of her head, her warmth seeping into his skin.

Almost as good, the shadows on the wall grew muted. Pebbles stopped plinking to the floor. He could only hope that meant her gift wasn't pummeling at her too.

Nuzzling his jaw along the silk of her hair, he drew her into his lungs. "This is better, right?"

It was all so fucked up. He'd loved her. Cursed her. Ached for her. And he still did, all of it churning inside him in one messy tumult of blame, need, and absolution. But something new pulsed within as well.

It terrified him to name it, but it almost felt like... hope.

He'd thought there was nothing left for him and Scarlett but hate and lust, but now, everything was different.

"I really am sorry." She clutched him closer, calmer, but still worked up. "I wouldn't blame you if you did hate me. Everything's such a mess. I honestly thought that I could fix it. That if I bided my time, Darvish would drop his guard, and I could finally stop fighting the darkness inside and let it take over, let it swallow me, Darvish, Crex, and all those disgusting vids in one explosion, and everyone would finally be free—"

"Wait. What?" Damien stiffened. "You were planning to sacrifice yourself to take out Darvish?"

Her gaze snapped to his, her eyes going wide. "It was the only way."

"No." Legs suddenly too weak to support him, he sank to his knees, then his ass, taking her with him, cradling her so tight that he was close to crushing her. "No!"

"Damien!" Startled, she seized hold of his shoulders.

Still, she wasn't close enough.

"Don't you ever fucking think like that again!" His heart hammered against his ribs as if wanting to crash right through and burrow into hers. "That is never the plan. You hear me? You have to be in this galaxy, Scarlett. You have to be alive." His voice was a desperate growl. "I can handle anything as long as I know you're out there breathing the same galactic air, smiling that sweet smile, looking up at the same stars."

She drew in a halting breath.

"Promise me."

She bit her lip. Looked away. "I can't make that kind of promise."

He gripped her chin and drew her gaze back to his. "You can. You will."

Otherwise, he'd chain her to him and never let her leave again. He might not anyway. "You think just because I wasn't physically here that I wasn't with you every single rotation? That my lungs didn't breathe in time with yours? My heartbeat didn't match yours? The truth is that you never left me. I carried you with me with every step, every breath."

Her expression softened.

He carried on. "Far away or near, fated-mate marks or not, it doesn't matter. You leave this life, and that's it for me. I'll fly my shuttle into the closest sun and join you in the beyond."

"Damien, no!"

"You want to look out for me, then you stay right here in this galaxy, and you fight with everything you have to stay alive. Promise me."

Her chin trembled beneath his hold.

"Say it."

"I-I promise."

"Good." His heart still pounded inside his chest, but at least he could draw air. He pulled back just far enough to stare down into her beautiful, tear-stained face.

Scarlett was still here. Alive. In his arms.

He refused to squander another moment.

"Things are going to be better now." He said it as much for himself as for her.

His words only made Scarlett's eyes fill with tears anew. "I wish... I wish... that were true."

"It is." His determination centered him. "I'm bigger and meaner than anything life can throw at us."

She shook in his hold. "Sometimes, there are things even you can't fight."

"We'll see about that." He pressed his forehead to hers. "We'll deal with Darvish's threats until they're no longer an issue."

"It's not that easy."

"Nothing worth it ever is." He bounded to his feet and strode toward another doorway at the back of the hideout, holding her tight in his arms. "This is where you and I begin again."



SCARLETT

Scarlett clung to Damien as he strode through the second doorway into a charming grotto with rocky walls and a large shimmering, turquoise pool with steam rising from the top.

It was a beautiful surprise.

Almost as beautiful as Damien's pledge to her.

*Begin again.* That was all she wanted too.

She just wasn't sure it was possible.

"Damien." She pressed a hand to his chest. "I don't—"

"No." His gaze bore into hers. "No more hesitation. No more waiting."

Her heart beat faster. "There are things you still don't know."

"I realize that. And we'll get to them. But what I *do* know is that I fucked up and let anger, ego, and hurt rule. I fucked up by staying away for so long, and I fucked up how I've dealt with you since I came back. That ends now."

He set her gently on her feet but didn't let go. "And you and I start anew."

She stared up at him, at the ferocity stamped on his face, wondering how, after all those nights of pain and longing, her dreams had somehow become real.

But dreams were just that for a reason.

"Damien..."

His hand cupped her jaw. "You are so beautiful, and I missed you every damned moment we were apart."

Her heart turned over on itself.

"I know you're scared, baby." He ran a thumb across her cheekbone. "But it's going to be okay."

She already knew that wasn't true.

"You like it here?" He gestured toward their surroundings but never once looked away or lifted his other hand from her cheek. "I think it's fitting." A teasing smile broke out on his face. "I mean, we need to get clean, but it's also symbolic, so don't let anyone tell you you've bonded to a total Alpha-hole fighter. I've got depth." He winked. "And girth."

She laughed.

It was outrageous and unexpected, and such a Damien thing to say, and she knew exactly why he was doing it. To lighten the mood. He'd done that when they were together before, when she was nervous about the tournament or his fights, and it had always worked then. Clearly, it worked now too.

She was exhausted, scraped raw by the honesty of their last exchange, and well aware they'd barely scratched the surface of what she needed to share, but he'd still found a way to get her lips tilting upward before she could stop them.

Was it any wonder she was still truly, madly, deeply in love with him?

There was no one like this male in the entire galaxy. Playful one moment, beyond sweet and romantic the next, and filthy and ferocious the rest of the time.

Goddess, she'd missed him.

But that didn't mean she could have him, no matter how badly she wanted it. No matter how much she wished to begin again.

Scarlett took a step back. "Damien—"

"No." The teasing light left his gaze. "I recognize that tone, and the answer's no. We are not going there. Not ever again." He stepped closer. "All I want to do now is hold my girl."

"But I'm not that girl anymore." She took another step back.

"Then I'll learn all the ways I like this new you." He advanced, his voice going low. "And we both know, no matter how much everything around us changes, when we're here, like this, you'll *always* be my good girl."

Her shiver at his words, the weakening of what she knew was right, only reinforced that she needed to bring this to a close. "You don't understand."

"I think you're the one who's missing what's happening here." Damien reached for her.

She threw her palms up and out. "I-I'm a monster." The confession, left to rattle inside her chest for so long, finally surged free as she stumbled back another step. "Like Crex, Like Darvish."



“You’re nothing like them.” He came at her and wrapped his hands around her shoulders.

“I am.” She shoved at his chest. “Just as bad.”

He didn’t even rock back a little. “You are not a fucking monster.”

Scarlett struggled in his hold. “You don’t know. You won’t let me tell you everything.”

“So tell me.”

*Oh gods. Oh gods.* She’d dreaded this moment for so long. “I... I’ve killed.”

Again, he didn’t even flinch. “Egan?” He clarified, proving he’d been listening. “You killed your handler, Egan, when he tried to rape you, right? Good. Fucker deserved it—and thank the Goddess for your gift.”

Gaze shifting away, she forced out the rest. “Not just him.” Her eyes filled. “Others.”

Damien bit out a low curse. “Fuck, I’m sorry, baby.”

She fought to keep the tears at bay. “So am I.”

“I don’t have to hear the stories to know you had no choice.”

“That’s where you’re wrong.” Another half-sob. “And I know... I know you’ve killed too, but I’m not like you and, what’s more, the Scarlett you knew would never have done such things. I could have disobeyed orders and chosen to let Luc die. Or myself. But I didn’t.”

“Thank the fucking gods.” Damien’s fingers dug into her skin.

She barely registered his words, needing to get it all out. “Th-they were all Consortium board competition or males who’d gambled and lost and owed Darvish. They all lived in this world, exploiting the fighters and the prizes, and I know they weren’t good males... but still”—her voice trembled—“they were alive. And my so-called gift took that from them because... because I was so angry.”

“Scarlett.” Damien pulled her close. “You did what you had to do, and I’ll never be anything but grateful for that.”

Her fingers curled into his shirt. “Do you know what Darvish called me? His pet. His little trained pet who stole, who killed at his whim, and who behaved or else.”

A low growl rumbled against her cheek. “I will kill that fucker.”

“Darvish knew exactly what I was.” She spoke over Damien, lost in her fury and shame, the darkness inside battering against her ribs proof. “A monster. Just like him.”

He drew back just far enough that he could glower down at her. “Baby, you are not a monster. I know monsters. My half brother’s one. But not you. Never you.”

“But—”

“He put you in an impossible situation, but you can’t let him win. He and Crex and all the other monsters out there do not get to beat us.” He shook her once, gently. “I can see you’re beating yourself up over this, but I want you to hold on to the fact that your choices didn’t only protect you, they also saved your brother, your omega friends, and... me.” He stared down at her. “Cause, like I already told you, without you in this galaxy, there is no me.”

“Damien—”

“You are *not* a monster.”

Her palms curled against his chest. “You don’t think you need to stay away from me? For your own safety?”

“I’m not going anywhere.”

“There are so many obstacles.”

“I’ll knock ’em down, one by one.”

Goddess, she wanted to believe. “I’m dangerous.”

“Told you already, beautiful.” His hands slid down the length of her back, then cupped her ass. In the next breath, he lifted her so that their gazes aligned, his determination to protect her a near-visceral light that shone from his gorgeous eyes.

Instinctively, she wrapped her legs around his hips as he continued talking. “The most dangerous thing in this galaxy is me when I’m kept from you.”

His mouth claimed hers, his tongue sweeping inside, as fierce and determined as his words—and so hot, she moaned and gave right back.

Scarlett ground her body against his, her fingers tangling in his hair until he broke away, his chest heaving.

“I’m claiming my omega now.” Damien growled the words against her lips. “No more waiting.”

Then, hands still gripping her bottom tight, he stepped forward. And without warning, she was waist-deep in warm water, steam rising from the top, Damien’s shirt and the torn pieces of her dress clinging to her thighs.

She’d been so absorbed in Damien that she hadn’t noticed their surroundings. Now she took them in big time. “How is this possible?”

His smile was smug. “I like that I can kiss you and make everything else

disappear.” When heat flared in her cheeks, he pressed his lips to the tip of her nose. “I like that look too.”

After giving the cave a cursory glance, he returned his gaze to her. “Your ancestors were smart and built their living quarters close to these underground springs. There are a few of them scattered throughout this section of the tunnels. Most have been blocked by rubble or dried up, but a couple are still functional. This is the biggest.”

“Amazing.” She’d lived her whole life in the Golden Dome and, until Damien’s arrival, had no idea these tunnels were still habitable. And once he left, she’d lost any desire to return underground. Now she was sorry she’d stayed away so long.

Especially from a wonder like this.

Perhaps she was just projecting, but she could swear there was also a sense of renewal in the air. Droplets of water clung to the cave walls, making the entire space feel like a shimmering crystal sanctuary. “It’s so beautiful.”

“Not as beautiful as you. Especially with those lips swollen from my kisses, those cheeks flushed, those half-lidded eyes.”

Swooning at his sweet words, Scarlett expected him to pull her close once more. Instead, he placed her on her feet, the water rising to the tops of her breasts, and lifted his hands away. “Strip.”



## SCARLETT

**O**ne word. A single command. That left her breathless.

“Do it fast, Omega.” Damien’s deep voice was as close to a primal rumble as she’d ever heard. “I am done waiting.”

His muscles bunching and water swirling around him, he pulled his shirt over his head and tossed it onto the rocks behind him.

Scarlett lost her mind, her breath leaving her in a rush.

His body had always been beautiful. Somehow, though, it had gotten even more so, every mouthwatering part of him more sculpted and larger, the last edges of youth slipping away to carve him into a dominant Alpha in the prime of his power. Her gaze bounced from his huge biceps and corded forearms to the swirling skin designs over his defined pecs, to the ridges of his abdomen, to the sexy V, begging to be licked.

Then he went for the laces of his leathers.

His cock sprang free: thick and long. Jutting upward, it slapped against his belly, his phallus so swollen and erect it was a deep crimson purple. His balls looked heavier, too, the ridges along his shaft more pronounced and the knot wider.

“You are so beautiful.” Her worshipful words were a whisper, her nipples tight, the throb between her legs a sharp ache even the water could not soothe.

“Omega.” Red streaked his eyes as he grabbed his shaft and pumped once. “Clothes off, now.”

She might be a few planetary rotations older, but her Alpha had come into his own.

Her hands scrambled to obey, her gaze never once leaving his. His shirt—now a blackened mess—came off over her head and was tossed aside with ease. The scraps of what remained of her dress took longer, thanks to her trembling fingers. It didn't matter.

His stare never wavered, and when she peeled the fabric from her breasts, he sucked in a sharp breath. And when she pulled it from her waist and let it drift away, leaving her naked before him, he growled low, his stare hungrier and more determined than she'd ever seen before.

“No dream, no wish”—his voice was a husky rasp— “comes close to the reality of you.”

Scarlett's heart stopped, then started up triple time as want throbbed between her thighs.

He strode toward her.

“I've never been rutted.” The confession burst from her.

Damien stilled. “What?”

“Never,” she whispered.

“I don't...” He shook his head. “What about Stormhart?”

“We never consummated the contract. I told you, I never felt that way about him, and he never wanted that with me either.”

His eyes sank shut for an instant. And when they opened, the depth of need and tenderness sent shivers racing down her spine. “Same.”

Now it was her turn to be confused. “What?”

“I never wanted anyone but you. So there's been no one else. Only you.”

She staggered back as the magnitude of what he'd done slammed into her. He was an Alpha in his prime, betrayed, and yet he'd remained loyal to her this entire time.

“Damien...”

“Darvish took so much from us. I'm so damned glad he's not getting this. First, last, and forever.”

Panting hard, she watched him advance.

He stopped a hand's length away and fingered the taming chain at her throat. “I'm leaving this on until the fated-mate marks return.”

A slow shiver ran through her.

“It looks hot as hells on you. And I haven't even shown you one-tenth of how it can be used to give you pleasure.”

Scarlett trapped in a soft moan.

“I want every Alpha to know you've been claimed by me. Plus, I know

when we're playing with it, you're going to spread those legs so wide and high for me, baby, and I'm going to take all you have to give—and give back even more.”

She trembled just thinking about it.

Damien and his toys. Damien and his arrogance. Damien and his commands. She loved every moment of it.

Truth be told, she wanted to be tied to him in every possible way.

He hadn't asked for her permission. She gave it to him anyway. “I'm never taking it off. Ever.”

Her declaration earned her a slow, sexy smile “Good girl.”

Seeing him like this, having him like this, she was done resisting.

The darkness inside her had become oddly, blissfully, quiet. Yes, she could still feel it, coiled tight, gathering energy to rise once again and taint everything she'd tried to set right. But she'd keep her gift contained. Double down on her efforts to vanquish it until it disappeared altogether.

Because there was no one like Damien Skolov, and she wanted to be his with every broken piece of her soul.

If he was willing to take the risk, then so was she. She'd fight with everything she had for the chance to be with him.

A flash of light on the tunnel wall had her whipping her head to the side. “Did you see that?”

“Your colors on the walls?” He shrugged as if it were no big deal. “They've been happening since we were in the closet at Consortium headquarters. But they're brighter now. As beautiful as ever.”

Scarlett could only stare at where the burst of color had been. It might be no big deal to him, but to her, it was everything. “I-I haven't seen that for a long time.” She cleared her throat. “I actually haven't been able to make them appear.” *Since you left.* “I didn't think I ever would again.”

He pressed his forehead to hers. “Never say never with me, baby.”

A soft humming vibrated in her throat. Her eyes went wide. There was no mistaking that resonance. She'd purred. That too had been absent since his departure.

They both froze.

Then, as if two parts of the same note, a deep rumble echoed from Damien in response.

“Our song.”

She surged onto her tiptoes as his head angled down. They met in the

middle, a wild tangle of lips and tongues and need.

His hands roamed everywhere. As did hers.

He broke their kiss, his hand sliding down her belly to cup her pussy, a trail of water in its wake. “This belong to me?”

She moaned low.

“Words.” His grip tightened. “You owe me after leaving so much unsaid.”

“Yes,” she whispered.

“And this.” He took her hand, wrapped it around his cock. “This belong to you?”

Her palm squeezing just hard enough to pull a low grunt from him.

“Scarlett,” he growled, “words.”

“Yes.” Voice thick with need and awe, she stared into his eyes as her thumb glided over the plump, full head. “This belongs to me.”

“That’s right.” His hips rocked forward, pushing into her hold, his expression fierce. “To you. Only. Always and forever.”

“I missed all of you so much.” She squeezed harder, her clit throbbing, her arousal an acute ache that only amplified with the thick, heavy weight of him in her palm.

“You’ll be reunited with it all. But first…” Gaze intent, he dragged her hand from his cock and up his chest to press her palm over his beating heart. “This belong to you too?”

“Yes.” Humbled, filled with wonder, possessiveness, and pride shimmering through her, she answered without hesitation. “Just like mine beats for you. Only you. Always and forever.”

“Fuck, yes.” A breath shuddered out of him, the look on his face—hunger and need, tenderness and hope—ripped her apart and built her anew.

Without warning, his expression shifted, growing fierce, and before her next breath, he grasped her bottom and lifted her from the water. Droplets flew in all directions as he pinned her to him and dragged her core over the outside of his shaft, handling her with ease as he worked her slick from head to root, getting him wet for her. “Time to begin again, baby. Time to let me inside. All the way this time.”

Scarlett knew he wasn’t just talking about her pussy.

“Yes.” She dug her fingers into his strong back, rocked with him, mesmerized by the beauty of him, the wet, warm heat of their surroundings, and the agonizing sharp edge of joy he gave her with every word, every



touch, every command.

And that was it. That was the thing with a storm like Damien. He churned up every emotion: the good, the bad, the ugly, and the beautiful. But for the first time in a long time, she wasn't afraid to drown in it, to hold up her head and let his strength and force of will pour over her, soak into her skin and lift her up, help her to believe.

Maybe, just maybe, there was a different fate in store for her than the one she'd once assumed was her only ending.

Maybe, even with everything that had happened, with everything she'd done, with every obstacle that still lay before them, she and Damien could have always and forever.

"It'll take some work, and some slick and spit, but I'm coming in." He grunted as he covered his cock with more of her slick. "I've had my fingers inside that sweet little pussy. I know just what a tight little hole you have, so we'll take it nice and slow, but it will be worth it."

She'd accept any pain to finally have him inside her. "Please, Damien. I need you. Now."

"If this is a dream, I never want to wake up." He turned them around, water splashing everywhere, his back pressing against a large, wet rock. Then suddenly, his hold was steadier, the angle even better.

She moaned low. "Damien."

"Put me where I'm meant to be, Scarlett."

Slipping a hand between them, she gripped his cock and tilted her hips in his hold, rocking back and forth until he sat notched at her entrance.

Finally.

Their gazes locked.

"This mine too?"

"Damien—"

"This. Mine?"

Her free hand cradled his jaw. "Yes."

"Forever?"

"And always."

Growling, he pressed inside, the thick head pushing into her channel.

Her slick and the wetness on his cock eased the way, but he was huge. Her body forced to stretch wide.

She was in awe of how careful he was being with her. She could see the corded lines of his neck standing out in strain and hear the rough, primal rasp

of his breath. And she knew he wanted to ram inside. He was an Alpha in his prime, and he'd waited for her for four long planetary rotations. Even now, he was holding himself back. For her.

But she wanted to give him everything.

Scarlett bore down.

His tip popped all the way in.

She mewled.

“Fuck!” He shuddered, his nostrils flaring, hands gripping her ass tighter, his words coming out in rough grunts. “Knew it would be amazing. Had no idea it would be life changing.”

She pressed her nose into the strong column of his neck, the sweetest of pleasures mixed with a sharp sting, proving she was alive—and that this was no dream. Only the loveliest of wishes come true. “More.”

Damien worked himself deeper. “No place better than your pussy, Scarlett. No place feels tighter or wetter or more like coming home.”

She cried out against his skin as the need inside her spiraled upward. The fullness of him, the beauty of their connection, making her wild.

“All the way.” She breathed against him. “Claim me.” She swiveled her hips and bit down gently on his neck. “No more waiting.”

He broke. With a roar, he seated himself to the root.

She screamed, not in pain, but in pure, white-hot bliss.

Her head fell back, her spine arching as he filled her completely. Coming home.

“Scarlett, baby?” Voice rough, Damien went still inside her. “You okay?”

She was omega, and she was made to take him. This Alpha. This extraordinary male. Always and forever. And she loved the feel of him seated deep.

“Better than okay.” She ground her hips against the root of him, the lust inside her building. “Fuck me, Damien.” Her own command.

Another roar ripped from him. “My wild thing.” Hips punching, he surged upward.

Then there was only the raw need, the slap of skin and the clash of lips, and the churning of the water as he bounced her on his cock, and everything inside her coiled tighter and tighter. Black, jagged shadows and vivid splashes of red, pink, and purple flashed across the walls as she purred and moaned his name.

“Eyes on me.” Feet planted far apart, his strength on full display, he

worked her up and down. “Eyes on me as you come for me, baby.”

Yes. Yes. Her gaze locked with his. That was what she needed. His eyes. His face. The sense of safety, of connection, that only he could give as he pushed her closer and closer to the edge, and for once, finally, she didn’t care if she toppled over.

“I got you, beautiful.” He rammed home deeper, harder, his knot swelling with every pump, forcing her channel wider, pleasure and pain mingling in the sweetest of ways. “Come for me, wild thing. Now.”

Damien shifted his hold, his fangs sinking into her skin as his new angle hit her clit just right, and primed as she was, she hurled over the precipice.

She came apart. Colors and shadows burst behind her eyelids as pleasure radiated from the top of her head to her toes and he grunted and filled her, her climax triggering his own.

Warm liquid flooded her pussy, marking her from the inside out as his knot expanded fully, locking them together. Bound together by sweat, saliva, cum, and hope.

They soared as one. Shattered and rebuilt. As one.

*This is where you and I begin again.*

*Always and forever.*

More than anything, she wanted it to be real.

And for one beautiful moment, it was.



## DAMIEN

**H**olding her close, his knot locking them tight, Damien took his first full breath in a long time.

Scarlett was his.

This was real: his hands on her ass, his dick buried deep inside her, droplets of water rolling down her back. Every part of her: his. Every part of him: hers.

Nirvana. After so much hells.

They were a perfect fit.

He licked at the indentations his fangs had made in her pretty throat, ensuring they closed. Then he nuzzled at the marks, thinking this was what happiness felt like.

She might still be wary. And he might have made himself forget for a while, burying the truth beneath anger and accusation, but that bullshit was behind him now. So was the agony, the jealousy, that had wrecked him at the thought of another male's hands on her.

She. Was. His.

Every moment of their struggle was worth it now that he held her in his arms.

And he would do whatever it took—kill whoever he had to—to keep her with him.

Always and forever.

But he feared his biggest challenge might be Scarlett herself.

She wasn't where he was yet.

He didn't have to hear her skepticism out loud to feel it. Or see the

flashes of black on the walls to know the pain still raged inside her.

But he'd batter down every fear, wipe out every doubt until she was right where he was: one hundred percent certain they would never be apart again.

"Damien?" She wiggled against him, and he refocused to find her staring up at him, shyness and uncertainty shadowing her lovely eyes.

*Shit.* He probably should have said something once he finished inside her. Not just lean against the rock, hands clamped tight to her ass with a shit-eating grin that had morphed into a determined scowl as his thoughts hit hard.

*Be cool, idiot.*

But, hells, it wasn't every rotation that he had his cock bounced on by the female of his dreams.

Still...

"Sorry, beautiful." He loosened his hold, but only a little, and pushed off from the rock. Still carrying her, his knot locking them together and her thighs wrapped around his hips, he waded over to a submerged rock bench on the far side of the pool.

Mindful that his cock was still deep inside her and he didn't want her scraping her knees or shins, he was careful as he settled on the rock bench and kept her straddling him.

He pressed a kiss to the tip of her nose. "I know I should be playing it cool, but you just took every filthy, perfect fantasy I had about being inside you and proved the reality was a million times better."

And he wanted to do it again. Repeatedly. Starting immediately.

His cock twitched inside her at the thought.

The shyness in her gaze disappeared, erased by a wide smile that made him feel as tall as an Abzalian ice mountain. "I knew there were benefits to being with a younger male. You younglings have such stamina."

His heart stuttered. He'd missed her teasing too.

*Also, hells yeah.*

Arms closing tight, Damien grinned down at her. "I knew you'd come around eventually."

Laughing, she pressed into him, her face burrowing into the column of his throat, and he breathed in the perfect fit of her against him, the warm air, the satiation that washed through him from the top of his head to his toes.

"I have to admit"—her fingers toyed with the hair at the nape of his neck—"I might need a moment of recovery."

That he got. It had been her first time too. "Whatever you need,

beautiful.”

She melted against him.

No wonder his older brothers were always sneaking off to rut their omegas. Fucking was amazing. As was the aftermath.

Good thing he hadn't known what he was missing.

It would have made him even more of an angry Alphahole than he'd been.

He'd make it up to this family.

Once he made shit up to Scarlett, and figured out how to protect her, get to Darvish and Crex, and locate Zaya.

“I dreamed of this moment so many times.” She kept her face buried in his throat. “I never thought it would actually happen.”

“But it has.” He'd tell her as many times as it took. “And it's only the beginning.”

Scarlett sighed, long and loud.

He knew what that meant.

She was afraid. Convinced that whatever ugliness she still had to share with him might send them back to the anger and pain of before.

But what she didn't understand was there was nothing she could do that would bring that about.

He'd fucked up once, let the thought that she'd moved on with another guy put him off when he should have fought with everything he had to bring her right back to his side.

But he hadn't. So now, he'd learned.

And what he'd learned was that he wouldn't allow anything to keep him from her ever again.

However, until she purged herself of all that needed to be told, she wouldn't know how hard he intended to stick. So there was no way out but through.

Damien threaded his fingers through her hair and gently tugged her head back so that she could meet his gaze. “You ready to trust me with more, Omega?”

It took a heartbeat and a deep, determined breath, but she nodded. “I'm ready.”

He liked that.

Her hands slipped from him, and she wrapped her arms around herself, a self-protective instinct he didn't like. One that had him wanting to reach out

and put her hands back on him.

Damien checked himself.

“Okay then.” Promising himself he’d be back inside her as soon as possible, he concentrated on deflating his knot and lifted her gently off his cock. He repositioned her on his lap, her legs draped across his thighs, his arm curled around her back.

The water lapped at them as she resettled, and his heart squeezed tight when she lifted one palm all on her own and pressed it to his chest. “I-I don’t even know where to start.”

“At the beginning.” He stroked along her spine, steady, soothing. “From the moment everything went to hells.”

“Right.” Gaze skittering away, she ran her other palm across the surface of the water. “Well, you know the Consortium... It’s always been an evil organization, a greedy company that runs the Golden Dome and takes what it likes—things and beings—and destroys the rest. But around the time you and I met, there was a power struggle. More accurately, a hostile takeover.”

“Darvish.”

“Yes. He went from being a new investor to taking control, intent on using his position as head of the Consortium for his own purposes. He controlled Egan, my handler.”

“Hells.”

“Y-yes. That rotation, after we argued, and we were supposed to meet, I waited for you. Darvish sent Egan instead. He... he, well, you know, he tried to rape me.”

Damien’s fangs pulsed against his gums as he locked his shit down tight. He’d heard it before, but it didn’t make it any easier the second time around. Even the thought of her, scared and alone, and him not there to help, made him want to burn the whole galaxy down.

“It’s okay, Damien.” Now it was Scarlett’s palm stroking slow and steady along his chest. “I made it through. The darkness... it just came out of me, slamming into him.” Her voice dropped to a whisper. “It was over in an instant. I knew he was dead. Even before I saw his eyes, I could feel my new gift absorbing his life force, feel it growing in power and need. Worse, I could feel that it wanted to do it again. Cause more chaos, bring more pain.” She shook her head. “It swallowed all my pretty colors. Left me a killer.”

He grabbed her hands and pressed her fingertips to his lips, the slight tang of the water doing nothing to hide the sweetness of her. “Left you a warrior.



A survivor.”

Her tormented gaze snapped to his, the doubt and self-disgust in her stare clawing at him.

Again, he told himself, it would take time. Patience. Not one of his strengths, but he’d learn.

“Remember what I said before. That gift kept you safe.” He focused on soothing her. He’d deal with his own guilt and fury—and hit something hard, repeatedly—after he’d taken care of his female. “That fucker was going to hurt you. Your gift stopped him.”

Her eyelids sank closed. “And became the reason I grew so valuable to your half brother. Darvish might have initially kept tabs on me because of my connection to you, but when he saw what I could do, his interest changed.”

She lapsed into silence.

Damien let her.

Yes, he wanted to throw his head back and howl, but instead, he sat stock-still, pretending each word didn’t strike with the force of a fist to the solar plexus. But he’d take the punches if the telling helped purge Scarlett of her pain.

Finally, she found the strength to continue: “Soon after your departure, Darvish made sure Kadon was appointed as liaison to the Consortium board and put in charge of the scheduling and financials of every aspect of the Golden Dome fights.”

Kadon Stormhart. Although hearing the guy’s name wasn’t as bad now, especially since it was Damien’s lap Scarlett sat on, his arms wrapped tight around her.

“It wasn’t Kadon’s choice,” Scarlett continued. “But he did what he did to protect me, and Darvish was insistent that Kadon take the position. Just as Darvish insisted on our prime omega contract.”

“Why?”

“I’m not sure, though I suspect it was the easiest way for Darvish to control us both, consolidate his power, mess with you, and hide his illegal actions.”

“I really hate my half brother.”

Scarlett’s slight smile made him feel a little better. “Me too.” Her expression hardened. “But Darvish isn’t the only problem.”

“Crex?”

She shivered. “Him, yes. But he’s just a greedy follower, a pathetic

puppet who'll do anything to make his puppeteer happy. He's a monster, obviously. The kind who smiled and pretended you were his friend and, yet, for a great deal of that time, he was spying and working for Darvish."

Damien would have liked to say he had an inkling Crex was playing him four planetary rotations past and that he'd wondered if the way they met had been orchestrated, but that would have been a total lie.

He'd thought Crex had offered support when they were thrown into a cell together because he was a good guy. He'd believed all the stories Crex told him about why he'd come to the Golden Dome. He'd thought that when Crex got into the cage with him at the tournament, he'd done it because they were friends.

All. Lies.

"I don't get the sisters, though." He reasoned aloud. "I've met them. Hung with them. Hells, I even gave two of them the funds they needed to make a prime omega match, and I'm currently waiting on the others to decide so I can send them whatever they need as well. They're all... a handful, but sweet."

Her expression turned sad, her palm skimming the water's surface once again. "I suspect they have no idea what Crex is really like. You've interacted with the male. You know how good he is at deception. But he told me several times that one of the best parts of being thought dead was that he no longer had to deal with his family. He resented how they drained his resources, held him back. He came to the dome looking for a way to fix that, and I got the impression that if Darvish hadn't found Crex and offered him a way out"— she lowered her voice— "he'd have solved his problem with his sisters another way. Permanently."

*Shit.* Damien made a vow then and there that Crex's sisters would never find out.

"The only justice in all this," added Scarlett, "is that whatever Darvish ordered Crex to take to make him look dead had an impact."

"Explain."

"Crex can't walk without excruciating pain, and it messed with his eyes too. He looks... odd."

Damien recalled the description of the assistant from the driver's interrogation. Now it made better sense.

It was some justice, but not enough. Soon, though, Crex would be feeling even more pain. Then none at all.

Damien could not wait to wipe him from the galaxy, right alongside Darvish and whoever else was out to hurt his omega and his family.

“Who else do we need to worry about, Scarlett?”

“I don’t know his identity, but there’s definitely another main player.” Her frustration was almost palpable. “I tried to find out so many times, but he’s elusive. He never showed his face. He only ever listened in on Darvish’s conversations with me. But I can tell it’s someone Darvish relies on, maybe even respects. Darvish is the one calling the shots, but when Darvish speaks to this other Alpha, it’s with a deference that I’ve never heard when he’s talking to anyone else.”

“We’ll find him. All of them.” Damien had no doubt. “Tell me more about what you know of Darvish’s plans so we can do exactly that.”

Scarlett gave a determined nod and sat up taller, her wet palms back on him, just as he liked. “As Kadon’s prime omega, I was given greater access to dome tech, and Darvish exploited this for his own purposes. He used me to set up marks like Prince Jai and win as much as possible for the house. Then”—she swallowed hard— “after every main fight, I was summoned to his private suite and, while they held a taser to Luc’s temple, forced to use my eye scan and blood to withdraw a substantial portion of those winnings and move them off-planet into untraceable accounts. Of course, Darvish transferred the funds out of there soon after, but whatever means he used to do it is so well-hidden it’s next to impossible to trace where the money went next.”

Damien focused on the implications to keep himself from losing it. “Which is why even Maxheim’s efforts to dig deeper have been stymied and why, if anyone looks for a trail like Maxheim did, it will appear as if you’re the one stealing.”

“Unfortunately, yes.”

“Any reason he used you for this rather than Stormhart?”

Her gaze shifted away, and the bad feeling in his gut got worse. “I’m not sure. He did force Kadon to steal money for him too, but... this particular ritual, where I visited him in his private room, he only did that with me.”

Jaw tight, Damien read between the lines and did not like what he came up with at all.

“I’m sorry, Damien.” Misinterpreting his sudden mood shift, Scarlett drew back. “I know it’s ugly. I-I wanted to spare you—”

“Beautiful, stop talking.” He ran his nose along her hairline and inhaled

deeply, using her sweet scent to lock his shit down even tighter. “You have nothing to apologize for. I don’t want to be spared what you went through. I want to know everything you trust me enough to share.”

Scarlett stared up at him, her gaze uncertain. “You’ve changed.”

“I damned well better have because there’s no way you’re going through anything else like this again without me, and I know it was my temper that was part of what got us into trouble last time. It caused our argument, then you agreed to meet, but I went off, marching around half-cocked and—”

“No, Damien.” She clasped his jaw. “Don’t say that. Don’t go there. You are *not* to blame.”

“I know *exactly* who’s to blame here: Darvish. But I also recognize my part, and I promise you I will not be making it easy for him to fuck with us this time around. I said I’d be there for you, Scarlett, and I mean it. I intend to be a male you can count on through the good and the bad, which means controlling my temper, ego, and anger, and putting them to use only when the time is right. It also means understanding that even if you’re not saying it aloud, you’re worried that although you like my changes, I won’t like yours. But I do.”

Silence.

Then, eyes bright, shadows still easy to see, her gaze shifted away, and he allowed her retreat because, as much as he wanted to batter at her defenses, he knew he had to give her time.

He wasn’t surprised when she changed the subject. “Darvish isn’t only using the Golden Dome fights to steal money,” she whispered, “but also for another purpose: to recruit fighters.”

That news hit Damien right in the gut. What the fuck was Darvish up to?

“Luc told Kadon that more and more fighters are disappearing from the Consortium ranks, and the few stupid enough to decline Darvish’s offer and continue working in the dome”—she trembled against him— “vanish without a trace.”

He held her closer. “Darvish made you deal with them?”

“No. He only forced me to unleash my gift around those he held a personal grudge against, like bigwigs who refused to succumb to his blackmail or Consortium board members who tried to undercut his leadership. After the first couple, those willing to risk it became few and far between.”

“You’re not to blame for this. Darvish is to blame. Crex is to blame.

Whoever the hells is working with them is to blame. But not *you*.”

She cupped his jaw, her lips tilting upward, though her eyes remained sad. “I know you’ll bring them down.”

Damien gripped her hand. “We will bring them down. Together.”

“Yes.” Her gaze darted away again, and his heart lurched.

“Tell me what else is worrying you.”

A slight scowl formed between her brows, and for a moment, he thought she was going to shut him back out, but then she spoke, her voice small. “Even after you came inside me and the biting claim”—she raised her wrist—“our fated-mate marks haven’t returned. Wh-what if they never do? What if it’s telling us something?”

Damien’s chest tightened, but he pushed past his sense of disquiet and gave her his larger truth. “I don’t need some marks on my skin to tell me what I feel. My marks are etched deep into my soul. I feel our bond wrapped tight around my heart. That’s all that matters to me.”

Raising her hand, she traced the contours of his lips. “You really are so beautiful. Inside and out.”

He nipped her finger gently. “I love that hungry look in your eyes. Makes me feel higher than the stars in the sky—and hard as hells.”

She shivered. “I like hearing that.”

“Good. Because I like feeling that way.” Spray splashing everywhere, he repositioned her so she straddled him, then gripped her ass and rocked her against his hardening cock. “I’m ready to share in a different way, baby.”

Scarlett giggled—actually giggled—and that only made him smile wider. And his dick harder.

Then his mouth closed over hers, and he swore that somehow, *some way*, he’d take all those shadows in her eyes, and the ones flickering on the walls too, and turn them back into vibrant bursts of color.



DAMIEN

“That’s it, Omega.” Damien’s fingers tangled in her hair, his eyes focused on her perfect ass as she bowed before him, her head bobbing up and down his shaft. “Suck me hard. It feels so fucking good.”

A soft hum vibrated from her throat.

And, equally as beautiful, splashes of deep red and sunshine yellow played across her skin and the nearby grotto wall.

His balls drew tight as a deep rumble echoed from him in response.

Scarlett worked him harder.

He grunted low. “I really like our song.”

She swallowed him deep, and his legs shook, and although he’d honestly been sure she’d drained him dry before, he realized now he had more to give.

*Hells yeah for stamina.*

They’d fucked once more in the water and again on a hide he’d found among the supplies in the other room. He’d dragged it through to the grotto so he could lay Scarlett down and rut her without fear of bruising her.

It was the very same hide he now knelt on while she fucked him with her mouth because neither of them was ready to stop. But his omega’s pussy needed some recovery time. So she’d taken matters into her own hands.

He wasn’t complaining.

They hadn’t even used the taming chain yet. He wanted to do that too. Along with a thousand other things.

And he would.

Because she was back with him.

Damien knew reality would intrude soon enough—his brother would show up, they'd need to get to a place where they had a signal and could communicate with Maxheim, and the hunt would begin anew—but after four planetary rotations apart from the only female he wanted, he'd seize every moment he could while he was able.

She took him deeper, purring, breathing through her nose, his dick so huge and hard thanks to her, his knot so swollen that she had to stretch her mouth wide to take him, the fat, ridged head so engorged, it pressed against the roof of her mouth, choking at the back of her throat. And judging by the way she squirmed, she liked it a lot.

“Good girl.” Tone coaxing, he massaged her throat. “Keep that throat nice and slack.”

Scarlett did as commanded, and fuck, yes, he slid even deeper.

“Yes, Omega, that's it. Suck it just like that. Like you missed it. Like you can't get enough.”

Hollowing her cheeks, she did just that.

Maybe too readily, too desperately. The splashes of colors on the walls grew fainter, making him worry that this was more than just pleasure or connection. That this could also be repenting.

And that shit had no place between them.

His hand slid from her throat to caress her jaw. “That's so good, baby. It's only your tongue and your slick I want on this cock.”

The splashes of color on the walls intensified and brightened.

He liked that a lot.

Just as he liked how she kept working him faster. Sucking deeper.

But he wasn't finishing like this. So he did what he had to do. His fingers tightened in her hair, and he held her against his cock, her nose pressed to his hipbone.

As he intended, her gaze locked with his.

Then, executing his sneak attack, he gave her what was in his heart.

“You were always meant to be my destiny. My only. Not just by the hands of fate, but because I forge my own path, and you are it. I will fight any obstacle to keep you by my side. To have this mouth forever. You are more than my fated mate; you are my everything.”

He loosened his hold and slid her head back so she could see all that was in his heart.

“I waited for you, baby. Only you would do. No one else.” He softened



his grip, his hands stroking through her hair. “And now that you’re here, I’m never letting you go. I’m going to worship you, Scarlett. I’m going to take care of that soft skin, that sweet pussy, and that scared, wounded heart, and you’re going to let me.”

Then, without warning, he pulled her off him with a loud pop. “Starting right now.”



Scarlett

Stunned by the tenderness of his words and sudden movement, it took Scarlett a moment to catch up. By then, she was on her back on the ledge, with Damien looming above, his big body spreading her legs wide as he wedged himself between her thighs, his expression fierce and determined. And so beautiful.

“Hold on to the rock above the ledge.”

She knew that tone. And she followed his command without question, her shaking fingers finding an anchor and holding on tight as her back arched and her aching nipples pointed toward the ceiling.

“This is mine now.” His lips rubbed softly over her mound. “Mine to please. Mine to exalt.” He took a long, slow lick. “Mine to dirty the fuck up.”

All she could do was whimper.

His palms slid beneath her bottom and lifted her hips higher. “So fucking perfect. Every bit as gorgeous as I remember.” He growled low. “Even prettier now that my cock’s been there. Now that I know how strong my female is. What she’s made of.”

She sank her teeth into her lower lip to keep from begging. She loved having him in her mouth, but this... this was amazing too.

As was every single moment with him.

A single finger slid between her thighs, grazing her swollen folds. “You hear me, Omega? You understand just how much I want you?”

“Damien.” She raised her hips to bring him deeper.

He grunted. “Yes. Such a needy girl. Is this for me?”

She nodded, suddenly inexplicably shy.

“Tell me.”

“Yes, Damien.” She was panting so hard it was difficult to get the words out. “For you. Only for you.”

“That’s right. Mine.”

“Please!”

“That’s exactly what a good girl says.” His thumb grazed her clit. “Then she gets her reward.”

Damien ran his thumb slowly over the swollen nub in light, teasing circles.

“Eyes on me, baby.” Another rough command. “I want you to see exactly what you do to me.”

She hadn’t even realized her eyelids had fluttered shut.

Forcing them open, she took him in. His hand was still between her thighs, his thumb working her at a leisurely pace, his gaze locked on what he was doing, but he’d risen to his knees, and now... now his other hand fisted his cock, tugged hard. Once, twice.

It was the sexiest thing she’d ever seen. “Damien.”

“My Scarlett.” Ropey white cum erupted from his shaft, splashing onto her belly and between her spread thighs. Marking her. Just as she’d marked him.

It was beyond erotic. It was absolutely filthy—and perfect.

Then, before she could tell him so, he wedged himself between her legs and dove in to devour her with his tongue.

She screamed his name. Already so close to the edge, she came after only a few swipes of his tongue. Her pussy fluttered as her body soared.

Behind her eyelids, colors flashed.

But he wasn’t done.

Her body thrashed as he worked his tongue faster against her clit, demanding more.

Pleasure radiated through every molecule.

She could swear that she felt his fingers dragging through the wetness across her belly and down, pushing inside her, filling her, as if he were deliberately stuffing his cum inside her pussy. But then his tongue lashed her clit, and she lost sight of everything but how good he made her feel.

Scarlett screamed, hips rocking as he held her down and she soared. Higher. Longer.

Such beauty. Such peace.

She wanted so badly for it to last forever, for every beautiful vow he’d

uttered to be true. For this to be their new beginning. She didn't even care about the darkness. She'd find a way to keep it in check.

In fact, whenever he touched her, it seemed to settle. So he needed to be sure to keep doing that. A lot.

There had to be a way to make this work.

"Hello?" A now-familiar voice echoed from the other room, killing the idyllic sex-frenzied-grotto vibe.

Damien bit back a curse, his dark head popping up from between her thighs as the kid she now knew was Maddox continued talking from next door.

"Anya told me this would happen between you and the omega again," the kid grouched. "But I said never in a million planetary rotations. So, thanks. Now I owe her fifty universal chits."

Damien's grip on her thighs tightened as the heat of a thousand suns climbed up Scarlett's chest and cheeks.

"Oh, and before you go all rut-mad on me again, big brother," Maddox shouted, "I have my taser charged and ready. So don't even think—"

There was a scuffle.

A female's voice broke the silence. "What the kid means to say is we're sorry to interrupt, but we have to go. Somebody had the smart idea of scanning the city for unusual seismic activity, and they traced it here. Darvish's guards are on their way. So, as happy as we are that you're finally getting some, big brother, we need to cut out before I have to save your asses again."

Damien's eyes narrowed. "Anya?"



## SCARLETT

“Cut them off at the next tunnel!”  
“This way!”

The nearby shouts bounced off the walls, punctuated by heavy footsteps. Lots of them.

With her hand held tight in Damien's, Scarlett lengthened her stride, trying to keep up with her charging Alpha as he led their party of four away from the voices.

Darvish had sent at least twenty Consortium guards after them.

“Get the female. Kill the rest!” More shouts from those in pursuit.

Scarlett ran faster.

At first, she was certain they'd made it away in time. Within a heartbeat of Anya issuing her warning, Damien had reacted.

He'd had her wait in the grotto while he had a quick discussion with his siblings. Then he'd returned, dressed her in one of his extra shirts, and led her back into the other room, where he'd issued the briefest of introductions before snatching up a pack of supplies, weapons, and his charred camouflage cloak.

Then they were off.

She'd been so relieved when they made it out without issue. But she'd had time for only a few deep, relaxed breaths before the pounding of footfalls had started and the chase began.

It hadn't let up since.

She tugged on Damien's hold. “Leave me. Let me use my gift to take them down once you're away.”

His grip tightened, and he pulled her along at an even faster pace. “No.” She’d tried this suggestion before, receiving the same response. “But—” “Quiet. I need to hear what’s coming our way.” He raised his voice slightly. “Maddox, do not fall behind or let Anya falter.”

“As if.” This was from Anya. The kid just grunted in response.

Damien had positioned his sister in the middle and Maddox at the rear of their lineup.

It had to be said that this was not how Scarlett had hoped to meet Damien’s adored sister for the first time.

Damien had shared stories about all his siblings, but his deep affection for his sister in particular was obvious. Which made Scarlett acutely aware, with every step she took, of her impossible-to-miss flushed cheeks, sex hair, the bruises and scrapes care of her gift, and the taming chain that bounced at her hips and throat as Damien’s spare shirt clung to her damp skin.

Anya, in contrast, looked stunning and unruffled. She wore her long, midnight hair tied back in a braid, and her outfit of fitted pants and shirt, while unconventional for an omega, was a smart choice while on the run. She was gorgeous, of course, just like all the rest of the Skolovs, with a faint red tinge to her skin that was lighter than her brothers’. She had the same carved cheekbones and stunning eyes, but she also had full red lips that gave her a sensual air. She was tall for an omega, at least half a head taller than Scarlett but equally curvy.

However, what struck Scarlett most was the graceful way Anya moved. She had a strength and confidence unlike any Scarlett had ever encountered in an omega and a fierceness that was shocking. Although young, she held herself like a queen. Like an equal to the males around her.

And Scarlett had caught the female staring at her as if she knew every moment of Damien’s unhappiness and fury and had absorbed it as her own.

So, a first good impression seemed unlikely. Not to mention that they were currently running for their lives thanks to Scarlett’s inability to keep her gift in check.

Or, equally troubling, that her gift was acting up even now, battering at her ribs to be set free. Which meant it was taking all her energy just to beat it back down and breathe through the pain while her lungs worked overtime to keep up with Damien’s far longer strides.

She honestly wasn’t sure how much longer she could do it.

The last thing she wanted was to shame Damien in front of his family or

make him regret the extraordinary time they'd shared in the grotto. But she couldn't pretend. What she'd feared was coming to pass. Everything in the grotto had been perfect, but it hadn't been real life; this was. And her gift was finally extending beyond what she had the ability to control. So, as much as she wanted to make a good impression, she couldn't ignore the danger she represented to them all.

"I don't want anyone else to get hurt." She tried again.

"The tunnel gets narrow here." Damien spoke over her. "Stay alert. We need to make it to the tunnel branch before they head us off and come at us from both sides."

"Damien—" This time, Anya spoke.

"Don't you start." Damien cut his sister off just as fast. "You were supposed to stay safe in the shuttle."

"When have I ever done what I was supposed to do?"

Muffled laughter from Maddox. And, despite her fright, Scarlett was again seriously impressed. Anya was inspiring fearlessness.

"I swear to hells." Damien, on the other hand, didn't seem as impressed. "Either one of you offers to sacrifice yourself again, when we get clear of this, you won't sit comfortably for a long while."

Absolute silence.

"Finally, some smart thinking," he growled. Then he pulled her along faster, the pack of supplies over his shoulder jostling, the laser at his waist bouncing with every long stride, and the cloak fluttering around his shoulders.

Without warning, he pulled up short. Cursed.

"What's wrong?" She tried to peer around his broad chest to see ahead.

"They're approaching from the other side too. We're hemmed in." Damien swiveled, his gaze dropping to her before locking on Maddox. "Plus, there's too many of us to hide. We'll make our stand here."

Scarlett wanted to beg his forgiveness, apologize to the others too.

She'd known. Known she was too big a threat to Damien and those he cared about to risk staying with him.

But now was not the time for straightening out such things. Instead, she simply braced for what was coming and did her best to keep her gift in check.

If it escaped now, there was every chance it would explode out of her, hurting not only the guards, but everyone in the vicinity. Maybe even bring down the ceiling and kill them all.

As if hearing her thoughts, the walls shook, and rocks plinked from above.

“Scarlett.” Damien dropped the supply bag. Two warm hands cupped her jaw, tilting her face upward. “Breathe, baby.”

She did.

Damien exchanged a brief silent exchange with Maddox, which she didn’t understand, but the kid must have because Damien released her, and the two Alphas turned as one to place their backs to her and Anya.

“Under the cloaks.” Damien held one out so she could duck underneath.

Without hesitation, Scarlett slipped beneath. The Alpha guards chasing them were twice her size and strength and, like Damien and Maddox, had claws and fangs and lasers. Plus, she needed to focus on slowing her breathing.

Unfortunately, it became immediately clear that Damien’s cloak was not impervious to a fireball explosion and a slide down a long metal cable. It no longer seemed able to blend entirely with the wall behind, making her appear more like a dark lump. Still, glitchy or not, the cloak was better than nothing.

Damien jumped up and used his horn to crack the nearest crystal embedded in the wall. It flickered and went out, casting the surrounding area into deeper shadows. “That will help.” Damien’s gaze shifted to his sister. “Get under Maddox’s cloak. Hurry.”

Anya, however, remained where she was. “I can fight too.”

A muscle twitched in Damien’s jaw. “Under. The. Damned. Cloak.”

Proving she could read her brothers well, Anya delivered a mutinous glare, then ducked beneath Maddox’s cloak and blended into the tunnel wall.

Still, Scarlett wasn’t sure about this plan. Maxheim’s invention might hide them, but it wouldn’t stop the guards from crashing into them in the narrow tunnel.

She wasn’t foolish enough, however, to throw out questions at this juncture, especially with that muscle still ticking in Damien’s jaw.

The two males used their bodies to corral her and their sister backward until their spines struck the wall. Still without speaking, Damien and Maddox stood between them and the approaching danger.

She wondered why Damien didn’t draw his laser. Again, she didn’t ask.

For her part, Scarlett concentrated on not undermining their efforts by failing to lock down her gift and killing them.

“This way!” The shouts grew louder, then a wave of bodies appeared, all



in Consortium uniforms, all gripping lasers set to fire.

In the next heartbeat, another wave converged from the other direction.

The ground beneath their feet shook again, and it took every last shred of Scarlett's concentration to hold her abilities in check; she was so absorbed in that, she almost missed what happened next.

"Anya?" Damien's voice was barely perceptible over the roar of their pursuers.

Scarlett had no idea what he wanted, but the other omega clearly did. "I'm on it." Anya paused. "But you know what that means, right? Yours won't work either."

"That's fine. We won't need our lasers." Damien's claws sprang out. "We have our own weapons."

"Say when." Anya's voice was a whisper, but it held an edge of steel.

While Scarlett was still busy wondering what they were talking about, two things happened at once.

First, the guards surged forward, so close now they were less than two bodies' lengths away.

Second, Damien growled, "Now!"

In the next breath, something stirred against Scarlett's skin, brushing by as it traveled elsewhere, gone before she'd even realized it had passed. Yet, in the next instant, all the lasers died, the bright green of their power cells flickering out.

Shocked snarls, growls, and shouts of "*What the hells?*" and "*Comms are out too!*" were still being issued by the guards when Damien and Maddox attacked, launching from beneath their cloaks to rip through flesh with fangs and claws.

Five guards went down in the blink of an eye.

Utter chaos ensued.

Scarlett's gift pounded against her insides, demanding release. And at the same time, a whisper of envy flitted through her. She had no doubt that the now defunct lasers and disrupted comms were a result of Anya's gift.

Amazing. And useful.

Scarlett's gift could have taken down the guards in one brutal blast. But at too high a cost. Clearly, Anya didn't have that problem.

That was astonishing in itself. As was the fact that Anya still possessed her gift. Most omegas Scarlett knew lost theirs early in life. The few who hadn't only managed to retain a trace of the abilities they'd possessed in their

youth. Except for Scarlett, of course, but her gift was ugly and erratic. The exact opposite of what she felt pouring from Anya, which was bold, determined, and in control.

But Scarlett had been drowning in her own darkness long enough to sense something else: the current of pain fueling Anya's formidable gift. Despite the other female keeping it mostly locked down tight, Scarlett recognized it, nonetheless. Something bad had happened to Damien's sister. Something ugly and dark that even several vicious Alpha brothers had been unable to protect her from. And beneath the confidence and grace and eagerness to fight, it still lurked. However, unlike Scarlett's gift, Anya's pain did not diminish her power; it strengthened it.

Their battle with the guards continued.

Now that the guards knew where Damien and Maddox were, they surged forward, trampling over their fallen comrades.

But Damien's reason for choosing this spot soon became apparent, as the narrowness of the tunnel made it impossible for too many of Darvish's guards to attack at once, in spite of their overwhelming numbers.

A handful of attackers went down, leaving more bodies littering the space.

But even more clamored forward.

Damien was currently battling four and Maddox three.

"Look out." Scarlett spotted a scowling guard with empty eyes sneaking in from the side, taking advantage of Maddox's distraction to try for a deadly belly strike. But before he could, Anya threw off the cloak and slammed her elbow down on the guard's forearm, resulting in a loud *crack*.

The male screeched.

Maddox sliced the bastard in two.

Anya was right; she could fight.

Maddox, too, was impressive in battle, and Scarlett had been around fighters most of her life, so she knew skilled combatants.

But most extraordinary of all was Damien.

She'd forgotten. The way he moved in the ring and in battle was like liquid power. He had such grace, especially for a big, solid male. He was mesmerizing. Breathtaking, even. And ruthlessly effective.

Damien plowed through their attackers three, four, sometimes five at once. Until it was clear their numbers were almost at an end, and even more astonishing, he'd barely suffered more than a scratch.

He truly was a sight to behold.

Nevertheless, she was ready when one of them slipped by his defenses and reached for her, her gift instantly blowing the attacker backward, his eyes lifeless before he struck the ground.

The walls shook, and bigger rocks tumbled from the ceiling.

Panting hard, she did her best to reel in her gift.

“And here I was, all set not to like you.”

Scarlett glanced over to see Anya eyeing the dead guard and then her, an impressed look on the other female’s face. “Looks like you’ll fit in just fine.”

Despite her fear and pain, the sweetness of Anya’s words pierced Scarlett’s chest in the best possible way.

“Here comes another wave.” Maddox’s unhappy grunt slapped her from her happy place.

Another wave? Twenty more guards? The hope that had started to swell inside Scarlett took a hit. The shadows, the urge to wreak destruction, raged higher, demanding their due, striking at her ribs as she locked her knees to remain upright.

“We’ve got this. Stay steady.” Damien, sounding as confident as ever, dropped back into battle position.

Drawing strength from his words, she stiffened her spine and blocked out the pain.

And Damien was right: they did have it. The dead bodies helped, making it difficult for the guards to maneuver as he and Maddox once again handled the next team that came at them. However, this round, a sure sign they were tiring, Maddox took three deep slashes to his arms and one to his chest that pierced his shirt and stained it blood-red. Damien, too, sustained a long claw slice across his forearm and another to his stomach. Meanwhile, she and Anya did their best to watch their protectors’ flanks and strike out when they could.

As a result, the Consortium bodies piled higher.

Even better, it looked as if Damien’s confidence might be warranted.

Until heavy footfalls echoed along the tunnel, and Scarlett realized another wave of guards had arrived.

This was not good.

Her body wrenched sideways as her gift slammed hard against her chest, demanding out.



Damien

Damien raked his claws across the throat of one attacker, striking an artery, while simultaneously kicking out at another and sending him flying backward.

He needed to find a way past these waves of guards. Maddox was injured and tiring.

Anya had also expended a lot of energy, and her ability to keep her gift going was waning. Soon, the guards would have functional lasers again.

Equally as worrisome, he could feel Scarlett's gift against his skin growing in ferocity. Her control was slipping. The shadows on the walls and the growing tremors further proof that she was struggling to control her gift.

Which meant pain for her. Additional bruises he did not want her to have. And the risk that the ceiling could come down on all of them at any time.

His mind scrambling for a solution, he took out two more attackers.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Anya, hair flying, execute an impressive palm strike to the nose of one of the fuckers coming after Maddox.

Pride surged. He'd taught her that move. Alphas might be bigger and stronger, but a skilled omega fighter could still do some damage against a larger combatant, especially when she had surprise and knowledge on her side.

And, despite her pain, Scarlett was more than holding her own, leaving each attacker she touched not just incapacitated but dead.

Which, he had to admit, was also proving a big help, even as he knew it cost her.

She might not like what she could do, but once they figured out how to keep her gift from hurting her, he was hoping she'd realize just how amazing this new ability could be.

Their galaxy was far from safe, and though he always intended to be by her side, it would give him some peace to know she could protect herself when required.

Damien took out three more. Maddox continued to defend, but he was losing steam, blood everywhere.

*Hells.*

Fact was, the kid was an incredible fighter—a force to be reckoned with

—but he hadn't yet hit his prime. A quick glance revealed the kid now had a slash across his leg.

But Damien wasn't going down. He was not losing those he cared about.

Subtly placing his body in front of Maddox, he did his best to draw the guards' focus and give the kid a break.

He'd take them all down himself if he had to.

He would do whatever it took.

Bruised, bleeding, broken, he didn't care. No one was taking Scarlett or his family from him.

Before he knew it, there were bodies littered everywhere and what looked like only two rows of attackers still standing from the third wave.

Then there was a commotion behind the guards. Shouts.

Panic in their eyes, a few swiveled, which made it even easier for Damien to take them out, and thus, more died.

Until, suddenly, the ranks of guards were so thin it was possible to see what was causing the commotion: Luc and Kadon.

Taking down guards from their side as well.

Until no live Consortium attackers remained.

Until all that stood between them and escape was Scarlett's brother and her ex-Alpha lord.

Each splattered in blood. Each looking downright feral. Each brandishing a functioning laser pointed straight at Damien and those he loved.

"Another wave's coming soon." Luc stared right at him. "Take yours and go. You might make it. Scarlett stays."

"No."

"She belongs with us," insisted Stormhart.

Damien charged.



## DAMIEN

“**D**amien, no!” Scarlett threw herself at him and caught hold of his wrist.

And because he never wanted to hurt her ever again, he pulled up short and swiveled, catching her against him before turning around again.

With his hard stare locked on her brother and Stormhart, Damien put more distance between her and them.

The red rage clouding his vision was only slightly soothed by the fact that she didn't fight him, or strain toward the other Alphas, but leaned into him, curling herself into his chest, her fingers wrapping in his leathers as she eagerly moved backward as well.

“I-I don't feel so well.”

His gaze snapped down to her.

His chest squeezed tight, his vision instantly filling with her and only her.

And she didn't look good. Her face was pale, her features pinched, and, worst of all, even though his shirt covered much of her, angry red and purple bruises climbed her chest and lower neck, as if something had tried to pummel its way out of her body.

She'd told him before it took time for new bruises to rise to the surface. But these had come on right away and they looked bad.

“Scarlett.” He swept her into his arms, ignoring the tight pull of his bloodied knuckles and claws to cradle her against his chest. “I'm so sorry, baby.”

“I'm okay.”

“You're not.” It fucking gutted him. He'd hoped her gift would settle now

that he was around, but it seemed to be growing more volatile.

“Told you,” Stormhart mumbled to Luc. “Flat-out crazy possessive, obsessed, and in love.”

“Fuck,” was Luc’s sole muttered reply.

But Damien didn’t give a shit what they were saying, his sole concern was the female in his arms. “I’d take the pain away if I could, beautiful.”

She nuzzled his jaw with her nose. “I know. Since I’d do the same for you.”

“Enough.” Luc’s patience had run out. “Give her to us and go. She’s hurt, and we can take care of her.”

“Like you’ve done so far?” Damien cradled her closer.

“What about the job you’ve done?” Luc snarled right back. “Don’t think I haven’t noticed that taming chain peeking out from whatever she’s wearing.”

*Shit.*

“Give her to us,” Luc finished, “or we’ll shoot you all.”

“Fuck off.” Damien was pleased when Maddox and Anya moved to flank his sides in a show of support. Even more pleased when Anya used her gift and the other two Alphas’ weapons powered down. “Looks like you need a new strategy.”

“More guards will arrive soon. All we need to do is wait for them to take you out,” Luc snarled.

“Stop!” Scarlett’s voice was no longer jagged with pain but sharp with fury. “Stop fighting. Stop threatening. All of you.” She squirmed in his arms. “Damien, put me down.”

He didn’t.

“You heard her,” Stormhart growled, taking a step closer. “Put her down.”

“Stay away from her. She’s mine.”

“Damien, please.” She softened her tone, placing a palm against his jaw. “I know seeing Kadon upsets you, but you don’t understand.”

“What I understand is that these fuckers want to take you away from me, and that is not happening.”

“That’s my prime omega.” Stormhart waded in once more. “I have every right to take her.”

Damien snarled.

“None of this is helping.” Scarlett shifted in his hold to glare at Stormhart. “This Alpha posturing is ridiculous.”



“No one’s posturing, baby.” Damien kept his gaze pinned on the other two males. “This is in fucking earnest, and I will take out any fucker who tries to claim you as theirs, even your blood.”

“Unbelievable.” Scarlett muttered the word under her breath, her attention shifting to Anya, who appeared almost amused. But she had several older brothers, so she was used to this. Apparently, Scarlett was not. “Enough!” She bristled in his hold. He couldn’t remember ever seeing her so angry. “This standoff ends now. Luc, you’re my brother, and I love you, but I’m not going anywhere without Damien. Kadon, your friendship means so much, but there’s no more need for pretense here.”

Damien registered the fear and relief that flickered through Stormhart’s eyes when Scarlett spoke, and he realized their contract had been as much a prison for the other male as it had been for her.

“I’m not the one you wanted to claim,” Scarlett told Stormhart. “And it’s time for us to break our contract, so we can both be with the ones we truly want.”

Music to his damned ears. Damien squeezed her tighter.

Except then, Scarlett raised her chin and, still pissed, took him on, proving she was so much stronger than she gave herself credit for. “And you? You need to calm down because if I wanted to go with them, I would, but I don’t. I don’t want to go anywhere you’re not ever again.”

His arms contracted around her; her words so sweet he didn’t care that she’d delivered them in a furious tone.

“First chance we get”—he pressed a kiss to her upturned nose— “we’re officially voiding that other contract and submitting our own. Because those fools may be too dumb to follow their instincts and claim each other, but that’s not me. Always and forever, beautiful. You are my prime omega, and I’m your Alpha lord, and that’s how it was always meant to be.”

Her expression softened, just as he’d hoped, as she mouthed *always and forever* back to him.

However, her brain must have caught up with what else he’d said, because she stiffened in his hold. “Wait. You said, ‘Those fools may be too dumb to follow their instincts and claim each other.’ You know?”

Damien registered the shock on her face and the reeling expressions of the two males standing across the tunnel, clutching their inoperative weapons.

Fucking family drama. As if he didn’t have enough of his own.

“About Luc and Stormhart? Yes. You think I don’t know what a male’s groans and grunts sound like? As soon as I heard those sex sounds blaring from the monitor on Darvish’s desk, I knew, and all the tension I’d observed between them suddenly made sense. I just don’t give a shit.”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about.” Luc’s denial came fast, but it lacked any heat.

Scarlett, mouth opening and closing twice, seemed less certain of what to say.

“Wait.” Damien held up a palm. “Let me amend that. If you cared that your brother and *ex-Alpha* were stepping out on you, I would too. But you don’t, so I don’t either.”

She blinked slowly, and he could tell she was still trying to come to terms with his revelations. Behind her, the two Alphas also appeared to be struggling with how to react.

“Best to have it all out in the open.” When no one else spoke, and Scarlett continued to just blink at him, Damien heaved a long sigh. “We need a moment.” His gaze shifted to the kid and Anya. “Keep watch. Either of them moves, tell me, and I’ll tear out their throats.”

“Damien!”

Ignoring Scarlett’s protest, he carried her away from the others for more privacy, stepping over more than a few prone bodies to do so. Because they needed to settle this quickly. He’d been waiting for her to tell him, and she finally had, but when it was way too late for him to handle it as smoothly as he’d have liked. So fast, blunt, and dirty would have to do.

He set her on her feet and wrapped his hands around her shoulders so they stood face to face.

“I hate the Federation because of its self-righteous, hypocritical rules for Alphas and omegas. And, despite being a necessary evil, I don’t much like the Brotherhood for the same reason. Too stuffy, too old, too rigid in their thinking. Most of their laws are ridiculous and shortsighted, and just plain controlling. Makes no damned sense that it’s illegal for Alphas to be together if they want, but that’s true for a lot of the galaxy’s shit regulations and traditions. As for me, I don’t care who someone gets it on with, much less loves, as long as they afford me the same courtesy.”

“I... I never... that is... I hoped, but... still, you’re glaring at them even now.”

“I don’t exactly have the warm fuzzies when it comes to your brother and

Stormhart, but not because they're fucking each other—that might well be the most interesting thing about them. The reason they piss me off is that they didn't want me with you in the first place, and they're continuing to take that stance now, and even more significantly, they've done a shit job of protecting you.”

“That's not true.” Scarlett leaped to their defense. “They did the best they could.”

“On this, we'll have to agree to disagree.” Damien let her into his thoughts again. “It's not like I did an amazing job either.” He blew out a breath. “And you're giving me a second chance. So, even though I don't like it, I'm getting used to the idea that I need to do that for them too.”

“Yes. You do.” Her smile was so bright that even the bruises on her chest and throat appeared fainter in comparison. “You really don't mind.”

It wasn't a question. It was a statement of fact. But he answered anyway.

“That they're rutting and knotting each other doesn't matter to me.” He held up a hand. “Wait. Another amendment.”



## DAMIEN

Scarlett snapped her mouth shut.

Damien let her off the hook. “It’s not even that I don’t care. I’m thrilled. When I realized what was going on between them, I wanted to throw back my head and howl with joy.”

Her eyes widened. “You did?”

“Hells, yes. If Stormhart was an Alpha who liked females, he’d have been all over you. But he wasn’t because he has strong feelings for your brother.”

“Very strong,” she confided. “Even if the two of them refuse to admit it.”

“Yes, and the fact that they feel that way about each other but still went ahead and had you join with Stormhart shows just how much they tried to protect you in their own way. Because Alphas are territorial, and it must have grated like hells for Stormhart to be so close to the one he loved but paired with his sister. And it must have torn Luc apart to see his sister with the male he wanted by his side.”

“You get it.” Eyes filled with unshed tears, she glanced away. “Do you also get that I did that to them? In their effort to protect me, to give in to Darvish and accept the prime omega contract, they gave up so much, and now”—she lowered her voice— “they seem so broken, so angry with each other. And that’s on me too.”

“No.” Damien pulled her close. “You’re way too hard on yourself, Omega. That’s not on you. You protected them too. Sacrificed too. Plus, they still have time to fix what’s between them. So do we.” He dropped his gaze to the fresh bruises on her skin. “But I’m going to have to do a better job because Luc’s right, you’re still getting hurt on my watch.”

“Damien, no. Now you’re being too hard on yourself. Don’t listen to Luc. He’s just an overprotective brother. These bruises are not your fault.”

“Feels like it.”

“You saved us.” Scarlett rose to her tiptoes and pressed a kiss to his collarbone, then the hollow at the base of his throat. “I’m still here and in your arms. I count that as a huge victory.”

Off to the side, Luc cursed once again.

Maddox scoffed. “You think that’s bad? You have no idea what I’ve seen. I—”

“This is, by turns, super sweet, amusing, and infinitely entertaining,” Anya announced, “but we don’t have any more time to waste. We need to move before another round of guards turns up.”

As usual, his sister wasn’t wrong.

The question was, where did they go from here? Luc and Stormhart seemed unwilling to leave without Scarlett, but Scarlett didn’t want Damien to kill them. That left him with only unpleasant options he didn’t like.

“We know a safe place.” Stormhart was the first to speak.

Luc whirled to face him. “You sure?”

Stormhart nodded. “It’s the safest option. He’d understand.”

“You think we’re trusting you?” This came from Maddox. “Not happening.”

Damien agreed wholeheartedly.

Anya sighed long and loud. “Why are Alphas such idiots?”

This time, Damien was less impressed by his sister’s insight and determination to share it.

“Anya,” he warned while, across the way, Luc and Stormhart growled.

His sister’s mouth was going to get her in trouble one rotation. Backed up by her overprotective brothers, she had a confidence few omegas in their galaxy possessed. And that was a good thing. But it also meant she’d never developed the caution—and tact—most omegas cultivated to ensure their survival, and that had caused problems before.

“No. It’s true.” Picking up the gauntlet, and his sister’s bossiness, Scarlett guided him back to where the others stood. “Anya’s one hundred percent right. We’re leaving here and going to this safe house. And it’s happening now so we can get away from these bodies, contact Maxheim to see if he’s found anything on those vids that will help us locate Darvish, get the incriminating vids from his collection, and bring Zaya home.”

She paused, her gaze boring into her brother and Stormhart before shifting to Maddox and then coming to rest on him, one eyebrow raised. “Anyone here think that’s a bad plan?”

Fuck. Him.

His eyes locked with Luc’s. The other male’s frown remained in place. “This place have secure comms access?” His shuttle did, but it was farther out, and that meant more time in the tunnels, which meant more risk to Scarlett and the others. Plus, Damien was itching to get to a secure location where his comms would work to find out whether Maxheim had discovered anything of use.

He’d asked Luc, but it was Kadon who answered. “Yes.”

“Explain.” Damien wasn’t going anywhere without more detail.

“It’s my father’s private vacation residence when he visits the Golden Dome to watch the fights. He’s not here now. That means it will be empty.”

Damien considered. It would likely be nicer—and roomier—than his shuttle. Kadon’s father, Andor Stormhart, was a high-level Brotherhood crime boss, one of the most powerful in the organization.

“Won’t it be under surveillance?”

“Absolutely, but I have the access codes. He lets me use it when he’s not here.” Stormhart’s gaze slid to Luc’s. “I used to go there plenty a while ago.” Damien heard what the Alpha didn’t say. He’d gone there to meet up with Luc before Darvish forced the prime omega contract on them all. “Andor likely won’t even notice I’m there.” A hard edge had crept into Stormhart’s tone. “He stopped visiting as often once I stopped fighting and there was less chance of him winning money off me. Now, as long as I’m doing what he likes—being his golden boy, serving as Consortium board liaison, and keeping the Stormhart rep intact—I doubt he thinks about what I’m up to much at all.”

*Fathers.* Damien sympathized. He’d lost his early on, and the bastard had still left a mark.

Seemed Kadon had issues with his sire too.

Couldn’t be easy growing up with a father like his. Andor Stormhart had a reputation as hard and crafty, but he had been a help to Damien and his brothers recently, running interference with the Brotherhood when things got ugly.

Decision made, Damien offered a chin nod. “Fine. We’ll go to Stormhart’s. But we split up to get there, and you two”—he nodded to Luc

and Stormhart— “make sure it’s secure and not being watched before any of the rest of us sets foot inside.”

“Why do we have to split up?” Scarlett’s upset was obvious. “We just found each other.”

He understood and didn’t like it much either, but safety came first. “We can’t move as discreetly with such a large group. Most of the hiding spots Maddox and I scouted out will only fit two, maybe three bodies max. We get the directions, split up, and meet there as soon as possible.”

“Yes, a good plan.” Luc crossed his arms across his chest. “Except Scarlett comes with us.”

“No.” Scarlett spoke before Damien could get heated again. “If this is the best plan, I’m staying with Damien. You and Kadon have stuff you need to discuss anyway. I’m done being the buffer.”

The two males tensed at her blatant intervention.

“It’s the only way this is happening,” Damien assured them too.

The two males exchanged glances, and Damien wasn’t sure which of the two stone-faced bastards was harder to read.

But eventually, Luc blew out a long breath. “Fine.” He reeled off directions.

Damien curled Scarlett deeper into his side. “We’ll see you there soon.”

“Wait.” Scarlett pushed against his hold. “I haven’t seen my brother without guards in four planetary rotations.” She wiggled more vigorously. “I want to hug him before we separate.”

Damien’s grip contracted.

He didn’t like letting her go. Even to her brother. Especially when that would put her near Stormhart. Even though he knew the guy wasn’t an issue, old habits die hard, and he’d put a lot of time and energy into hating Golden Boy’s guts.

“Damien, please.”

“Right.” He willed his hands to unlock.

“Luc!” Within the next heartbeat, she crossed the space and threw herself into her brother’s arms, squeezing the male her tight.

“Watch those bruises,” Damien barked, but he counted it as a victory that he didn’t wrench her back, especially when she opened her arms to pull Stormhart into the hug with her brother, so they formed one big huddle, swaying back and forth together.

“We made it this far,” she said. “We did it. And you’re finally free. I am



finally hugging you, and no Darvish in sight.”

Damien couldn't see either male's face, as they were tipped down to stare at her, but he could hear their low murmurs of relief, the soft words.

He'd never have thought either of those Alphaholes could take the stick out of their ass long enough to be such softies, but they were for his omega.

Fuck. Him.

He'd have to find a way past his resentments and old habits because there was no question: both these Alphas would be in Scarlett's life forever, and since that was where he intended to be, too, he'd do whatever it took.

Forever and always.

“Do you think they're always this touchy-feely?” Anya slipped beneath his arm, leaning into his frame. Because while she might be a badass, a hellion, and a troublemaker, she was also very sweet and a fan of cuddling. “I thought cage fighters were just grunting, unfeeling brutes with no emotional range whatsoever.”

He squeezed her tighter in retribution since he knew she was giving him shit and thoughtfully trying to distract him from the fact that his female was in the arms of two other Alphas.

Maddox joined them. “I'm just wondering if I'm going to bleed out by the time this is over.”

“You're going to be just fine, drama queen.” Damien eyed his kid brother. The wounds were already knitting themselves back together. Skolovs healed fast.

“That better not be my new nickname.”

Damien chuckled. “No. But I'm not sure ‘kid’ works anymore either.” He clapped a hand on Maddox's shoulder. “You fought like a warrior this rotation.”

His younger brother straightened and stood taller. Actually smiled. “Thanks, brother.”

Settling. Finally.

Damien's heart got a little fuller. *We'll find you too, Zaya, and bring you home. You'll settle too.*

“In fact”—he hugged his sister tighter— “you both impressed the hells out of me.” He knew how good it felt to have your elder brothers hand out praise, and despite his worries over Anya and what further boldness it might encourage in her, she deserved to hear it too.

Anya gave him a warm smile.

“Hells, we’re almost as sappy as them.” Maddox, back to being Maddox, tipped his chin toward where Scarlett and the two Alphas still stood in a huddle.

“Think so?” Damien couldn’t resist. “Then I should probably warn you that even though you might not be one anymore, I’ll still be calling you *kid* even when your ballhair’s gone gray.”

Maddox found that funny.

Anya wrinkled her nose. “Thanks for that visual.”

Damien forced himself to count to ten before announcing, “Enough!” He projected his voice loud enough for the huggers to hear. “We need to go now. Scarlett, come here.”

Thankfully, after one more squeeze, she broke away from her brother and Stormhart and hurried back to him, a sweet, happy look on her face. One he wanted to keep there forever.

Neither Stormhart nor Luc appeared as happy as he slid his arm around her waist and plastered her once more to his side but they’d deal.

Just as he would.

“Okay. We have a plan.” Damien turned toward his sister and Maddox. “You two alright with the split?” They could stay together, but what they’d just gone through proved it was harder for them to hide when they traveled as four, and the guards were after Scarlett, so splitting up would keep them safer.

“We’ll be fine,” Maddox assured him. “We’ll see you soon.”

“I’m not hiding under any damned cloak next time there’s an issue,” Anya insisted.

Fuck. Him.

His gaze slid to Maddox.

“We got this.”

“Be safe and stay alert.” Damien couldn’t resist the final warning. “They’re not searching for you, but the guards will be fired up, so they’ll likely shoot first and ask questions later.” Then, a last look at Luc and Stormhart. “I guess this is welcome to the family. But know this: if you fuck us in any way, I swear I’ll gut you.”

“Damien!” Scarlett was outraged.

He pulled her close but didn’t retract his threat.

Instead, he snatched up his supply pack, and they were off.



## SCARLETT

“It won’t be too much longer now.” Damien’s gentle hold on her wrist contracted slightly as he turned into another tunnel, her following close on his heels, his gaze shifting from side to side as he scanned for danger. “I know you’re anxious to be together again.”

It was true.

Usually, she’d be happy spending time alone with her Alpha, especially when they’d had so little of it for so long. But these weren’t “usual” circumstances. Guards were after them and until she and Damien were safe at the hideout with Luc, Kadon, Anya, and Maddox, she’d remain tense.

“I just hope they’re all okay.”

“They are,” Damien assured her, not for the first time. “Maddox and Anya aren’t even on Darvish’s radar. Luc is, but he’s got Stormhart with him, and together, they’re formidable. You’re the one the guards are actively hunting, but I’ll keep you safe.”

“I know.” But she was still worried.

Mostly because, despite all the obstacles they still faced, she hadn’t felt this settled—or happy—in a long time.

And that terrified her.

After four planetary rotations of hells, she’d gotten used to bad. She didn’t know how to deal with all this good.

The first bit of good: Damien knew about Luc and Kadon and was fine with it, which was huge.

Of course, she understood that Damien’s acceptance didn’t wipe away all the challenges and prejudice that awaited her brother and Kadon. Plus,

Kadon's and Luc's lives were at risk, particularly if Darvish ever released his incriminating vids. But with a family like the Skolovs backing them, they'd be better protected than ever. Moreover, her and Kadon's rotations of pretending to be something they weren't were over, and now her brother and her friend could truly explore what was between them. They deserved every happiness.

The second, huge, piece of good: Damien was going to help her find the incriminating vids—and she'd help him find his sister—and together, they'd bring down their enemies.

Never in a million planetary rotations would she have thought, when she stood in that luxury box with Prince Jai crowding her, afraid and hopeless, that she'd soon be where she was now: Damien at her side, her heart full of hope.

The only blemish on her happiness, besides their separation from the others, was her gift. The darkness still swirled inside her, not as strong as before, but there, restless, waiting to pounce.

However, Damien kept insisting she wasn't a monster, and, Goddess, she wanted to believe that. Wanted to trust that he was right, and her gift could be handled. It helped that, despite the bruising, she'd managed to breathe through her fury and control it when they'd fought those guards. So maybe, *maybe* she could make it work. Maybe she could have an ending different from the one of death and sacrifice she'd thought was her only option.

Thanks to Damien.

Clasping the hand wrapped around her wrist, she squeezed tight. "I am so glad you came back to the Golden Dome, Alpha." Her words were a whisper. "I had no idea I'd ever feel joy again, but with you, I'll never say never again."

"Omega." His voice a low rumble, then he risked a glance her way, his expression severe. "Save those sweet words for when I can taste them—and your pussy—on my tongue."

But she could tell from the light in his eyes that he liked hearing them too. Even if he was correct, and now was not the time.

Refocusing, she scanned the space for threats, shifting to look over her shoulder. A faint light bobbed along the corridor—growing closer with every heartbeat.

Fear swept through her. "Damien. We've been spotted."

He looked over his shoulder. Then, with a curse, he swept her into his

arms and sprinted in the other direction, moving faster than he would if she were on her feet, trying to keep up.

“Freeze!” A streak of laser fire flashed past, barely missing Damien’s shoulder.

Scarlett shrieked in fury, the darkness inside her roaring to alertness.

Another laser fired. “We said stay where you are. Or the next shots won’t be warning ones.”

Darting left, then right, Damien tried to avoid taking any one path. But at least ten guards were on their tail, which meant ten lasers pointed their way. Damien was fast, but he couldn’t dodge them all, and they didn’t have Anya there to drain their weapons indefinitely.

Damien must have come to the same conclusion because he skidded to a halt. “Okay.” He shouted so his words carried to the guards. “We’re following your demands.”

He placed Scarlett on her feet.

Turning to face the oncoming guards, he shoved her behind him. “Stay out of their line of fire.” He dropped the bag by his feet and slid it to the side. “No matter what. I’ve got this.”

They’d been through this before. She knew he intended to fight, and he expected to win.

Such confidence. Such arrogance. All Damien.

But these guards had functional lasers, and there was only one Damien, and he’d already fought several times this rotation.

“Damien, let me give myself up.”

“No.”

“Damien—”

“Stay. Behind.”

Scarlett fell silent. The last thing she wanted was to distract him, especially as the guards closed in.

Her gift strained at its leash.

One of them spoke into his wrist comms as they advanced. “We’ve got ’em.” He stopped just beyond Damien’s reach. “The omega and some big dark-haired Alpha.”

Their comms crackled.

“Excellent.” Darvish’s smug voice emerged from the comms, bringing back every bad memory, lacerating her insides. “I knew she wouldn’t get away.”

The walls shook, making the guards glance around nervously. One bobbed his laser but managed to hold on to it.

“Breathe, baby.” Damien’s words were a low, soothing command. “I’ve got this.”

But she couldn’t breathe, much less speak over the slam of her heart, the roar of her fury, and the single repeating thought: *Darvish would not take everything from her again.*

Her gift battered against her insides, shrieking to be unleashed.

“Darvish?” Damien pitched his voice to be heard through the comms. “I wouldn’t get too cocky. *She’s* getting away. But *you*, you knotbag, are not.”

“Damien Skolov? Is that you?” Darvish sounded almost pleased. “I wondered which of my blood was here, trying to fuck things up. Of course, I should have known it would be you. I managed to keep you away for four planetary rotations thanks to my pet and Crex’s help. I thought it would have stuck that you shouldn’t fuck with me. Clearly, you need another lesson.”

“I see you’ve got a lot of our sire in you. What a shame.”

A snarl came through the comms; the guard holding the device visibly stiffened.

Scarlett committed the moment to memory. Confident in his absolute control of those around him, Darvish was never caught off guard or anything but unruffled—until now.

Having her Alpha challenge his smug sense of superiority was beyond satisfying.

Until Darvish regained his footing and taunted Damien as he’d so often taunted her: “I have some nice vids of you desecrating my pet when she was still a prize. I watch them frequently.”

The tendons in his neck bulging, Damien lurched forward, but he caught himself before the guards had even realized he was on the move, pulling up short and placing his palms in the air as a gesture of conciliation. “You know what, brother? Enjoy watching them.” His voice grew even harder. “I hope each time you do, it’s a real kick in the balls knowing you’ll never have the real thing. Because, unlike with you, Scarlett enjoys it when I touch her so her gift lets me. But you...? We both know you lay one finger on her, and you’re a dead Alpha walking. Whereas me? I’m alive and well and, despite your pathetic efforts, getting to hold my female.”

“She’s mine,” Darvish snapped. “Not yours.”

“Wrong.”

“Your sister too. They both belong to me.”

“Wrong again.” But it was clear Darvish had scored a direct hit when Damien growled, and his voice emerged as a menacing rumble. “Tell me where Zaya is, and I’ll make your death a little less painful than it’s going to be otherwise.”

The darkness inside Scarlett slammed against her barriers once again.

“I don’t think so.” Darvish regained some of his usual smugness. “Especially when I’m not the one with multiple tasers pointed my way. But I will definitely think of you when my pet’s back by my side, your sister next to her, the Skolov name nothing more than a pathetic footnote in Anarheim history.”

“You truly are a delusional fuck.”

“You’re a dead one.”

“Your orders, Alpha Lord?” The guard spoke into his wrist comms but kept his gaze trained on them, his laser steady as he aimed it straight at Damien’s heart.

“Bring my pet to me alive.” Darvish was still riled. “Kill the male but drag his body back with you. I want to return his broken corpse to his brothers as a warning.”

*Kill. The. Male.*

Blistering, uncontrollable, murderous rage slammed through her.

Damien spoke to her in low tones, assuring her he had it under control, but it was too late.

Her back bowed as the darkness punched through her skin and erupted outward.

She barely registered Damien’s curse as he leaped forward, swiping out with his claws to take out the three closest guards—even as the walls shook and rocks smashed to the dirt as her gift wreaked its vengeance.

Only this time, it wasn’t the ceiling that collapsed.

It was the floor.

The ground rumbled, then tilted violently, tossing her, Damien, the supply pack, and those guards still standing around like space debris during a solar storm. Damien pitched forward while she toppled back onto her ass.

Her position provided the perfect vantage point to watch as a small crack appeared directly in front of the stumbling guard with the comms, his arms pinwheeling as he fought to keep his balance.

In the next blink of an eye, the small crack disappeared, swallowed by a



major fissure as the ground fell away and took the guards with it, all of them screaming as they disappeared, plummeting into an abyss that hadn't been there moments before.

Horror swept through her.

Especially when the yawning chasm didn't stop; it tore through the crust as if it were fabric, consuming all in its path, just like the monster inside her, snaking its way to where her Alpha stood.

"Damien!" She leaped up and ran toward him, arms outstretched and panic sweeping through her, knowing she'd be too late—only to have a heavy mass slam into her, sending her hurtling backward.

She landed on her back, the comforting weight of her Alpha on top of her, less than an arm's length from where the ground had finally stopped splitting.

There was silence, broken by the occasional plink of rocks as they bounced down into the new hole, the grave of twenty males. Thanks to her.

A tomb that could have been Damien's too if he hadn't reacted so fast.

"Scarlett? Baby?" Damien's hold tightened, his heart pounding fast against her skin. "You okay?"

The pain was excruciating. The shattering of her hopes and dreams even more so.

"Baby, talk to me. Are you okay?" The anguish in his voice prompted her to take action.

She nodded. It hurt too much to talk.

"Got to get you away from here before more guards come. Then we'll take care of you." His arms slid beneath her back and thighs; his touch so gentle as he lifted her that tears pooled in her eyes.

He was handling her as if she was delicate crystal.

When the truth was, she was the most dangerous thing around.

"Hold tight." He whispered the words against her skin, nuzzling her temple. "You're going to be okay, Omega."

Damien was soothing her—protecting her, as always—but she could hear the rough, jagged edges of his voice. She suspected it hurt him to see her this way almost as much as it did her.

And she hated herself for that even more.

She kept her eyes closed, concentrating on breathing deeply, focusing on ensuring her gift didn't go off again as he snatched up the supply bag, which had miraculously avoided falling into the chasm, and carried her and it down

the tunnel.

Soon, thankfully, it became clear her gift had once again burned out.

The agony had lessened too. Soon, she suspected, it would become nothing more than a dull ache. The physical hurt, that was. The void in her chest, the downfall of her hopes, they would never leave.

“We’ll be safe here. I know it’s damp and a little muddy, but all aqueduct shafts built by your ancestors are, and the entrance to this one’s next to impossible to see from the main tunnel.” She wasn’t sure how much time had passed before she found herself floating downward, cradled gently as Damien settled her on his lap with such care that she could barely breathe. “Hells, if we’re lucky, they’ll think we fell down that hole too. Even better, it’ll take time for them to dig the bodies out, which gives us some serious breathing space.”

She flinched, and he quieted for a heartbeat.

“This is not on you, Scarlett.” His voice was rough when he spoke again. “You weren’t the one with a laser. You did what you had to do to survive.”

She’d tried telling herself that too.

But that excuse wouldn’t work when it was Damien, one of his family members, Luc, or Kadon down in that kind of tomb.

She took a deep breath, then opened her eyes and curled her fingers into his shirt. “You have to let me go.”

Damien stiffened beneath her. “What did you just say?”



## SCARLETT

Scarlett's voice shook, but she forced herself to keep talking. Forced herself to rise from the safety of Damien's lap on shaky legs and stand on her own. "You have to let Darvish's guards take me to him."

Damien shot up right behind her, the fury on his face cutting deep, but she knew she had to stay strong. For him.

"You have to let me take Darvish out before I destroy you or someone else we care about. I couldn't bear that." She turned away, her movements sluggish as the damp dirt clung to her slippers.

A hand grasped her wrist and spun her back around. "No."

"I warned you." She tugged at Damien's hold. "I warned you what would happen. Now it's clear. You need to let me go. We're not even fated mates anymore. You. Have. To. Let. Me. Go!"

"How are you feeling?"

"Excuse me?" She jerked in his hold, his calm in the face of her high emotion not what she'd expected. "Damien, did you hear me? I need you to let me go." Her panic grew. What if her gift came back now? What if it erupted, and the ceiling crumbled, or the ground opened and took the male she loved above all else?

"I asked you a damned question, Omega." Damien corralled her backward. "How's your pain?"

"O-okay."

"Okay, as in you're still in a lot of pain but pretending to be fine as usual? Or okay, as in the pain's gone?"

Her spine hit the wall, the dampness immediately seeping past the

protective layer of Damien's shirt and into her skin. "The pain's lessening. The worst of it's already gone." It was the truth. The agony in the moment had been excruciating, but it had burned out. Now it was only a little above her usual soreness and nothing compared to the anguish she felt every time she thought of that abyss and how close it had come to swallowing Damien. "Please!" She peered up at him. "It doesn't matter. We need to focus on more important issues."

"More important?" His voice grew even tighter.

"My gift's dormant now, but it will roar to life again. It will return, and I don't want you anywhere near it when it does."

He offered no response.

She had no idea what he saw, but she wasn't hiding. She was crushed. Terrified. And one hundred percent determined to go because she would do *anything* to protect him.

"I'm tainted, Damien. Broken." The anguished words tore from her. "I-I thought maybe I could be something better with you. That my colors would return, and it could be like before, but... it can't. I'm too far gone. Too much of a monster, the darkness too deep inside me. You have to let me go."

"This ends now." His jaw clenched, so tight a muscle ticked within. "That's the last time you ever make that request."

"Damien—"

His mouth claimed hers. Hard. Angry. Hot.

And because it was him, because he was her everything, and this was goodbye, she rose to her tiptoes and claimed him back, her fingers threading through his hair, yanking him closer, as she poured every last bit of her need, her grief, and her love into him.

Then she ripped her mouth from his because any longer, and she'd be unable to leave. Already, the need pulsed between her thighs. "Damien—"

"Quiet." His thumb traced along her lower lip. "Still no pain?"

"No pain," she whispered, the dark energy radiating from him finally penetrating her own pain and panic. He might not be shouting back at her, but he was far from calm.

Rough fingers curled around her shoulders. "I get it. I left you. Now you keep threatening to leave me."

Shock blasted through her. "You didn't leave me. I chased you away because Darvish made me. I'm not trying to hurt you. Or get payback. I am trying to *protect* you."

“I had my so-called reasons for staying away too. They seemed like good ones at the time.”

“It’s not the same.”

“Maybe not, but the underlying lesson is. And it’s one we *both* should’ve learned by now.” Fury flared in his gaze. “There’s no excuse, no reason, good enough for the two of us not to be together.”

“I could hurt you.” She shrieked the words at him, desperate to make him understand. “Or someone else we love. Then you’d hate me. I couldn’t bear that.”

“I could never hate you, Scarlett.”

“It would destroy me if my gift brought you harm.”

“You think it would gut me any less if you walked away from me?”

Scarlett swallowed hard. She had no good answer for that.

“It took so much damned pain and misery to find our way back to each other.” He filled the silence. “But we made it, and when we’re not being chased or dealing with our families, things are good between us. Beautiful even. Are you really willing to throw that away? Throw me away?”

Her heart faltered in her chest. “I’d never do that. I wasn’t... I’d never! You mean everything to me.”

“So stay, Scarlett.” His grip tightened. “Stay and fight for us. Because you are everything to me too.”

“I’ve got so much darkness inside me, Damien. I’m nothing like I was.”

“So fucking what?” Hands still wrapped around her shoulders, he shifted her away from the wall, his movements stiff, his fury palpable, but so was his care, his touch careful.

He slid her shirt over her head, leaving her once more in nothing but her taming chain. “You are not going anywhere.”

“Damien!”

“Watch and learn.” Palm planted in the center of her chest, right over the taming chain and away from any bruises, he gently pinned her to the wall.

Eyes wide, she watched as his other hand stretched outward, the veins in his forearm bulging as his claw swiped down the wall.

She had no idea why. Even when that same, now declawed, finger smeared across the flesh of her belly, right between her hipbones, just below the links of the taming chain. His movements deliberate, his expression one of fierce concentration as he smeared the cave wall mud across her flesh.

She looked down.

## MINE

Etched in mud across her belly. Four letters. A single clear message.

She barely had time to register it before she was flipped around, her cheek pressed to the wall, her palms slapping against its cool, damp surface.

Damien's hand followed close behind, landing next to hers, caging her in, while his other finger painted across her lower back, this time right above the taming chain. The same motions as before, and she knew he was making the same claim.

"Mine." This time, he growled the word. "You got that? You told me you were mine. Same as I was yours. It might not be pretty. It might be forged through dirt and filth and pain and leave both of us marked, but that bond will never change. I don't need fated-mate marks to know." His thick thigh pushed between her legs, his body crowding hers. "Mine."

Lust and need collided with desperation. "Damien, I-I don't deserve you anymore."

"You deserve fucking everything, Scarlett. As do I. And what I want is you." His hands, now coated in mud, skimmed up her sides, light, careful, until he reached her breasts. He palmed them both, kneading them, marking them, the mud cool against her nipples as he rolled them between his fingers.

Her head fell back, striking his strong chest as a revealing moan escaped.

"That's right, baby. This is what I want." He ground his hips against her while continuing to play with her tits, and she thought she might come from that alone. "This is what I deserve. I've suffered enough. Paid my dues. It's time for my reward, and this is it. My female, my wild thing, melting under my touch. Streaked in mud, my fingerprints all over her skin, making those sweet, sexy purrs. Giving me her. Giving me everything."

Scarlett's hips bucked, need coiling tight between her thighs.

His fangs dragged against her skin. "Not always pretty. Filthy, even. But that's us."

His hand moved down her belly. "Mine." Over her hips. "Mine." Across her ass. "Mine." Stroked her clit. "Mine."

Marking her everywhere as he drove her wild.

Until she panted. Shook. Desperate for him to come inside her.

"Damien, please." She rolled her hips. Pushed back into the hard bulge at her back.

But he wasn't done. "You think your darkness makes you unfit for me? Oh no, baby. It's what makes you perfect for me."

He smeared more mud onto her skin—and his. Wrote his claim on her body again. This time, so gently that she barely felt it, but she knew it was there. Just beneath her ribs, covering the bruises.

The twisted rightness of his lesson carved those words into her soul so deep she knew even when the words and the mud washed away, his message never would.

“Damien, please.”

“You wet for me, Scarlett?”

“Goddess, yes.” She was soaked, her thighs slick with far more than mud.

“Palms against the wall. Ass up.”

Scarlett did as she was told.

She heard the rustle of laces being undone, then firm hands grasped her hips and drew her back and up, lifting her onto her toes.

He drove inside. She whimpered, the sheer, extraordinary pleasure of him stealing her breath.

Damien was right. It might be messy, and it might be ugly. But this was them, and it was everything.

Her channel, even drenched and throbbing, worked hard to accommodate him, stretching as he thrust himself deep, his cock tunneling inch by inch until he was seated to the root.

Until both of them were panting. Her forehead pressed to the dirty wall, her arms trembling.

“This pussy knows too.” He pulled out slowly. Then rocked back in. “Mine.”

She gasped. Purred in surrender.

“That stubborn heart knows too,” he whispered, his voice softer than before.

Each thrust of his cock drove her pleasure higher, the need inside her spiraling until she was so close...

Then he stilled.

“Damien, please.”

He chuckled low. “I fucking love it when you beg me, Omega.”

Before she had time to protest, one huge palm covered her belly, and he pulled her from the wall, his weight bearing down on her until she knelt on all fours in the dirt, his body curled over hers.

“I’ve got darkness too, Omega. So fucking much.” One hand wrapped around her throat while the other gripped her hips and held her in place.



“You’re the only thing keeping it at bay.”

He started up again, holding her immobile while he drove inside, his pace slower than before but no less deliberate.

His shaft grew larger with each thrust, the ridges of his cock rubbing over her swollen tissue just right as his knot swelled, bringing that exquisite rush of pleasure-pain.

While all she could do was take it.

It was beyond hot.

His hand left her hip to run along the links of her taming chain, and she screamed as the vibrations struck, amplifying her pleasure a thousand-fold.

A hand clamped over her mouth. “Just for me, baby. Those sounds are always just for me.”

She moaned against his palm. Trembled beneath him. Powerless to do anything but submit as he rode her hard.

“Do you want to know how to keep me safe? Do you want to know how to take care of me?” He rutted her harder. “Never fucking leave me. It’s that simple, Scarlett.”

She sobbed against his hand.

“I don’t know how to claw you out of my soul. I wouldn’t know where to begin. I wouldn’t even want to.” His hand slipped beneath her thighs to work her clit again. “I don’t care about the pain. The risk. The darkness. It’s part of you, and I’ve experienced life without you, Omega.” He leaned over, his warm body blanketing her, his hips driving deeper as his lips moved against her ear and his filthy fingers pinched her clit. “The truth is, Scarlett, I’ll take you any way I can.”

She came apart, pleasure ripping through her.

She’d thought what happened with those guards had carved a chasm so deep and dark inside her soul that it would never heal, but Damien had proved her wrong. His words, his touch, his care shattering her and then patching her back together, filling the rupture with beauty and light and love.

Her gift wasn’t gone. Its dark imprint still remained. But maybe it didn’t have to be her destruction. Maybe Damien was right. Maybe together, they could handle it and grow stronger than before.

“Tell me,” he growled, fucking her harder. Fucking her through every beautiful shimmer of pleasure radiating through her as her climax went on and on and on. “Give me the words I need.”

“I’m yours,” she whispered; her throat, her chest, her heart so full it was

almost impossible to speak. “I’m yours, and you’re mine, and this is us.” She pushed back into him, lifting her hips to meet every hard stroke, relishing the cool mud beneath her hands and knees, the fingerprints of her Alpha on her skin.

“Fuck, yes.” He gripped her hips, pounding harder. Faster.

“And I’ll fight with everything I have to stay right here with you.”

Grunting, calling her name, he toppled over the edge, his cum flooding inside her, his hips drilling deep until his knot swelled so big it locked them together, and all he could do was rock against her.

They were still both breathing hard when he rolled onto his knees and dragged her back with him so that she ended up in his lap, her spine against his chest, his cock still buried deep inside, his strong arms wrapped tight around her. There was mud everywhere. All over her. On him.

She couldn’t have cared less. It matched the darkness inside her—and for once, thanks to Damien, she felt like owning it.

“Give me that sweet mouth, wild thing.” His fingers threaded through her hair.

Eager, she tilted her chin up and back and gave him everything, just as he did her.

When they broke apart, he kept her where she was, his gaze locked with hers as he commanded, “We’ll find a way to deal with everything. Together.”

A memory of the guards’ screams and the gaping chasm flickered through her mind. But now, so did Damien’s recent words, the recollection of his fingertips marking her skin.

“Together.” She pressed her lips to his.



## DAMIEN

“**W**hat the hells happened to you two?” Mid-chew, Maddox slid open the back door and peered out into the alley, crunching down on something purple that smelled a lot like a *tarshe* vegetable.

“We had an incident.” Damien threw off the cloak and nudged his brother—and snack—backward as he hustled a mud-covered Scarlett inside. He’d watched and waited to make sure there were no eyes—or recorders—in the vicinity of Andor Stormhart’s upscale vacation residence before making their approach.

“Another one?” The kid did incredulous well, but Damien saw the amusement lurking beneath.

“Shut it.” He wrapped his arm tighter around Scarlett, then dropped his supply pack onto a round crystal table smack in the center of the entranceway, which had probably cost more than his shuttle.

Scarlett giggled, a miracle in itself after the whole chasm mess and the guilt he knew she still harbored. Only then, she leaned further against him, as if even that small amount of laughter had taken everything out of her.

Damien bore her weight gladly. Although in a better place emotionally, she was still wiped out. He’d practically had to carry her the last several tunnel lengths, so he wanted her clean, her bruises covered with healing gel, and her tucked up in bed as soon as possible. “We need—”

“Gods, what happened?” Kadon barreled into the entranceway from somewhere out the back, his arms outstretched, his horrified gaze fixed on Scarlett.

Damien stepped in front of her, snarling, instinct taking hold before he’d

even registered it.

Kadon skidded to a halt, his palms shooting up. “I’m just concerned for her.”

“She’s fine.” As Damien pulled her forward and tucked her back into his side, out of the corner of his eye, he caught Maddox choking back laughter. The kid wisely took another bite out of his food instead.

Scarlett mustered up the energy to elbow him.

*Hells.* That wasn’t how Damien had meant to play this meeting with their current host—the one offering them a safe hideout—but clearly, it was way too soon, and he was still way too raw to not react to Kadon Stormhart charging toward his female.

Though who was he kidding? Damien didn’t have much charm at the best of times. And the guy had coldcocked him while he was drugged, so he wasn’t sure they’d ever be best buds.

“Thanks, Kadon, but we’re okay. Totally unharmed.” Scarlett’s tone was warm, but she also wrapped an arm around Damien and squeezed, reminding him exactly where her loyalty lay.

He liked it a lot. “We just need a cleaning unit. Stat.”

They’d used cleaning tablets before leaving their aqueduct hideout, but they’d rolled around in mud, and that shit was everywhere. They required a serious, comprehensive purification unit to get to those hard-to-reach places. While it had been hot as hells at the time, there were some definite drawbacks.

*Still... enthusiasm and stamina for the win.* He and Scarlett would learn and refine their play as they went. They had all the time in the galaxy now.

“You sure you’re okay?” Stormhart didn’t exactly seem convinced, but he looked like he wanted to be, and Damien suspected they had an ally there.

“I really am fine. Better than I’ve been in a long time.” Thankfully, Scarlett truly sounded it, and Damien’s chest expanded wide.

Despite what happened with the hole in the ground and the guards, her tone and movements were lighter. As if getting filthy had somehow helped to purify her soul.

But she’d always been perfect to him, and the darker aspects of her gift didn’t change that at all. But he was just happy their *talk* had had an impact. She seemed better, less haunted, and, most significantly, was no longer insisting that he send her back to Darvish so she could kill the monster and herself and that was a game changer.

However, he didn't delude himself that it would be only smooth times ahead.

His female had a gift that was a definite danger to herself and others. They still had to confront Crex, Darvish, and this other mystery collaborator. Plus, get ahold of these incriminating vids and erase Scarlett's part in the stolen funds before the Brotherhood caught wind of it and took out their fury on the wrong party.

But Scarlett was with him now and one hundred percent committed to fighting for their bond, no matter what obstacles they faced.

And that meant there was no battle they couldn't win.

"What the fuck happened to you?" Luc crowded into the small entranceway right beside Stormhart.

*Not again.*

"We're fine. I'm fine." This time, Scarlett jumped in first.

"You don't look fine." Luc's fangs flashed.

As the tension in the room ratcheted up, Maddox placed his half-eaten snack on the crystal table.

Damien's claws pushed against his skin.

"We heard chatter over the Consortium comms lines." Not one braided hair out of place, Anya glided into the fray and, without hesitation, curled an arm around Luc's waist as if she'd known him all her life and he was just another brother wrapped around her finger. "You tell them we were worried, big guy?" She gave Luc a squeeze. "'Cause we all were, but now that you two are here safe and sound, we can all relax and work together to make sure we stay that way."

From the confused look on his face, Scarlett's brother had absolutely no idea how to handle someone like Anya.

But it didn't matter. Luc grunted his assent, and, just like that, the tension dissipated.

Scarlett sucked in a sharp breath and muttered, "Fearless."

Anya just kept right on talking. "Kadon and Luc have been *amazing* hosts, and I, for one, am grateful to be off the shuttle and out of those tunnels. But when you didn't arrive, I started monitoring comms over Kadon's secure line, and it seems something big went down in one of the tunnels. There's a lot of teams there now. Digging."

Scarlett stiffened beneath his hold.

So he'd been right. Darvish wasn't sure if they were in that hole along

with the dead guards.

*Dig away, motherfucker. And while you do, I'll keep hunting you.*

“I can fill you all in, but first, Scarlett needs a cleansing unit and to rest.” Plus, the last thing he wanted was to force his female to relive the whole chasm incident when it was still so fresh. He'd just gotten her beyond her state of devastation. He shifted to give her his full attention. “Omega, you head there, and I'll catch up with you.”

“We'll show her where it is.” Luc rushed in right away. “Alone.”

“Good idea.”

The surprise on his face almost made Damien's agreement worth it.

Did he like that the guy still wasn't sold on the idea of Damien in his sister's life? No. Did he like that Kadon Stormhart would accompany her to the cleansing unit? Also no. Did he like that Luc and Stormhart would likely interrogate her on the way? That, too, would be a no.

But he did like that Scarlett had others who worried about her.

It also wasn't lost on him that Luc and Stormhart had taken care of his sister and Maddox.

Best of all, he was confident that whatever the hells Scarlett told the nosy Alphas about their bond, it would be good.

He and Scarlett were solid.

It might not have been pretty—though it had been fucking hot—but they'd pushed past a big obstacle, and she was with him now. Committed to fighting for their future.

It made him slightly less twitchy about sending her off with two Alphas who clearly didn't think much of him.

Plus, he needed to speak with his family in private.

But first, he wanted one final check-in with his female. “You sure you're good?” Currently, the only dark cloud on his horizon when it came to her was those damned bruises and her level of exhaustion.

She snuggled into him and shot a soft smile his way. “Better than okay. Great.”

His chest went tight. For so long, the thought of them like this had been nothing more than a dream gone bad. But here they were. They were real, and even with all the shit they still had to deal with, they were beautiful.

He couldn't wait to get home to Abzal with her. Show her his world. Breed her and make a family together. Figure out a million more ways to be filthy and wild together. And do whatever it took to see that sweet, contented

look on her face for the rest of their lives.

After pressing one more kiss to her temple, he released her. Then watched as the other two males closed in.

He didn't like it, but he let them lead her away.

"She'll be fine." Anya tugged his hand. "Come on. You need to hear the latest so you can go clean up too." Her nose crinkled. "You're filthy."

"Got that right," Maddox snarked. "But Scarlett doesn't seem to mind that he's got a dirty mind and even filthier soul." Sexual innuendo delivered, the kid picked up his half-eaten snack and shoved it into his mouth. "Let's hit the cooking area. I want another one of those."

Damien said nothing. He was too content to be anything but mellow. Plus, he was happy the kid was cracking jokes and enjoying himself. And getting some food. After so many rotations of shuttle rations, a growing Alpha like Maddox must think he was in paradise.

He snatched up his supply bag and followed his brother's broad back, prowling through the space, taking in room after room of plush, fancy furniture like the entranceway table. The hallway took them past several living rooms and a study before it led to a kitchen filled with high-end appliances, including a top-of-the-line replicator.

No surprises there. Andor Stormhart's family had been in the Brotherhood for a long time. They'd initially made their money through raiding but had branched out. Everything in the place was gold, silver, or covered in opulent crystal. It was ostentatious as fuck, and not at all what Damien would have expected a badass raider's home to look like. But it was clean and safe, which meant that once they were out of this mess, Damien would be personally calling to thank Andor for the use of a hideout he didn't know he'd provided. Damien would also send the male a crate of Abzal's finest ale as a show of gratitude. Andor might have nosed his way into their family business more often recently than Damien liked, but he'd also come through time and again.

Maddox went immediately to the replicator.

Anya rolled her eyes.

Damien stowed his gear.

"Tell me." He didn't bother with pleasantries. He wanted to get clean and get back to Scarlett.

Anya answered, "The good news is there's a lot to sift through from the vids you found in Darvish's office, which means more chance of clues. The



bad news is there's a lot to sift through, which means it'll take time. But Maxheim's on it—and laser-focused. So you know we'll have something soon."

"The other good news is that Scarlett's friends are safe." This time Maddox spoke around something purple-skinned and sweet-smelling.

"That was fast." Damien was glad. Scarlett would be pleased.

"Nikolai knew someone nearby who owed him a favor. All the prizes from the transport were rounded up and are already on their way to Abzal, where Dahlia, Tess, and Keira are waiting to welcome them." Anya's lips twitched upward. "Coincidentally, two outer-rim Consortium brothels had all their females disappear in one night. Obviously, we know the two incidents are unconnected, but if the Brotherhood comes knocking, Nikolai says to deny involvement in either."

Damien narrowed his gaze at Anya, who stared back at him with an innocent "just reporting the facts" expression. But he got the sense there was more she wasn't telling.

Seemed an awful lot of omegas-in-distress had disappeared lately, and he knew for a fact that his brothers hadn't been involved in most of those cases.

"Are we sure there's no connection?" he pushed.

"It is curious, huh?"

Damien noted she hadn't given him a straight answer.

"Whatever the case, Scarlett will be pleased about her friends, right?" Maddox swallowed the last mouthful of whatever he'd been eating and reached for another.

True enough. And whatever else Anya might or might not be involved in would have to wait until Damien dealt with more immediate concerns. "Anything else to report?"

Anya shrugged. "That's all we've got. We had an uneventful trip here. Stormhart and Scarlett's brother—who are still working through some stuff themselves—are actually sweet when you get past all the bluster and cage-fighting, meanie vibes, and they made sure the place was empty and recorder-free before we entered."

"Good to hear. Now, I'm off to get clean. Let me know the moment you hear from the family." He shot Maddox a warning look. "Don't eat Stormhart out of house and home." As he prowled away, the kid made annoyed sounds of protest behind him, and Anya laughed.

Halfway down the hallway he heard, "Skolov, a moment."

He turned as Luc emerged from sleeping quarters as gold and silver and fancy as the rest of the place.

Damien braced. "I want to check on Scarlett."

"She's in the cleaning unit."

Damien couldn't resist. "Even better."

Luc's shoulders went tight, and with no Anya or Scarlett around to bring calm, Damien tensed too. "Look, you didn't want me with Scarlett from the start, but I'm here, and I'm sticking around, so get used to it."

"You didn't stick around," Luc growled. "You left her, and then you stayed away."

"So you want to trade fuck ups?" Damien kept his voice down in case the walls were thin enough for Scarlett to hear. "Because you made a lot of your own, including not protecting her as you should. Letting her destroy her life for you and your guy."

"You think that's what I wanted?" Luc prowled closer, his voice low but hard. "Fuck you. I would make any sacrifice for my sister. At first, I wanted her with Kadon because it seemed like the only way to save her from the brothels and the fate of most prizes. He was... reluctant, but at the same time, he wanted to protect Scarlett too. I knew I was asking a lot, but I was certain he wouldn't use her and toss her aside, and I..." He plowed a hand through his buzzed hair. "I thought it would be a way of keeping Kadon close and safe too. Be a family. Together."

Doomed to fail. But Damien had to admit he got it.

"They both had their reservations about the plan." Luc shook his head. "But I couldn't see any better options."

"Thanks." That had to have been the tenth time Luc let him know he didn't think Damien measured up.

Scarlett's brother didn't appear the least bit apologetic. "You were an unknown to me and cocky as fuck. Way too ready to swagger in to save the rotation without any idea of the full extent of the complications and danger you were wading into."

Unfortunately, Damien couldn't deny it.

"But before I could get it all sorted," admitted Luc, "all that shit went down with the tournament and the blackmail, and by the time I realized what was happening, Darvish and his minions already had their claws in Scarlett—and me. They took my plan to protect Scarlett and Kadon through a prime omega contract and turned it into a nightmare. Every time I tried to get close,

to see her, to plan, my attempts were blocked. I've been punished and tortured and locked up more times than I can count. The only reason I'm still alive is because that fucker needed me to control my sister and Kadon. Do you know what that's like?"

He didn't give Damien a chance to respond.

"To know that you're an instrument of doom being used to torment and screw over those you love most? To have to live with the fact that you were trained for one thing, to fight, but no matter how easy it would be to kill, you can't?"

Again, he gave Damien no time to answer.

"I thought long and hard about taking myself out of the game, except I knew Darvish would only use them against each other. I knew my death wouldn't set them free. Even if I was no longer a concern, Scarlett was too worried about Kadon, her friends, and the threats against them to leave. And Kadon would never abandon her. Not to mention, he'd still be stuck because if those vids of the two of us were ever released, it would mean the end of his golden boy rep, expulsion from his family, and a death sentence from on high, whether I was here or not."

Damien couldn't argue with any of that reasoning.

Plus"—Luc's voice shook—"I knew they'd blame themselves for my death. Scarlett, because she feels she's responsible for everyone and should be able to fix everything. Kadon, because he'd be an idiot and think he drove me to it by being the one to make the first move when really... besides my sister being born, he's the best thing that's ever happened to me."

*Shit.* No wonder Scarlett's brother was wound up so tight. He'd been through hells too.

"So," Luc said, "I bided my time, telling myself I'd find a way to protect them in the end, waiting for my chance, then you burst back onto the scene and"—he blew out a breath—"she says she's fucking happy, and what's more, she looks it."

Surprised, Damien stood taller.

"Those shadows are still there," Luc muttered, "and those damned bruises, but I can tell she means it when she says she feels better than she has in a long time. So... thank you."

Holy fucking hells. Damien had not expected that.

He opened his mouth to finally get a word in, but the guy stepped back. "That's it. Nothing more to be said. Now go see to her. I'm going to sit with

that wild sister of yours to see what else we can find out by listening in on Consortium comms. It's been a while since I've felt useful, and I look forward to stretching old muscles.”

Then he was gone, leaving Damien to stare at an empty hallway.

*Huh.* Seemed he had extra good news to relay to his omega.

He prowled down the hallway in search of Scarlett, hoping to catch her naked in that cleaning unit because Maddox wasn't wrong: Damien had a dirty mind and even filthier soul—and Scarlett was his perfect match.

And, for once, everything seemed to be going their way.



SCARLETT

“That’s it, baby. Take it all.”

As Damien’s hand clamped over her mouth, Scarlett moaned.

She clawed at the smooth, tiled walls of the cleaning unit, bent nearly half over as Damien drove his cock deeper, see-sawing his shaft between her closed thighs.

Her tits bounced with every thrust, her legs straining against the cloth tied around them as the heated water poured down on them both and the laser sterilizers painted the small space with a carnal red glow.

Every instinct screamed to spread wide. But Damien had decided otherwise, getting creative as he positioned her as he wanted, his cock forced to push through the resistance of her clamped-together thighs, creating exquisite friction while accentuating her inability to move, forcing her to simply take what he gave.

It was beyond erotic. It was everything.

She was going to come. Hard. Her body trembled as near-violent need ripped through her.

And it had all happened so fast.

One moment, she’d been just about finished with her cleansing after lingering longer than she should have. First, because she’d kind of hoped Damien would join her. Second, she’d wanted to ensure all the mud was gone. Third, cleaning units such as Andor Stormhart’s, which utilized both laser sterilization and water, were a luxury she and Kadon hadn’t had in the housing unit Darvish assigned them.

When in town, Kadon’s sire had invited them to stay overnight often

enough, but Kadon usually found a reason to decline. He didn't feel entirely comfortable around the older male. Their personalities clashed. Andor took any opportunity to try to control his son, and she too had not wanted to be in his presence, for fear he'd notice that she and Kadon did not behave as a typical Alpha lord and prime omega might.

But now, everything was different.

So she'd been enjoying her time in the cleaning unit. Thinking how she was exhausted but too on edge to actually sleep when Damien appeared in the doorway, wide shouldered, narrow hiped, thick thighed, his huge cock jutting toward her.

He'd looked so beautiful she'd almost forgotten how to breathe.

She'd been so overcome, it had taken a moment to register the long, thin cleaning fabric gripped in his fist.

Without uttering a word, he'd twisted the cloth into an elongated form. His movements were dominant. Deliberate. Carnal.

Her body responded at once. Her nipples beading, clit throbbing, while slick pooled on her folds.

"You clean now, baby?" He'd growled the words as he grabbed both ends of the twisted cloth and snapped it taut. "'Cause I'm about to dirty you up."

She'd been instantly, painfully, aroused.

He'd lassoed the cloth around her legs and tied it tight, right above her knees, so there was just enough give between her thighs to drive her wild—and allow him access. Then he'd lifted her against the wall until her tied legs were practically planted on his face and fucked her with his tongue while she squirmed and begged him to let her spread wide.

He'd refused.

Instead, when she was a heartbeat from coming, he'd settled her back on her feet, spun her around, drawn her hips back and tilted her ass up, and, pushing between her tied thighs, rutted her like a male possessed. Like they'd been apart for planetary rotations rather than a brief span of time.

She loved every wild, raw moment of it.

Even getting clean with Damien could be filthy.

As if reading her thoughts, he thrust harder. "I've had a lot of time to imagine all the things I'd do to you, Omega. It'll take a lifetime, but we'll get there."

*A lifetime.*

Her heart turned over with wonder.

Then he'd grabbed the portable cleaning nozzle, turned on the liquid spray, and aimed it straight at her clit.

She broke apart, moaning into his palm. He followed right behind.

A lifetime with Damien sounded perfect.



“WAKE UP, BABY. YOU’RE OKAY.”

Scarlett lurched upright—or tried to. A warm band of steel pinned her in place.

“You’re safe, Omega.”

“Damien.” Hand clutching his forearm, Scarlett surged fully into wakefulness, her heart hammering against her ribs.

“It was a bad dream.” His voice was a gentle rasp. “You’re here with me in Andor Stormhart’s place, in the big bed we commandeered, and I’m watching over you, making sure you’re safe.”

*Right.* Damien had returned to the Golden Dome. They’d found their way back to each other. He’d joined her in the cleaning unit. Dirtied her back up in the best possible way, then gotten her clean again before sweeping her up and carrying her to the bed. Then he’d told her about his conversation with Luc and that Ebony, Amber, and the rest of the omega prizes were safe from Darvish, covered her bruises in healing gel, and insisted that she rest, promising to wake her if any news arrived from his brothers.

Apparently, she’d given him another reason to wake her.

Nightmares.

She rolled to her side and curled into him, burying her face in the strong column of his throat.

Except those weren’t just nightmares. They’d been distorted replays of actual events. So many powerless moments. So many ugly instances. So much grief and pain and rage.

*Behave, pet.*

*Kill, pet.*

The memories battered at her—right alongside her gift. No longer dormant, the darkness inside her slithered through tissue and bone, fighting to get out.

She had to find a way to keep beating it back.



“Breathe, love.” Damien nuzzled the top of her head with his chin.

She did her best. “I just don’t understand why Darvish hasn’t released those incriminating vids of Luc and Kadon. Or the ones of me killing or the records that prove I stole from the Consortium. Why hasn’t he sent any of it to the Brotherhood? He always threatened to do so, and he’s not one to bluff.”

Damien stiffened against her. “You want the truth?”

“Yes.” Scarlett burrowed deeper.

“I suspect it’s because he still hopes to get you back. Whatever he’s planning, he wants you to be a part of it. If he takes away his leverage now, he’ll have nothing to use against you when he has you.”

A shiver ran through her. A part of her had known Darvish wouldn’t let her go easily but hearing it out loud made it somehow more real. Especially when the thought of being back in that monster’s clutches after being with Damien seemed so much more horrific and soul-destroying than before.

“Don’t worry, baby.” Damien held her tighter. “That’s not happening.”

“I know.” Still, her arms banded around his waist to crush him closer.

“I remember the first rotation I saw you dancing in that crystal cage.” Solid, powerful hands glided down her spine. “I thought you were the most beautiful creature I’d ever seen. I still think that now. But now I also know you’re even stronger than you are beautiful and nothing could keep you caged for long. We’ll find a way through this. Together.”

She gazed up at him. “The hands of a fighter. The soul of a poet.”

“And a cock the size of a freight shuttle.”

Scarlett burst out laughing. “Outrageous as always.”

“You know it.” His grin fell away. “You okay?”

She knew he’d done it on purpose. Given her a better memory from her past. A reminder, too, that she could still laugh. And, best of all, that she was no longer dealing with everything alone.

A flash of light on the silver-paneled wall had her head whipping to the side. “Did you see that?”

“Your colors? Yes.” He smiled again. “They’re getting brighter. You should have seen them in the cleaning unit; they were a gorgeous light show.”

She hadn’t noticed, as she’d been somewhat preoccupied. But she noticed now, along with something else that made her frown return. “Maybe so, but the black’s still there too, and it’s growing stronger.”

He smoothed a thumb across her brow. “We’ll deal with it.”

“I try to push it down. But it’s never enough. I-I worry I won’t be strong enough.”

Damien rolled them both until he lay half on top of her, his forearm on the mattress bearing most of his weight, his face close to hers. “You are. You’re strong enough to do anything. Look at all you’ve already done.” He pressed a kiss to her temple. The tip of her nose. “I’ll be right here with you as we figure it out.”

“I know.” Scarlett wrapped her arms tighter around him.

“We’ve got a beta scientist on retainer whose research focus is fated-mate bonds and omega gifts. He’s helped my brothers and their omegas. He’ll help us too.”

She willed away the last vestiges of the nightmares trying to prick holes in her newfound hope. “That would be amazing.”

“You know what else would be amazing?” He slid down, pressing kisses to her throat, her collarbone, the valley between her breasts, leaving shivers of pleasure in his wake.

“What?” Lust thickened her voice.

When he reached her belly, right above the taming chain, she expected him to put his lips there too.

Instead, he surprised her by rising to his knees, his expression intense as his fangs dropped, and her heart beat faster.

“This.” Gaze locked with hers, he pressed his thumb to the tip of a fang. “This is the most amazing thing of all.”

A drop of blood beaded on the pad of his finger.

“Alpha?” Scarlett held her breath.

His eyes never wavering from hers, he pressed his bloodied thumb to her skin, moving his hand in a way she’d grown to recognize.

Her heart squeezed tight. Slick pooled on the inside of her folds.

**M I N E**

The words he’d written on her in mud had been washed away.

Now, proving he’d bleed to keep it there, he’d seared his promise of love and protection into her skin for a second time.

“That’s what’s most amazing, Omega.” Contentment glittered in his stare. “That you are well and truly mine, and we will never be separated again.”

She felt his blood vow right to her soul. It was raw, primal, and barbaric; it was messy, and it was theirs.

“Yours.” Seizing hold of his hand, she guided it to the carved ridges of his stomach—since she knew he’d lose his mind if she tried to cut herself—and, with a quick flick of her wrist, smeared her initials on his flesh. “Mine.”

“Fuck, yes.” His eyes, already hungry, already streaked with red, grew more so as he stared down at her claim.

Then, gaze returning to her face, he drew his thumb to his mouth and sucked the small wound. “I’ve been bleeding since I left you, Scarlett, but every step I took, I can see now it had a purpose. I needed to learn what truly matters to me: and it’s not fame or a rep or even money or glory—hells, it’s not even making my brothers proud. It’s you.” He stared down at her. “It’s being there for you. Supporting you. Shouldering your burden. It’s proving to you that I can be the male who’ll always choose you and be there for you in whatever way you need. You wreck me in the best possible way, Omega.”

“You heal me in even better ways, Damien.”

“I hope so.” He lowered himself until he hovered just above her. “My mother was gone before I could do much more than walk and feed myself. Being near the bottom of the Skolov litter, I was always one of the kids taken care of, even when we were hiding out in mountain caves, scrounging for food, hunted by our enemies. I hated it. I hated feeling useless and a burden on my family, and I think...” He swallowed hard. “That’s part of why it hit me so hard when I thought you’d chosen Kadon over me. I wanted to be your everything, Scarlett. I still do.”

“You are.” She lifted her hand and cupped his strong jaw.

He nuzzled her palm. “I’m going to fucking worship you for the rest of your life, Scarlett. Revere that soft skin, that sweet pussy, and that scared, wounded heart.”

Her breath hitched.

“I know I’m not what everyone needs, but I am what you need. A bold, brash brawler, an Enforcer who likes it raw and dark and will take down anyone who tries to hurt you. Who’d give his life to keep you safe.”

No longer able to take it, she reared upward and cradled his face, her lips claiming his. “I would do the same for you. Always.”

A knock shook the door. “We’ve got news.”



## DAMIEN

“I don’t see anyone.” Luc shifted impatiently.

“Agreed.” Cloak on and back pressed to the alley wall, Damien scanned the rear entrance to Crex’s place. “It’s strangely quiet.”

“You sensing a trap?” Luc narrowed his eyes as if his borrowed cloak also gave him the ability to see through walls.

“I don’t know. Not necessarily. Just something seems... off. You?”

Scarlett’s brother inhaled deep, as if scenting the air. “All I’m sensing is that I want in there and my hands wrapped around that fucker’s throat in payback. Then I want us out of here as soon as possible.”

“You and me both.”

Bagging Crex, Darvish’s long-term assistant, took them one step closer to Darvish, which, in turn, was one step closer to bringing Zaya home, so this field trip had to happen ASAP.

Still, Damien hadn’t wanted to leave Scarlett, his sister, or Maddox, but dragging them along was a hell of a lot riskier than having them remain at the hideout. Not to mention, he had no interest in Scarlett witnessing what he was about to do to Crex.

So, once they got the address from Maxheim, and Luc made it clear he was going after Crex no matter what, Damien decided he had no objection to a helpful pair of cage-fighter hands along for the ride.

After all, Crex had tortured Scarlett’s brother. Payback was due.

But Damien wanted the omegas protected, so after some negotiation, they’d left Maddox and Kadon to guard the place.

Damien had tucked Scarlett back into bed with the promise he’d return as

soon as possible. He didn't want her to have any more nightmares without him there to soothe her.

So, here he and Luc stood. In one of the so-so neighborhoods of the Golden Dome—not glitzy or luxurious, but a step above the sterile, cramped housing quarters of most prizes, fighters, and staff. Here, the units were attached, one-story residences just off the main strip. Crex's place wasn't in the best shape: tiles had fallen from the roof, and the windows were dirty, but the unit was a short walk from the stadium and arena, likely so Crex could be at his employer's constant beck and call.

"We sure he's in there?" Luc asked for the tenth time.

"If Maxheim says Crex is in there, he's in there."

Maxheim was busy working his way through the scanned vids, searching for any intel. Unfortunately, most of what he'd found was incriminating stuff that would get Scarlett or her family in trouble, which was probably why Darvish had left them behind: as a form of a warning.

But one of the vids was a recording made by Crex, where he'd roughed up a restrained Luc to keep Scarlett in line. Damien hadn't watched it. He knew he'd lose his shit if he saw what Scarlett had had to witness, and he needed to keep his cool long enough to get information from Crex about Darvish and Zaya. Only then could he tear Crex to pieces.

However, Maxheim had been less interested in *what* was on the vid than in *how* it had been recorded. Unlike most of the other vids, captured through Darvish's vast surveillance network, this particular one had been produced using a different source. Crex had recorded it himself. Which meant it could be traced back to his unique comms signal. A signal Maxheim had locked in on and followed back to the wearer's location.

"Let's do this." Damien pushed off the alley wall, his cloak fluttering at his calves as he prowled toward the door, Luc following right behind.

It was surprisingly easy to rewire the door and slide it open. Another development that had Damien's gut stirring.

Still, laser raised, he barreled through the doorway, going high while Luc went low.

No movement from within. No sound either. It was soon apparent why.

Crex sat facing them, staring back with sightless eyes, an open mouth, and a broken neck. Tied to a chair, he was naked and covered in bruises and blood. And had something stapled to his chest.

"Hells." His laser still up, gaze scanning for an ambush, Damien stalked

forward.

Someone else had gotten to Crex first.

Any doubt as to who that was ended when Damien drew closer and saw the message etched into the outside of the vid monitor attached to Crex's chest: *For my pet.*

Damien growled low.

Luc didn't seem much happier. "That fucker. Darvish did this and left a vid for Scarlett."

"I know." Damien turned in a slow circle, ready for any sudden ambush.

Luc did the same. "He's obsessed with her."

"Yup." Damien had figured that out a while ago.

Thanks to their Alphahole sire, his half brother had a thing about being defective and never measuring up, and Scarlett was as good as it got. Not only was she beautiful, but she was also Damien's female and had a dangerous, powerful gift. Plus, no matter what Darvish did to her, she got back up and kept on enduring. Unfortunately for her, that made her the perfect plaything for a monster such as Darvish.

"That's why he hasn't left yet." Luc voiced another of Damien's not-so-recent realizations. "Darvish should have scurried away already, but he hasn't. Because he wants Scarlett for himself."

"Yes," snarled Damien, "but he's not fucking getting her."

"On that, we finally agree."

But Damien knew they were running out of time. Because Darvish wanted Scarlett badly and wouldn't linger forever when it came to getting her back. He wasn't stupid, and he knew Damien was closing in. He'd cut and run, fading into whatever other identity he'd constructed for himself, continuing his scheming, just as he always did—taking his information about Zaya along with him.

So Damien needed to act fast. And he needed to gather as much intel as possible, so even if Darvish ran, he couldn't outrun them.

Confident there was no imminent ambush heading their way, Damien shoved his laser into the back of his leathers and studied his ex-friend. Fuckers had died a painful death.

At least that was something.

Though Damien would have preferred to dole out the execution himself—after squeezing every last piece of useful information he could get from Crex about Darvish and his sister Zaya.

Of course Darvish had stolen that opportunity from him.

But his half brother had left him something else.

Damien swiped away the blood on the vid monitor from the stapling and read the rest of the message: *Bring the omega to what was Consortium headquarters in exchange for this recording. Otherwise, this will be released, and I'll reclaim my pet anyway.*

“Twisted fuck.” Luc’s fangs flashed. “Does he honestly think we’ll do it?”

“Guess he’s used the same leverage to control Scarlett before, so thinks it’s worth a shot.”

“Well, it’s not going to work.”

“He likely knows that too.” So what the hells was the point of it all? Damien’s gut blared louder. Darvish was clever, a strategist who played the long game. There’d be a purpose to all this. So, beyond the obvious attempt at intimidation, why leave Crex and the message?

“Why kill him though?” Luc stared at Crex with a mix of fury and pity.

“To tie up loose ends. Those around Darvish have a habit of dying once they’ve outlived their usefulness. Plus, Darvish is smart, and he knows what makes Scarlett tick. If there’s a chance she’ll see or hear about this, he wants her to wonder if he’ll do this to someone loyal to him, what will he do to those who stand against him? Which is why we won’t tell her and let him mess with her head.”

“Agreed. You see those scratches?” Luc gestured with his chin toward the chair’s armrest. “Looks like Crex tried to claw out a message before he died.” He peered at it. “*Close 2 U*. What the hells does that mean?” Luc swiveled his head around as if expecting something to jump out at them.

“No clue. But from what I know of the real Crex, we can assume there’s nothing altruistic about those scratches, that’s for sure.”

“True. The guy was the worst kind of Alpha.” Luc spat at Crex. “I hope he’s in every hells there is.”

Damien tapped the vid screen. “Let’s take a look at what Darvish wanted us to see.”

Between the blood streaks, a grainy image appeared on the screen before quickly sharpening into focus.

“Fuck me.” Luc’s body went tight. “Of course.”

It was a vid of him and Kadon.

“We don’t need to watch it,” Luc snarled. “I’ve seen plenty. Fucker



filmed us several times before we realized.” He reached for the monitor. “I was weak.”

Damien smacked his hand away. “You weren’t weak. Weak is letting ego or pride rule you. Believe me, I know. Going after what you want takes courage.”

Luc said nothing.

Damien considered staying quiet. But when had he ever? “I waited far too long with your sister,” he admitted. “Don’t make the same mistake.”

Luc’s breath shuddered out of him. “I’ve grown up hearing how I feel is wrong. Telling myself the same.” He shook his head. “Plus, there’s so much to lose. Kadon—”

“Would do anything for you.” Damien wasn’t sure why he kept pushing. Maybe because he knew it would make Scarlett happy. Maybe because he still felt he had something to prove to this male. Or maybe he simply recognized another’s pain—having been that low himself so recently—and didn’t want anyone else to suffer like that. “Stormhart keeps saying he knows what crazy, obsessed love looks like, and take a hint, it’s because he looks in the mirror and sees it in his eyes every rotation.”

Luc remained silent.

“Also, just a heads-up, I see it in your eyes too.”

“Hells.” Luc looked away.

“You’re scared.”

“I am not scared.” Luc bristled, his chest expanding as the tendons in his neck bulged. “I’m a trained Consortium cage fighter. I wipe the mat with Alphas twice my size. The Consortium’s controlled my life ever since rotation one. I’ve bled and broken for them. I lost the ability to feel fear for myself long ago.”

Damien got it. “But you can still feel fear for others.”

Luc’s shoulders slumped. “Yeah.”

“Does he know you love him?”

Luc stiffened, opening his mouth as if to deny Damien’s question, then closing it just as fast as his gaze shifted away. “He gives up a lot if we officially become an ‘us.’ Me? Not so much. I was born Consortium property. Even now, I don’t have much that’s mine. Kadon, on the other hand, was born with everything. A Brotherhood legacy, the right kind of blood, money, connections. He could have taken the easy way and just ridden the family coattails. Instead, he took a path where, as you well know,

connections only get you so far.”

Damien wondered if Luc had any idea just how far gone he sounded over Stormhart.

“In the ring, nothing matters but focus, spirit, and determination”—Luc was still on a roll— “and how hard you’re willing to work. Kadon excelled in every way and became one of the top cage fighters in the galaxy. He truly is the dome’s Golden Boy.”

“Plus”—Damien didn’t bother to sugarcoat it— “he’s Brotherhood. First son in a family that has power and prestige and expects him to take a prime omega and sire several Alphas to keep the bloodline going.”

Luc swallowed hard. “Yes.”

“And he’ll lose it all if he’s with you.”

“Yup.”

Which was why Luc hadn’t told Kadon how he felt. Stupid, but honorable.

“But he’ll gain a lot too.”

Luc’s jaw clenched. “Gain? Being with a Consortium trainer who doesn’t even own himself? Not really. I don’t have much to offer besides hot-as-hells fucking—and lust only goes so far.”

Damien’s chin jutted toward the screen. “Seems like a lot more than lust.”

“You’ve now overheard two Alphas go at it. Double the rut haze. It’s intense.”

Fuck, Luc was possibly even more stubborn than his sister.

“Kadon had four planetary rotations of playing the golden boy alongside my female,” Damien pointed out. “Didn’t seem to make him happy. How about you stop holding him at bay and let him choose what he wants?”

There was a long pause.

“Maybe,” Luc said at last, and Damien had no clue from the other male’s tone if he’d gotten through or not.

“No maybes. Pull your head out of your ass and stop pretending what’s between you is just Alpha lust and bad decisions on his part. You already know what it’s like trying to live without each other. Kadon doesn’t seem too happy with that path, and since he’s the one with so much on the line here, surely his vote counts for something. From the way he looks at you, I get the sense you’re worth it for him. So wake up before it’s too late. You and I have already wasted enough time being apart from the ones we love.”

Luc said nothing, but Damien hoped he’d gotten through.

If not, that was that. He'd stuck his nose in far enough.

Refocusing, he tapped the screen and replayed the vid.

"Looking for some tips?" Luc didn't sound happy, but he did sound slightly less tormented.

"I do just fine in that department."

"That's my sister, Alphahole."

"Yeah, and I intend to make her happy for the rest of my life."

Luc cursed. "I'm going to actually come to like you, aren't I?"

"Happens to the worst of us. Give in now."

Luc actually chuckled. If Damien hadn't been standing next to a dead guy who'd betrayed him, with proof that Darvish's obsession with Scarlett was extreme, he probably would have felt pleased with himself. Now all he felt was itchy. Like he was missing something. Big.

He watched the vid loop again.

Luc sighed. "Haven't we seen enough?"

"I'm not trying to get my jollies. I'm trying to figure out why this bothers me."

"Hells, I thought you just said—"

"Not that." Damien studied the screen. "The angle, the background. Where was this recorded?"

Luc peered closer too. "Hard to say. It's so dark, and they've blurred out the background."

"Exactly, like it was done on purpose. Maxheim hasn't mentioned them doing that with any of the others, which tells me Darvish has something to hide. So study it. Try to remember where this was recorded."

Another curse from Luc, but this time, he watched carefully.

Suddenly, he shot up. "Shit. I do recognize that. See the barely there outline of that table?" Luc pointed to the screen. "It was hard for us to find places to meet. We were both under such scrutiny, so Kadon and I would sometimes get together at his father's place. Fuck, we figured it was safer than the alleys or our rooms. I'd swear that's the entranceway table at Andor's vacation retreat."

Damien went still.

His body locked while his mind moved at warp speed. Background blurred. Crex's message: *Close 2 U*. Filmed at Kadon's father's place.

Where they'd left the others.

"We need to go." Damien spun around. "Now!"



THEY REACHED their hideout in record time.

Damien burst through the door, Luc right behind.

It was too late.

The place had been torn apart, the entranceway table shattered, and broken furniture lay strewn everywhere. The boot prints of several hulking Alphas stamped in the dust and debris.

But no Scarlett, Anya, Maddox, or Kadon.

Worse, the sleeping quarters where Damien had left Scarlett was crumpled in on itself, the ceiling caved in, the floor half gone.

Damien threw back his head and roared, "Scarlett!"

His comms beeped with an incoming message.



## SCARLETT

“**W**here the fuck is she?”  
Scarlett’s eyelids fluttered open. “Damien.” She’d been pretending to sleep to appease the others, but really, she’d been waiting. For him.

Anya rose from her seated position beside Scarlett’s bed. “I’ll go get him before he roars so loud Darvish’s guards know exactly where to find us again.”

Scarlett managed a smile.

Outside in the shuttle’s hallway, the booming voices of Damien, Luc, Maddox, and Kadon clashed, each trying to shout over the other.

“Alphas.” Anya sighed. “So easily wound up.”

While she wasn’t wrong, Scarlett thought it might be justified in this instance.

She, Anya, Kadon, and Maddox had barely escaped capture by Darvish’s guards when Kadon’s father’s place was raided and she’d no idea what had befallen Damien and Luc in their pursuit of Crex.

Truth be told, she’d been worried sick since she came to earlier, and felt like screaming herself. Except the darkness inside her was once again burned out, and her energy had yet to return.

The shouting in the hallway grew louder.

“You, rest.” Anya could be as bossy as her brother. But she was already gliding toward the door and out of Damien’s shuttle sleeping quarters, and Scarlett didn’t have the strength to argue with her. Or to look away from the new bruises now stretching to her upper arms. Her body, not the walls, was

again her canvas; only this time, it was splattered with angry red, purple, yellow, and blue discolorations that looked more painful than pretty.

The door closed behind Anya.

Scarlett knew the aches and pains would recede. The exhaustion too. But it was taking longer than last time, and she was impatient.

She wanted to leap from the bed and glide through the doorway herself. Jump into Damien's arms and make sure he and Luc were okay—then drag her Alpha back to this huge platform bed that took up nearly the entire space and roll around on the sexy, silky sheets and soft hide that scented of him and had been working her up since she awoke earlier and found herself on her Alpha's shuttle.

"Scarlett!" Damien's voice boomed in the hallway, sounding a little nearer.

"I see you got our comms message." Anya must have met him outside the door because her voice was pitched at a far more normal decibel level, and Scarlett heard her perfectly.

"Yes. After I saw the place." Damien's agitation was easy to hear.

Scarlett winced. She could only imagine how bad it had looked. What he must have feared.

"I'm sorry about that." Anya echoed her thoughts. "We had to get away first. We didn't want to risk using the comms until we'd made it out and were on our way to the shuttle."

"Of course. You did good. All of you. But now I need to hold my female."

"Right." Anya lowered her voice, but Scarlett was listening hard, so she heard her anyway. "Don't freak out. The bruises are worse. And her gift..." Anya hesitated. "It almost took down the whole room. Maddox pulled her out just in time. By then, the guards who'd come for her were dead. But it took her a while to wake up."

"Fuck. The doc—"

"Is on his way," Anya assured him. "It's another reason I told Kadon and Maddox to bring her here."

Scarlett hadn't been privy to that discussion. She'd been unconscious by then, the pain from her gift's eruption taking her out completely. Goddess, she hated it. Hated what it might do to her and Damien...

No. She wasn't going there. Not anymore. She'd have hope. Remain focused.

She and Damien were in this together. Always and forever.

Silence fell in the hallway as if he, too, was coming to grips with what he'd learned.

Eventually, he offered a choked, deep, rasped, "Thank you, Anya, for watching out for her."

"I got you. Always, big brother." Anya's tone was gentler than Scarlett had heard the omega use with her brothers before. "For all the times you watched over me."

"Anya." Damien's voice remained rough. "You don't owe me anything."

"I disagree. I'll always be grateful to Nikolai, Maxheim, and Alexi for hustling their asses to keep us warm, fed, and safe. But I will always be *particularly* grateful to you for providing me with something equally precious: love and laughter."

Scarlett choked up. No wonder it came so naturally to Damien to be her protector and shield. He'd been doing it since he was a kid for those he loved.

"And"—his sister's voice wobbled—"I'll never forget that you were there for me in my darkest hour."

Scarlett wondered what that was about.

"It's been my honor," Damien whispered.

*Ugh.* Scarlett swiped at her eyes. The last thing she needed was for Damien's first glimpse to be of her all teary-eyed. Given her Alpha's protective inclinations, she'd never leave this bed again—and not in a good way.

The door to Damien's sleeping quarters slid open.

"Hey, beautiful." Her Alpha loomed in the doorway, mouthwatering as ever.

"Damien." Locking down any inclination to wince, she pushed to sitting and opened her arms. "Thank the Goddess you're safe."

"I was just thinking the same thing." He reached her side, sweeping her gently into his arms. "Fucking scared the hells out of me when I saw the place." He pressed his lips to her temple. "But now that I'm holding you, I'm much better. What about you? How are you feeling?"

"Better now too." She smiled up at him. "Tell me, what happened with Crex?"

"You first. What do you remember from the raid?"

She thought back. "I was asleep when the ruckus started. I heard noises. The crash of furniture and fighting. Anya's scream. Then Kadon and Maddox



yelling at Anya and me to hide, but it was too late. There were Alphas in my room, dressed in Consortium uniforms. One was reporting into his comms that they'd found me when two others reached out to drag me from the bed." She hesitated and then admitted her least favorite part. "M-my gift exploded. The males flew backward. I was in a daze," she admitted. "The pain was immense."

"Omega," he crooned softly, holding her tighter but somehow more carefully too. As if she might break apart in his arms.

Scarlett burrowed deeper into his hold, still struggling to believe this was her life now. That this was them after so much angst. "I could hear the other guards shouting not to touch me. To use the tranquilizer first."

Damien cursed. "A tranq? Hells."

She nodded, knowing he wouldn't like that last part. Or any of what was coming next, so she figured it was best to get through it as fast as possible, for both their sakes.

"I wanted to run, but they'd blocked the exit." Her voice dropped to a whisper. "I was afraid. I could hear Kadon, Maddox, and Anya struggling. Fighting. And... and I was just so angry. I could feel my gift raging. I tried to keep it in. For Anya, Maddox, and Kadon's sake. But then, one of the guards aimed a tranq blaster at me, and... I lost it." She blew out a breath. "The rest's fragmented. Pain. Screams. Pieces of the ceiling and floor collapsing around me. Then nothing."

"It's okay, Scarlett. You're here with me now. I got you." Damien's palm pressed into her spine, steadying her.

"Honestly, I'm fine." Her fingers curling into the fabric of his shirt, she stiffened her spine. "I think it's just the aftermath. Anya told me Maddox ran into the room, leaped over the hole in the floor, dodged a bunch of falling debris, and grabbed me. Thankfully, my gift had burned out by then."

"Yeah, Maddox says you and your gift turned the tide, taking out the bulk of the guards and making it possible for them to handle the stragglers. I'm proud of you, Omega."

That was nice to hear. Nice to know, too, that her gift had been a help and not just a hindrance of potentially epic and disastrous proportions. Especially since she was now weak, lying in this stupid bed, covered in bruises. "I'm just glad no one we care about got hurt."

"Besides you." Damien's growled words were laced with admonishment, as if he wasn't okay with her forgetting that important part.

“Point is, we made it. Kadon, with some help from Anya, took care of the last of the guards while Maddox carried me out.”

Damien ran his nose along hers. “That’s why I’m buying the kid ten crates of that purple-skinned food he likes so much and letting him sneak out to meet whoever the hells he wants once we’re back home.”

Scarlett giggled. Of course.

Leave it to Damien to make her laugh.

Still grinning, she said, “Now it’s your turn.” She leaned into him. Telling the story had taken it out of her more than she’d expected. “What happened with Crex?”

“Tell me first how you are really feeling.” He ran his gaze over the bruises on her skin.

She sat up straighter. “I’m fine. Really.”

“Omega.” The rough, cautionary rumble shot straight to her core. As did the way his hand slipped beneath her shirt to slide up her thigh, then along the taming chain at her hip, his fingers playing with its links; another subtle warning to give him the truth.

Her nipples tightened.

She definitely wasn’t tired anymore, another kind of pain replacing the old one: an exquisite, achy throb centered right between her thighs.

“Alpha?” She slid her hands up his chest and wrapped them around his neck. “Perhaps you need to check me over yourself to be sure. And ensure the taming chain is working too.”

Hunger darkened his stare. “Fuck, yes.”

Thank the Goddess for his ability to be distracted. Especially when it was exactly what she wanted as well.

“Give me that mouth, wild thing.” Damien’s lips descended toward hers. “Because you might be fine, but I am not over my scare yet. I need to touch you everywhere to remind myself you are exactly where you’re supposed to be. But this time, it’s gonna be gentle between us, and if you feel even a twinge, you better speak up at once because if you don’t and I find out, when you really are feeling better, I’m going to—”

“Ah, Damien.” The door slid open, and Anya poked her head back in. “Sorry to interrupt, but I’m curious. Why’s Maddox pointing a laser at Luc and Kadon while they’re cuffed and chained to the wall?”

“What?” Shoving against Damien’s chest, Scarlett bounded out of his lap, then leaped off the bed.



## SCARLETT

“U nchain them at once.” Scarlett marched down the hall, not caring that she wore only another of Damien’s oversized shirts. Or that she listed from side to side. Or that every step she took sent a twinge through her ribs and another through her clit.

“Baby, calm down.” Damien followed close behind. Anya at his heels.

“No!”

In the next heartbeat, her feet left the ground as Damien swept her up in his arms. “Damned it, Scarlett. You need to get back in bed.”

She glared up at him.

He glowered right back.

“Scarlett will rest once this is resolved.” Anya offered a diplomatic alternative to their standoff.

Damien’s grip tightened, his frown deepening, but he managed a grudging “Fine.” His fierce gaze bore into her. “Just don’t get too worked up.”

“Too late.”

They reached the front of the shuttle quickly—the ship was gorgeous and clearly cared for, but it wasn’t huge—only to find the exact situation Anya had described, but worse.

Thankfully, Damien set her on her feet as she took it all in.

Luc was restrained to the shuttle wall, and he looked furious. Plus, a small scuff mark on his chest looked fresh. Kadon, sporting a new bruise to add to the slashes he’d accumulated from his earlier fighting days, was manacled to Luc’s chain, his expression equally stormy.

Maddox, meanwhile, stood guard an arm's length away, the bandage covering the wound above his eye, courtesy of the raid, again seeping blood while he pointed a weapon at her brother and friend.

She reexamined Damien. Not a mark on him.

Alphas!

Scarlett pointed toward her cuffed brother and friend. "Let. Them. Go."

Damien crossed his arms over his chest, biceps bulging, stubbornness oozing from every pore. "There are questions that need to be answered first."

Her patience snapped. "What does that mean? And how does restraining them possibly get your questions answered?"

"It doesn't, but I needed to see to you. Ensuring you were okay was my first priority. Then I was coming back to deal with this."

"*This?*" She tried not to get distracted by the sweetness of his concern for her. "Being my brother and my friend shackled like prisoners?"

"It's complicated."

"Complicated?" Her voice rose, and she knew she was repeating his every other word, but she couldn't seem to stop.

"You're in for it now," Kadon noted with a fair amount of glee.

"I'd be very careful when you take these cuffs off me, Skolov." Luc's sentiments clearly ranged toward the more murderous.

"See?" Damien gestured her brother's way. "Complicated."

"You are not helping," she snapped at Luc before returning her attention to Damien. "Can you explain why they're chained up?"

"I had to restrain Luc. Otherwise, I knew he'd object when I locked down Kadon."

His explanation wasn't making anything clearer.

Anya looked equally confused. It was the only thing that made Scarlett feel any better.

"It's no big deal," Damien assured her. "Luc would do the same if our positions were reversed. And if I'm satisfied with what Stormhart tells me, which I expect to be, this will all be behind us soon."

Scarlett tried a different tack. "You are not the Enforcer in this situation. You're my Alpha, and since those males are my family, they're yours too."

Damien's expression hardened. "Family doesn't mean a Get off the Prison Planet Free card. Darvish is my blood, and he's trouble. I will always be the Enforcer when it comes to you. I will do whatever's necessary to protect you."

*Ah.* So this somehow had to do with her.

She had no clue why Damien would suddenly perceive Luc or Kadon as a threat to her, but she understood now that her Alpha had been triggered, and the fastest way to get through this was to do exactly as Damien insisted and get his questions answered.

“Okay, yes, let’s get to the bottom of this. But please unchain them both while you resolve whatever it is that got them shackled in the first place.” She wasn’t above a spot of manipulation in an extreme case like this, so she leaned into him and added, “And please do it fast. I want to get back to bed.” She lowered her voice. “With you.”

“Hells, yes.” Eyes streaking red, Damien jutted his chin toward Maddox. “Unchain them. But keep your laser on Stormhart until I say otherwise.”

Luc growled.

Kadon just shook his head.

Scarlett clamped her mouth shut, reminding herself she’d won one battle. She’d pick her moment for the next.

A few short heartbeats later, their manacles were off.

Fortunately, Luc didn’t follow through on his threat to go after Damien. At least, not yet, but he did shoot a glare her Alpha’s way.

“So, what’s this about?” Kadon flexed his wrists, his gaze bouncing from Damien to Luc.

Her brother, she noted, looked away fast.

The nape of her neck prickled. What was going on?

“Any idea how the Consortium guards found you?” Damien fired his first question at Kadon.

“No idea.” Kadon appeared surprised by the query. “Do you?”

Damien didn’t answer. Instead, he exchanged a glance with Luc.

“What do you know that I don’t?” Kadon, like her, was catching on to the idea that something significant had happened at Crex’s place. “I thought you said Crex was dead when you got there. What the hells is going on?”

She hadn’t known Crex was dead. And wasn’t sure how to feel about it. But there was no time to process that revelation now.

“I’ll ask the questions.” Damien wasn’t in full Enforcer mode; instead, he was studying Kadon, his voice—weirdly—almost gentle.

“Fine.” Kadon threw up his hands.

“Yeah, fine. Ask your questions, Skolov.” Luc waded back into the discussion. “But only so you can be as certain as I already am that Kadon had

nothing to do with this. And do it with Maddox's damned laser pointed somewhere other than at the male I love."

"Th-the male you love?" A look of wonder crossed Kadon's face.

Scarlett felt pretty giddy herself. She'd never heard her brother say those words before.

"Yeah." His voice rough, Luc swiveled to face Kadon and wrapped his hand around the nape of the other male's neck. "The male I love. I want you to remember that no matter what."

"No matter what." Kadon's head bobbed up and down, his eyes focused only on Luc.

"Great. Nice timing," Damien muttered, his scowl directed at Luc. "I told you to declare your feelings, but not during my damned interrogation."

Luc merely shrugged; his gaze still locked with Kadon's.

Scarlett fought to catch up. *Damien told her brother to declare his feelings?*

What in the blazes had happened at Crex's?

Damien motioned to Maddox. "You might as well put the weapon away. Golden Boy looks like he's floating on a nebular cloud. Like he's invincible in his happy little cocoon." Damien didn't sound displeased, more like resigned. "He won't give a shit about the laser. Or too much else past Luc, for that matter."

It was true. With Luc's big hand still wrapped around Kadon's neck, their foreheads pressed together, the intense energy and naked affection between them was so beautiful and raw that it was clear they barely registered anyone else was in the room. The lust bouncing between them was off the charts as well.

Finally! She'd waited such a long time for this moment. Feared she'd never live to see it.

And it was all happening because Damien had returned to the dome. Now not only she but also Luc and Kadon could get their happy-ever-after.

Scarlett wished she and the others could creep away and leave the two Alphas alone.

But one glance at Damien, and she knew that wasn't happening.

His legs planted far apart, her Alpha still had questions, and she could tell from the flare of pity in his gaze that he was determined to ask them without delay and that they'd be ones Kadon would not like.

She suspected, moreover, that Luc knew this and might even have chosen

this moment to declare his love to soften the coming blow.

“You ever tell your father about you and Luc?” Damien was done with waiting. Kadon’s “interrogation” had resumed.

Still, Damien’s choice of topic surprised her.

As it did Kadon.

A barked laugh erupted from him as he dragged his gaze from Luc to Damien. “Sure, we often have warm heart-to-hearts.” When he realized her Alpha was serious, Kadon furrowed his brow. “No. Never. He wouldn’t understand.”

“You ever let your father know you were coming to his place while he was out of town?”

“Yes.” Kadon’s tone was cautious now. “I always do as a matter of courtesy, but it wouldn’t matter whether I did or didn’t. I need a code to access his place. He’s notified every time I use it.”

“When was the last time the two of you were in contact?” Damien’s expression gave little indication of whether or not he liked Kadon’s responses. “Before you answer, let me remind you that Maxheim can dig through your comms and find the truth.”

“That won’t be necessary.” Kadon shrugged off his comms and tossed it to Damien. “See for yourself. I notified him I was stopping by his place. But I said nothing about you or the others. I told him I was heading there for a little peace and quiet. I’ve used the same excuse before.” He cleared his throat. “My father and I aren’t close. Before that, it’d been a while since we last spoke. He used to come to town more often, but since I stopped fighting, he isn’t too interested in what I’m doing. I think his last comms asked if Scarlett was breeding yet and requested that I let him know immediately when that happened.”

“What an Alphahole,” Maddox chimed in.

“Agreed,” Anya said.

“Your story checks out.” Damien studied Kadon’s comms. He didn’t sound surprised. Nor was she. “Thanks for indulging me.” He tossed the comms back.

“What’s this all about?” Kadon’s question mirrored her own.

Damien’s gaze shifted to Luc.

Her brother grabbed Kadon’s hand. “All those times you thought you were safe at your father’s place. You weren’t. Darvish’s silent partner, the other enemy we’ve been wondering about, has been much closer than we



realized.”

“Explain.” Kadon had gone stiff.



## SCARLETT

“**Y**our father’s the one working with Darvish,” Luc told Kadon. “We found proof at Crex’s place that he’s been recording us and sending the vids to Darvish.”

“No.” It was a raw, guttural denial.

Scarlett barely managed to stifle her gasp.

Kadon’s father was the mystery Alpha? The one who’d listened in all those times? She couldn’t believe it. Poor Kadon: this would crush him.

A wave of dizziness struck. She shoved it aside.

A warm, solid arm wrapped around her, drawing her close. “It’s better that he knows.” Damien’s calm resolve steadied her. “Better we all do.”

He was right, but watching Kadon absorb the news was still heart-wrenching.

They’d all had so much betrayal in their lives, but this... this was brutal.

“Fuck.” Kadon tried to yank his hand from Luc’s. “So this is my fault? All this time? All this hells for us? For Scarlett? Because I trusted that male and never saw what was right in front of me?”

“It’s not your fault,” Damien cut in. “Andor and Darvish are to blame. No one here is confused about that. Don’t let yourself get mixed up about that either.”

Luc held Kadon’s hand tighter. “Remember what I said? No matter what.”

“But how could he do that?” Kadon’s voice broke. “To his own son?”

“He likely found out about us and didn’t like it.” Luc’s voice was softer than Scarlett had ever heard. “At least we now know why Darvish insisted on

the prime omega contract. It wasn't just for his own interests, but also Andor's. An effort on your sire's part to safeguard the family from any rumors and get you to fall in line as he wanted, and he was willing to do whatever it took to make that happen."

"That fucker." Kadon's shock was shifting to fury.

"There may be more to it," Damien added. "Andor Stormhart's been nosing around Skolov family business for a while. It always struck me as odd, but with hindsight, if he's working with Darvish, it makes perfect sense."

"But why would he work with Darvish? Andor's Brotherhood. Darvish is plotting *against* the Brotherhood." This question came from Anya, who'd been quietly absorbing it all. "If it comes to light that Andor's working with Darvish, it will threaten the Stormhart family's standing more than Kadon's love for Luc ever could. What could possibly be Andor's motive for taking such a risk?"

"Excellent question." Damien looked at her with pride. "I'm going to ask Maxheim to go digging. I'm sure there's an answer. We just don't know it yet."

"I-I can't believe this." Kadon was still reeling.

"Andor's probably the reason those vids of you two never went public." Maddox was thinking things through as well. "He doesn't want them out there either. Unfortunately, we don't know if Darvish is bluffing or if he'll ultimately ignore Andor's wishes and release them. In the past, Darvish has often discarded co-conspirators once they're no longer useful."

"Perhaps he'll save me the trouble then," announced Kadon.

Scarlett watched Damien and Luc exchange another glance.

She knew what it meant. Kadon was furious, embarrassed, and hurt. And when on edge, he had a temper easily sparked. But killing your sire was a whole different level of hurt, and by silent agreement, it had just been decided that neither Damien nor Luc would let Kadon go there. They'd ensure Andor Stormhart's end was delivered by someone else.

It must have been a serious heart-to-heart at Crex's, after all.

She wrapped her arm around Damien's waist and squeezed. Aside from chaining up her loved ones, he really was wonderful.

"So, what's next?" This question came from Maddox, who looked ready for action. Or maybe he was just hungry. Scarlett was never sure with that one.

“We set a trap.” Damien didn’t hesitate.

“Finally.” Maddox’s fist shot into the air. “I like what I’m hearing.”

“Good. We’re going on the offense. We’ll bring Andor and Darvish to us.”

“How?” Anya asked.

Damien focused on Kadon. “You up for it?”

“Whatever it takes.”

“I expected no less.” Respect lit up Damien’s gaze, and Scarlett experienced another happy twinge as another piece of the life she’d always wanted slotted into place: all the Alphas in her life were figuring out how to get along.

Damien’s confidence and certainty sizzled through her. He really was right. *Forever and always*. This was all going to work out.

“Kadon, you’ll reach out through your comms.” Damien’s calmly issued instructions pulled Scarlett from her thoughts. “Andor has no idea we know he’s working with Darvish. Sure, we know the house was raided, but the guards could’ve easily traced us to that location some other way. If Luc hadn’t recognized the background in that vid recording, we’d likely still be assuming that Kadon’s sire wasn’t a betraying bastard but someone blameless who got caught up in our troubles. And that’s exactly what we want him to believe we think. So it won’t seem odd when you reach out to him for help in this moment of crisis.”

“It will have to be handled carefully,” Maddox warned. “Kadon can’t give up too much information or suddenly appear to trust the guy. They weren’t close before. Andor will know something’s up if Kadon starts acting too friendly now.”

“True,” Damien said. “But the beauty of this plan is Kadon doesn’t have to do much beyond making a seemingly panicked I-don’t-know-where-else-to-turn request for transport through his comms for him and a few others.”

“Because,” Anya chimed in, “all Andor will have to do is trace the comms signal to know where to find Kadon.”

“Exactly.” Damien’s smile was ominous. “We wait for Kadon to reach out once we’re in the location of our choosing. We set the trap. Andor comes straight to us, thinking he’s the one getting the jump on us. We prove him wrong.”

Scarlett thought it was a brilliant plan, except for one concern. “How can we be sure it won’t just be guards like the last raid?”

“Another good question.” Damien hugged her tighter. “We can’t be certain, but I’d put good money on Andor coming. He won’t want to risk another failure like the one at his vacation residence, so if he can show his face, appear concerned and helpful, and in the process, get his son, Scarlett, and the rest of us onto his ship and under his control without a fight, all the better. Andor probably would have preferred this tactic from the start, but since Kadon never asked for his help, he couldn’t show his hand by offering his assistance. Now Kadon’s about to give Andor the chance to get his son back in his clutches, capture Scarlett for his ally, and make it easy to tie up any loose ends by getting rid of the rest of us. I suspect that enticement will prove irresistible.”

“Brilliant.” Now Scarlett had no concerns. She was convinced Damien was right.

“And Darvish?” Luc asked.

Damien’s grin faded. “We may get lucky, and he’ll come too. He wants Scarlett bad. But if not, Andor will lead us to him. We’re closing in on Darvish. I feel it.”

She did too.

As did the others.

Excitement and a thirst for vengeance thickened the air. After so much powerlessness and so much time being twisted and hurt by Darvish and Andor’s games, the tide was finally turning.

A high-pitched siren blared.

“Intruder alert.” A robotic voice vibrated through the shuttle. “Interior breach.”

“Shit.” Damien shoved her behind him. “Prepare.” He gestured for Maddox to throw him the laser.

“How could they get through the perimeter alarms without tripping them?” Maddox reached Damien’s side and tossed him the weapon.

“They can’t!” Anya looked furious, and insulted.

Maddox shoved her behind him and raised his taser.

Kadon and Luc circled close, fangs and claws flashing.

Scarlett, too, tried to prepare. But the moment that siren sounded, her dormant gift woke, shrieking for release. It clamored to destroy, uncaring it would likely tear apart Damien’s shuttle and take down those within. *Stupid, stupid gift.* The effort of trapping it inside was so great that it took all her concentration just to remain on her feet.

The door slid open with a crash.

“Now, *this* is a family greeting.” Two gorgeous, terrifying Alphas with the same strong jawline and dark, gleaming hair and horns as Damien filled the hallway. At their side, dwarfed by their hugeness, was a nervous-looking beta with bushy eyebrows, a furry white neck and arms, and a lab coat that seemed out of place against the backdrop of the warlike leathers of the two males looming next to him.

Unfazed by the weapons aimed their way, the two Alphas appeared far more interested in something else. “So, little brother, where’s this omega of yours everyone’s talking about?”

*Damien’s older brothers.* How sweet—and alarming.

Especially since Scarlett wore little more than Damien’s shirt and her taming chain.

And even more especially when, despite wanting to say hello and make a good first impression, it was too late.

Her knees buckled.

Everything went black.





SCARLETT

“Calm down. She’ll be fine.”

“You need to let the doc do his thing.”

Eyes still closed, Scarlett woke to the scent of Alpha pheromones saturating the air and several deep, rumbling voices—and what sounded like a fist slamming into the shuttle wall. “Would you be calm if this was your omega?”

She recognized that voice, and the fact that she was back in Damien’s bed, tucked beneath a soft hide. “Damien?”

He was at her side in an instant. “Scarlett? Baby?” A calloused hand gripped hers. “I’m here.”

She squeezed back and grinned up at him. “Always.”

He returned her smile, but his didn’t quite reach his eyes. “And forever, wild thing.”

“Where are the others?” She’d gotten used to worrying about them all.

“Maddox is eating. Anya’s pretending to be busy but secretly hiding since she wasn’t supposed to sneak off-planet, and Kadon and Luc...” He rolled his eyes. “Well, the moment the doc said you were sleeping but healed, they cut out so fast they left horn burns on the ceiling.”

She smiled at that. “I’m glad.”

“As for my brothers—”

“We didn’t travel all this way not to take advantage of the first chance to say hello.” A gravelly voice came from behind Damien before a new face and form appeared shoulder-to-shoulder with Damien. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, Omega. I’m Nikolai. Damien’s eldest brother.”

He executed an old-school Alpha Lord bow, and she sucked in a breath. She could see where her Alpha got his confidence, swagger, and command. And, Goddess help her, what was in the Skolov drinking water? Like Damien, Anya, and Maddox, Nikolai was gorgeous.

“I’m Maxheim.” Another Alpha popped up right next to Nikolai: his face a little more severe, his manner a bit more reserved, but his overall impact no less powerful. “Damien’s other elder brother. And you are a miracle worker. For the longest time, we thought Damien only cared about hitting things and working out. Turns out, he cares about a hell of a lot more than that.”

Scarlett smiled up at them. “Nice to meet you both.”

“Okay, that’s enough with the charm.” Damien scowled their way. “I need my omega to focus on me.”

Nikolai and Maxheim exchanged a look that was part amusement and part satisfaction.

“You should be writing this down,” Nikolai told Maxheim.

“You’re right,” the other Alpha agreed. “Alexi and the omegas won’t want to miss a word.”

“Gossip elsewhere,” Damien grouched, but his words were underlaid with deep affection. He took Scarlett’s hand and pressed her knuckles to his lips. “How do you feel?”

Everything but his soft, warm mouth against her skin faded away.

“Omega.” His amused command pulled her from her lustful thoughts. “Filthy thoughts later. For now, tell me how you feel.”

“Damien!” Her gaze flickered to his grinning brothers.

He leaned in close. “My brothers understand. They have omegas of their own. Plus, we might as well get them used to us and how we’re going to be pawing at each other all the time. Start as we mean to go on.”

Outrageous as ever.

But his brothers had to know there was no reeling Damien in.

And since she loved that about him, she decided simply to power through, focusing instead on his question.

“Better,” she said at last. “I feel much better.” Even inhaling hurt less. In fact, she couldn’t remember the last time she’d felt this good.

She sat up straighter in the bed. “Excellent, in fact.”

Unexpectedly, Damien’s scowl returned. “Yeah, that’s probably because you had several bruised ribs, and now you don’t.”

She started. “Really?”

“Yes, the doc healed them.” The deep V between his brows grew more pronounced. “I should have thought to check for internal injuries too.”

“Why would you?” Scarlett raised a finger to smooth away the lines on his forehead. “It never even once crossed my mind either.” She caught sight of her arm and yelped excitedly. “My bruises. Damien, look! They’re practically gone too.”

This, finally, produced a smile. “Doc gave you some accelerated-healing gel for that as well.” Damien gestured across the room and she noticed the beta from earlier.

He’d been concealed by the broad shoulders and commanding presences of Damien and his brothers, but he was unmissable now. His furry white arm moved at a frantic pace as he scribbled notes into a journal while observing her and Damien, his expression oddly intent.

She refused to let that deter her. “Amazing.” She smiled at him. “I can’t thank you enough.”

Gray-and-pink streaked eyes blinked back at her several times before the doc gave a quick nod. Then his gaze shifted to Damien, and he swallowed hard.

“Dr. Toth Randalff,” Damien announced. “Our family’s expert on omega gifts and the fated-mate bond.”

She was suddenly nervous. A glance at her wrists revealed there were still no marks.

“Doc’s going to look you over.” Damien’s voice drew her attention back to him. “Now that he’s made you feel better, he’s going to figure out what’s going on and how we can prevent you from getting hurt again.” He winked at her. “And he assures me the fated-mate marks are not the only way to express that bond, so I was right all along.”

“Wonderful.” Scarlett gave the beta scientist another big smile, so relieved to hear the pronouncement that she forgot to give Damien grief about his unbelievable arrogance.

“Just one thing to do before that.” Damien was back to sounding agitated.

“What’s that?”

“Maxheim needs your help to access any additional accounts Darvish had you manage for him. My brother thinks he can mine them for useful intel.”

“Excellent. I’m glad some good can come from it.” She sat up straighter against the headboard. “Now?”

“Now.” But Damien didn’t sound happy.

Then she got it. Scarlett squeezed his hand. “It will be over in a flash,” she assured him. “And if you kiss me while it happens, I won’t feel a thing.”

That was all the invitation he needed. He growled, fingers threading through her hair and tipping her head back. His mouth slammed over hers. *Paradise*. She barely remembered to hold out her finger.

The sting was there and gone before she even realized it, Damien’s pull far more potent.

Her tongue tangled with his.

A loud cough had them both stilling, mouths pressed together, their breaths coming fast.

“How about that retinal scan now?” His expression amused, Maxheim leaned in and, after shoving his brother’s face aside, positioned the monitor to scan her eye. “Done.”

“Excellent.” Nikolai wrapped a hand around the back of Damien’s neck and squeezed. “Now, I have my own omega I’d like to be kissing, not to mention a son I’d like to tuck into bed as soon as possible, and a few enemies I’d like to wipe from this planet sooner than later, so I’m going to help speed this along by placing Damien over there”—he pointed toward the other side of the room—“while Doc works on you here.”

A testament to the fact that he was the head of the family and a little scary, no one argued with Nikolai’s decision. Except for Damien.

Proving he made his own rules when it came to her, her Alpha lingered. “That okay with you, Omega? I’ll be just over there.”

“Yes. I’ll be fine.”

He didn’t seem to want to go even after that, but after a reassuring smile from her, he went.

Which was sweet. But also useful, as the poor beta scientist was clearly nervous about being near her with a touchy, protective Alpha Enforcer underfoot.

Plus, the Alphas’ chatter from across the way gave Scarlett something to concentrate on as the doc stepped forward and waved several different shiny, tubular devices over her skin while muttering to himself.

His bedside manner was clearly not one of the doc’s strengths, but if Damien trusted him, so would she.

“It’s a good plan.” Nikolai’s deep voice boomed from the other side of the room.

“Glad you think so.” Damien actually sounded like he didn’t care either way but was being polite.

“These Consortium accounts from Scarlett are invaluable.” Maxheim tapped away on a portable screen. “I can compare these with her personal accounts to better track what Darvish has done with the funds once they leave the Golden Dome. At some point, it has to lead to him.”

That news pleased her immensely. Again, it was nice to have some use—since she was once again stuck in this bed, and not for the right reasons.

A loud beep sounded.

“Hmm.” The doc waved another device over her.

This time, Scarlett watched him work, and this time, she didn’t like what she saw. His frown deepened, and his fur bristled.

Equally troubling, she could feel her gift stirring, pushing against her now-healed ribs. The invincible, feel-good sensation dissipating, replaced by familiar, unwelcome exhaustion.

Another strident beep.

With lips pressed tight together, the doc repeated the same steps. However, this time, his hands shook.

“Doc?” Proving he’d been watching too, Damien appeared by the bed. “Everything alright?”

“Umm.” The doc yanked at the collar of his lab coat and studied the small screen connected to the device he’d just waved over her. “I, ah…”

“Spit it the fuck out,” Damien snarled.

A big hand landed on his shoulder. “Calm, brother.” Nikolai squeezed tight.

Maxheim came to Damien’s other side. “He can’t explain or help if he’s curled up in a ball.”

“Right.” Damien blew out a breath. “Sorry.” He reached for her hand, then sat beside her on the bed. “Sorry, Omega. It’s all good.”

She wasn’t sure it was, but she gripped his hand anyway and, grateful for the warmth of Damien’s thigh against her hip, gave the beta scientist an encouraging smile. “Whatever you have to say, please feel free to say it.”

The doc cleared his throat. “As you know, light exhibits both wavelike and particle-like properties. Color is the visual perception of different wavelengths of light, and this exceptional omega has the ability to wield it.”

Scarlett sat up straighter. That was nice. She smiled at the doc.

The flash of sadness he gave in return scared her more than his previous

distracted bedside manner.

“Even more amazing,” he continued, “her gift somehow enables her to take those wavelengths and their resulting electric and magnetic fields and propel them outward, creating enough energy to melt crystal or knock down ceilings.”

*Or kill.* Scarlett filled in what he didn’t say.

“The thing is,” the doc carried on, “such a gift is clearly powerful and”—he hesitated, making her heart beat faster— “well, most times an omega’s gift is symbiotic with its host. But, ah, we’ve seen cases where a gift can be erratic, nonexistent, latent, or dangerous to the omega or others. Unfortunately, in this case... the gift is harming its host.”

“She’s not a fucking host. She’s Scarlett, and we know this already.” Damien’s grip on her hand was almost too tight. “We’ve all seen the bruises.”

“Yes, well.” The beta straightened his lab coat again. “The damage is greater than anticipated. According to my tests, there’s substantial cellular degradation and nervous system damage.”

“What the hells does that mean?”

“I-I fear if this keeps on, the host itself—the omega—will... will share the same destructive fate as the energy she manifests.”

“Say again.” Damien’s voice had dropped to a low, terrifying bark.

Beside him, both Nikolai and Maxheim had gone unnaturally still.

“I-I...” The doc’s white fur bristled.

Scarlett took pity on the poor beta. “He means I’m dying.”

“No.” Damien shook his head, his grip so tight that his knuckles had gone white. “We knew this was complicated. We don’t need more negatives. We need solutions.” He glared at the doc. “How do we stop it?”

Her heart broke further. Damien was in fix-it mode. Ready to be the shield, protector, and Enforcer he’d always been. Determined to use his will to batter through this, just as he had every obstacle before.

Only this time, he couldn’t.

“Damien—”

“What if we extract it?” He spoke over her, his gaze locked with the doc’s.

The beta’s brow furrowed. “Gifts can’t be extracted.”

“Then she just doesn’t use it anymore,” Damien retorted.

“I-I am not sure that’s possible. It’s an instinct. Like breathing.”

“Tess and her gift can help.”

“Maxheim’s omega can’t counteract death. Only ease the pain.”

“Then Scarlett finds a way to control it.” Damien’s voice was rising, and for the first time, Nikolai and Maxheim looked unsure how to handle him.

“Yes, of course,” the beta sputtered. “I’m just not sure how.”

“You’ll figure it out.”

“But—”

“No buts,” her Alpha roared.

Scarlett rose to her knees and gripped his broad shoulders. “Damien, he can only do so much.”

“No.”

This was what she’d feared. What a part of her had always suspected, and why she’d planned to take Darvish out on her own terms.

It was also why she’d initially tried to remain aloof from Damien, to spare them both this anguish. But thanks to his sheer force of will, ferocious determination, and extraordinary cock, that distance hadn’t lasted long. And she didn’t regret it. Even if it was short, every moment of sweetness, beauty, and mess with her Alpha was worth any pain, but Damien... he’d be the one left behind, and so she knew, as hard as this was for her, it was harder for him.

“Damien,” she tried again, “he’s not saying it will happen now, only that it will happen eventually. I’m dying.”

“No!” Damien shot up from the bed.

She tossed off the hide and followed right behind. “Alpha—”

“No.” Chest rising and falling fast, he pressed his palms to the wall. “No. There are other tests. Experimental meds.”

“Meds that don’t yet exist? Tests that will only show what the doc’s already told us? What my body already knows?” She placed a hand on his shoulder. “My gift is killing me, and I don’t know how to lock it away. I’m not strong enough to fight it.”

Fangs flashing, he whirled to face her. “You are!”

“I’m trying, baby. For you, I’m trying.” She cupped his jaw. “And I will keep doing that with every breath I have. I will never give up the fight. But —”

“No.” Locking his hands behind his neck, he shook his head. “No.”

He wrapped his arms around her and yanked her close. Sank to his knees.

“Everyone, clear the room.” Nikolai hustled the other two out.

Scarlett barely noticed, her hands cradling Damien’s jaw as she stared

into the deepening shadows in his gaze. He looked... ripped apart from the inside out.

It destroyed her anew. "My love—"

"No," he whispered. "You're my colors. My light. Without you, there's nothing left but gray."

Her heart seized in her chest, but she forced herself to pull it together. "You need to accept this will happen at some point."

"Stop fucking saying that." Sheer panic glittered in his eyes. "It's not too late. I'm going to do something. Fix this."

It only made her love him more.

"I know you would if you could. You're the strongest, fiercest Alpha there is. But sometimes, it's not about fighting."

"No."

"Damien."

"No. You fucking promised me always and forever."

"I know." She ran her fingers through his hair. "And I'll do my best to keep that promise, but we don't always get to choose what that forever and always looks like."

"You will."

Scarlett let him have his hope. She had her own agenda. "It's your turn to promise me something."

"Whatever you need." He pressed his cheek to her belly. "Just stay with me."

"I need you to promise that you won't give up, even if I can't keep my promise to you. That you won't take that shuttle and head to the nearest sun."

He stiffened.

"Damien..."

"Come back to bed, baby." He shoved to his feet and swept her into his arms. "I know you're tired."

She was. "But—"

"Let me just hold you, okay?"

She could tell he'd shut down his emotions, his focus back on her, but she wasn't sure how to reach him now, and truth be told, she was ready to be held. To curl into his warmth and commit to memory what it was like to be close to him while she still could.

"Okay, Alpha." She let him settle her on the bed and slide down next to her, his body curling around hers, his face inches from hers, his arms



clutching her so close she didn't think any space remained between them.

"Let's rest now," she whispered. "We can talk more about it when you're ready."

Damien's arms contracted around her. "I'll never be ready to let you go."

She wanted to tell him he had to find a way for her sake, but her eyelids were already fluttering closed.



DAMIEN

**D**amien sensed the moment Scarlett's breathing evened out, and she went lax in his arms. Slowly, carefully, his movements on autopilot, he slipped from the bed, covered her with the hide, typed out a brief message on his comms, and staggered to the door.

He wandered down the hallway. Stumbled.

This was not happening.

He would fix it.

Luc appeared, his skin sallow and expression crushed. Nikolai and Maxheim must have told him and the others about the doc's prognosis. "Skolov—"

"Don't. It's not happening. She'll be fine."

"Damien—"

He shoved past the other male. "Stay with her." It's why he'd messaged him in the first place. "I... I'll be back soon, but just in case, I don't want her to wake up alone."

No response.

For that, Damien was grateful. He couldn't handle a conversation. Right now, he needed to focus.

He would fix this. Scarlett would be fine. He'd make sure of it.

His hand rubbed at his chest, the weight on his sternum greater than a shuttle, the storm inside whirling like shrapnel.

He stumbled farther down the hallway.

He was cracking into pieces and had no idea how to keep it from happening. Anger, he knew. Rage and brutality, he'd learned how to channel

and endure. But this? This miasma of pressure and pain, of seething agony and the kind of helpless anguish, despair, and grief that wrapped around his windpipe and stole his breath? That he didn't know how to survive.

One of the shuttle's overhead lights flickered. Damned things had to be replaced regularly, but now... now it caught his attention. Now the dimming of the crystal, the growing darkness, hit with such force that he staggered back, and then leaped forward.

With a roar, Damien smashed his fist through the smooth graphene material. His fingers closed around crystal and wiring. Oblivious to the cuts, the blood, and the debris, he wrenched at it as if his life depended on it. The crystal snapped free with a crack. Breathing hard, he cradled it in his palm—only to watch the light go out.

*No, no, no.*

He sank to his knees.

Couldn't catch his breath.

He'd made himself strong, trained himself to endure pain, and come back twice as hard.

But this time, there was no one to fight, and no one to blame.

There was only fear and helplessness, a tightness that stretched from his chest to his throat and made swallowing difficult. Made breathing next to impossible.

He'd never make it without her.

Couldn't lose her like this.

Before, at least, she'd existed in this same galaxy. Four planetary rotations ago, he'd known she was out there, living her life, looking at the same swirling stars and planets. What's more, he'd never lost the belief that he'd see her again. Touch her again—in anger, pain, or need. A part of him had always known he'd find an excuse to make his way back to her.

But this...

His mind staggered away from the doc's words.

This looming abyss was more than he could bear.

He'd always believed he was strong, but he didn't know how to be strong enough to handle this.

He could not lose her.

She was his axis. His light and his colors. His heart and his soul and his breath.

And without her? There was only darkness.

He'd wanted to give her the world. The galaxy. The universe. To put her on a pedestal and worship at her perfect feet. To take away all her burdens and make her life easy. To be her guard and gatekeeper. Her Alpha, her shield, and her protector. He'd wanted to make her scream with pleasure and then laugh just as loud.

Always and forever.

He'd wanted it all.

Chest rising and falling fast, he scurried backward until his spine struck the wall. He sat there, blinking wildly as the pressure on his chest increased.

Elbows planted on his knees and head between his arms, he tried to catch his breath.

He needed to get up. Fight. Swing at something. Talk to the doc. Make a plan. Be there when Scarlett awoke.

But he couldn't seem to make himself move.

He'd been a youngling when their father was cut down in front of him. Then, only a few planetary rotations later, he'd watched their mother burn, grieved the twins, witnessed Nikolai and Maxheim grow harder as they struggled to keep the family alive, endured when his brother Alexi was taken and then returned to them a different male. And through it all, he'd been too small, too useless to do anything about any of it. So he'd grown up and vowed never to be powerless like that again. To battle anything and everything that threatened those he loved.

But how the fuck was he supposed to fight this? The very body of the female he loved and worshiped, the very body that made him crazed with lust and tenderness and possession, was the same body that threatened to take away what mattered to him most.

Crushing pain stomped on his chest. Darkness pressed in.

Damien fought to raise his hands to swipe at it, to battle it away, but for once, his fists wouldn't rise, his body wouldn't take the bait.

When he needed to be strong for her, he was weaker than he'd ever been.

"Take a deep breath." A body slid into a seated position beside him, mirroring his pose. Another took up sentry at his other shoulder. One more crouched in front of him.

He was so lost in whatever the fuck this was that he hadn't even noticed their approach.

But now, he felt them: solid, comforting, steady. His brothers' strength. Surrounding him. There for him, as it had always been. He'd worked so hard

to prove to them that he was as tough as them, that he wasn't the damned kid everyone had to worry over, but right now, he didn't give a shit about any of that. Right now, all he wanted was for them to make everything okay.

"I can't lose her." His voice emerged as a croak.

"We're here for you." Nikolai gripped his shoulder.

"We're not going anywhere." Maxheim settled in close.

There was no pretense. No promise they could save the situation and make everything turn out okay. And yet, oddly, it helped. It didn't make Damien feel better, but it did give him the courage to turn the horrific pressure on his chest into words.

"How can I watch the most important thing in my life slip away? I already lost her once. I-I don't think I can bear it." He knocked his head back against the wall and found the strength to face them despite the telltale wetness around his eyes and grimace of agony on his face.

Him ripped apart. Exposed.

But when he stared into his brothers' eyes, he saw the same pain, the same weaknesses, the same anguish that was in his chest, and it was suddenly so clear that there'd never been any need to prove anything to them. They were there for him one hundred percent, whether he was the baddest Enforcer around or the weakest, most broken, lovelorn soul in the galaxy. They'd each had their demons, their pain, and his brothers knew exactly how much joy and peace the omegas in their lives brought, how critical they were to their very being. Which meant they knew just how badly it would destroy Damien to lose Scarlett.

"What the fuck am I going to do?" His words emerged as a soft whisper.

"Whatever it takes." Nikolai's voice was a rumble.

"And we will too." Maddox put out his hand. "We're here with you every step."

Damien grabbed hold of the kid's hand as if it were a lifeline. "Whatever it takes," he repeated.

"Even," Maxheim said gently, "if that means finding a way to just help you survive it."

Damien shook his head, but he knew it was true. There was a good chance that was the best there would be.

And it gutted him. But he'd do it—for Scarlett. "How did you guys find me?"

"Scarlett sent us."

So, not sleeping as he'd thought.

He knocked his head against the wall.

She was *always* so strong. Stronger than he could ever be in the ways that mattered most.

A rattling started in his chest and swirled upward, a choking sound that dragged at his throat and would not be denied. Same with the wetness on his cheeks.

Crying. He was fucking crying.

Worse, it felt like he might never stop.

And yet, he'd never regret the reason for it. Never regret her. He would live with this pain a million times over if it meant he got to spend even one more moment with Scarlett in his arms.

Nikolai grasped the back of his neck and brought their foreheads together. "You are not alone in this. You never were."

"I know." Damien's voice cracked.

"We'll be here for you, so you can be all the things she needs you to be. Strong and so crazy in love that no matter what happens to the flesh, your souls will always be intertwined. Even death can't take that from you. If you believe it, she will too."

"Right." He shoved to standing. "Thank you for..." Damien's voice shook. He'd been so angry for so long. Such a damned punk. He doubted he'd even told them before. "For fucking everything."

"Always." Nikolai spoke for them all, but Maxheim and Maddox nodded, and Damien knew if Alexi were there, he would have too. Same went for Anya.

Was everything better? Hells, no.

His insides were raw, his grief almost unending, his terror making it hard to even push his stiff limbs upward and stay standing. But he fucking did it.

Because he knew his family was with him—weak or strong—and he knew the same went for Scarlett. And suddenly, he didn't give a shit about how he'd endure this; all he cared about was being with her.

Soaking in every moment he could, painful or joyous, agonizing or beautiful, because it was still time spent with her. And that was the one thing he would fight viciously for; to be with her for every heartbeat they had left together.

He knew, too, exactly what he needed to do next. "I need your help."

His brothers stood at his side the next instant.

“Follow me.” Damien strode down the hallway, heading off to carry out his plans as fast as possible so he could return to where his heart and soul needed to be.

*Always and forever.*





## SCARLETT

Scarlett sat up, clutching the covers to her chest.

She'd feigned sleep to give Damien some processing time but had wondered who he'd messaged on his comms before slipping from the room.

Now she knew. "Luc?"

"Yes, it's me." Her brother lingered in the doorway, the dim lights in the hallway casting his expression in shadow, but his steady presence soothed her immediately.

She should have known Damien would be thinking of her.

Good thing she'd thought of him too. He might believe he needed to be alone, but she knew better. She'd used the comms on the bedside panel to reach out to his brothers the moment the door slid shut behind him.

"Come in." She patted beside her on the bed, then used the bedside panel to turn on the light.

Luc shuffled closer, and her breath caught in her throat. His appearance wasn't unexpected, but it still hurt. His handsome face was stamped with a grief so heavy his cheeks looked sunken, his eyes buried by pain.

One more loved one she hadn't been able to protect.

But then again, she wasn't the only one who could do that for him now.

"So, you and Kadon"—she waggled her eyebrows—"finally."

Luc didn't smile. Only drew in a sharp breath.

So much for misdirection. "So, I take it you've heard what the doc had to say?"

His gaze shifted away; his jaw clenched so tight she feared it might break.

He was still standing too. “Scarlett, I—”

“He said it *will* happen. Not that it’s happening *now*.” She’d already decided she was done with shock and sadness for the moment. There was much to accomplish still. “I don’t want this to mar your new happiness.”

A muscle twitched in Luc’s jaw. “Sorry, no can do.”

She sighed to herself over Alpha stubbornness. “Well then, I’m glad you at least finally have someone who can get you through the sad parts and give you plenty of good reasons to be happy anyway.”

A full-body shudder passed through Luc.

“Believe it or not,” she whispered, “that makes it easier.”

His hand shot out and seized hers, his grip a little too hard, but still sweet. “Nothing”—his voice cracked— “will make this easier.”

“Oh no.” She jerked his hand and, miraculously, brought his face closer while assuming her best bossy-little-sister expression. “We are not doing the whole sad thing when it’s not yet time. And you’re not going to mess this up or revert to your earlier foolishness. You’ve used up your excuses for a lifetime. I know you only wanted to protect me and Kadon, but that self-sacrificing stage is over. You’ve told Kadon you love him. You guys are together now, and that is that.”

Amusement cut through the shadows in Luc’s gaze. “I don’t want to go back.” He swallowed hard. “I’ve wasted enough time as it is.”

“Thank the Goddess.” She released his hand and fell back onto her pillows, ignoring the body twinges for the sake of dramatic flair.

“I just—”

“My brother doesn’t speak much.” She talked over him, addressing the ceiling as if it could listen. She refused to allow Luc to hijack their conversation and return it to sadder concerns. “But at least when he does, he’s finally saying the right things.”

Scarlett hid a smile.

She didn’t usually speak to her brother with such irreverence, but she’d picked up a few tips on outrageous behavior from her Alpha and intended to put them to good use.

Earlier in her life, there’d been a painful distance between her and Luc. The affection was there, but he was a stoic, silent type of Alpha. He’d kept his thoughts and secrets to himself, and she’d followed his example. He was still that guy, but now at least some of his secrets were out, and, after four planetary rotations of barely getting to see him while worrying over him with

every heartbeat, she refused to go back to how they'd been.

Damien said what was on his mind; he showed her everything that was in his heart—the good, the bad, the filthy, and the fearless. She'd learned so much from that. Especially the foolishness of pretending or leaving unsaid what needed to be spoken aloud.

“I love you, big brother.” She shifted her gaze until it locked with his. “And I'm so happy that we've both found the Alphas of our dreams.”

His throat bobbed up and down. “I love you too.”

“Okay, that's enough of that.” Out of nowhere, Anya glided through the still-open door and toward the bed, bringing a new—and welcome—upbeat energy to the room. “This is not a dead-rites situation.” She jerked an accusatory thumb toward Luc.

Luc scowled at her and opened his mouth to protest, but Anya wasn't done talking. “We've got my brothers down the hallway, heads close, whispering to each other.” Her gaze landed on Scarlett, utterly sympathetic. “It's a lot. Alphas—especially when confronted with emotion, something they can't fight or fuck—are a l-o-t.”

Scarlett smiled wide. Anya got it. But then, she'd managed several brothers for a while now.

“You”—Damien's sister pointed at Luc— “need to give us some omega time.”

He scowled. “You're far too bossy for an omega.”

“So I've been told.” Anya did not look apologetic.

“Damien told me to stay.” Luc widened his stance.

Anya shrugged. “Suit yourself, but Scarlett and I are about to discuss the trials of my love life. Then we'll get to hers, and at that point, I suspect you'll learn way more about Damien's proclivities and the size of his cock than you ever wanted to know.”

“Message me if you need anything at all.” Luc was already stomping toward the door while Scarlett shook with silent laughter. Anya might be even more outrageous than her brother.

He paused in the doorway and glared over his shoulder at Anya. “But just know I'm leaving because I can see that your silliness is making my sister smile. Not because of your blatant attempt at manipulation.” Then, out of nowhere, his expression shifted, and before Scarlett knew what was happening, her scary, serious brother winked at Anya. “And, for the record, except for the Damien part, that actually sounds like the kind of conversation

an Alpha like me would enjoy.”

Then he was gone.

But Scarlett was so busy staring wide-eyed at a similarly wide-eyed Anya that she missed his exit.

“Your brother has a sense of humor?” Anya whispered. “Who knew?”

Scarlett certainly hadn’t.

“No time to ponder how that makes him even hotter.” Anya marched over to the paneled wall and pressed. The wall slid away to reveal a whole lot more than Scarlett had ever expected.

Good to know. She hadn’t gotten too far in her room exploration yet.

Most of what Anya revealed was storage drawers and tech panels to operate the room, but the central component was a monitor and keyboard.

And it was flickering to life.

Scarlett smoothed down her hair and perched at the edge of the bed. “What are you doing?”

Anya kept tapping away. “I’m calling in the *real* brain trust: the Skolov omegas. The sisters of my heart.”

“What?” Scarlett snapped to standing. “Now? No. I can’t meet the other Skolov omegas looking like this!” she shrieked. “I’m in Damien’s shirt.”

“Too late.”

Three seated females appeared on the screen, each beautiful. Each wearing a lovely gown with her hair brushed and skin glowing. Each one staring back at Scarlett with avid, near-gleeful curiosity.

“Ah, hello.” She waved at the screen.

Three sets of lips tipped upward.

The female in the middle was the smallest but, somehow, the most formidable. With white-golden hair, shimmering skin, and bright blue eyes, she resembled an ice sprite, but one look into her eyes, and it was easy to see the spine of steel beneath. Power and elegance rolled off her in waves. Scarlett had no doubt this was Nikolai’s omega, Dahlia. Only someone like this, a queen in her own right, could handle an Alpha head-of-the-family warlord like the one Scarlett had met.

Seated next to her was an equally stunning dark-haired female with cobalt streaks in her hair and violet eyes. The dark promise of sensuality rippled from her, but she also had a watchfulness about her that Scarlett recognized. It was the same look she saw in all omega prizes. This was a female who, like her, had learned to survive early in a harsh galaxy. Scarlett was fairly certain

from what Damien had told her that this must be Maxheim's omega, Tess.

Positioned on Dahlia's other side was the final omega in their group. No less lovely, but with a quieter, softer look that instantly put Scarlett at ease. The third omega had a kind smile that made Scarlett feel she was in the presence of someone competent and steady. She had wild, dark curls threaded with gold and warm, green eyes. This had to be Alexi's omega, Keira. And from her sweet, serene expression, Scarlett never would have guessed this was the same fearless female who, Damien had told her, had spent her nights before she met Alexi sneaking through the pleasure districts of Sartin and rescuing abused omegas.

Dahlia cradled an adorable sleeping Alpha youngling in her arms. The other two females were clearly pregnant.

A flash of envy shot through Scarlett, but it was quickly overwhelmed by a greater sense of relief. These females would be there for Damien when she couldn't be, and their young would give him a reason to keep going as their protector and Enforcer until he found a different motivation. Perhaps—her heart clutched, but she continued with the thought—with someone who could give him young of his own. Because, above all else, Scarlett wanted Damien to be happy.

“So, you know why I've summoned you.” Anya's brisk, business-like manner pulled Scarlett from her musings. “We'll do lengthy intros another time because it won't be long until Damien returns to claim Scarlett's time, and this needs to be discussed sooner rather than later. I know your Alphas have filled you in on what the doc had to say about Scarlett and her gift and the fact that it's killing her.”

Apparently, there was no such thing as boundaries or privacy when it came to the Skolov omegas.

But then Scarlett registered their sharp nods. The flattened lips. But also the fact that no one was losing it or staring at her as if she were already an invalid.

She was suddenly beyond grateful for Anya's no-nonsense approach.

“We've heard.” Dahlia's lyrical voice vibrated through the monitor. “We're sorry you're going through this.”

“Thank you.” And she meant it. Not just for the voiced sentiments, but also for the way they all kept looking at her as if she was still alive and well and not a ghost in the making. Anya was right. Sometimes Alphas were a lot.

“Each of us has struggled with our gifts.” Tess spoke up next. “While we

don't know if any of our struggles will be relevant to yours, we do think it's worth discussing."

"The doc," Keira added, "is one of the foremost galactic experts on the fated-mate bond and omega gifts thanks to data accumulated by combing galactic history and, more recently, observing us." She made a face. "Sometimes, way too closely." Her expression shifted to one of defiance. "But even he doesn't know everything."

Dahlia nodded. "He has no idea what it's like to be an omega. Or all the ways this galaxy chips away at our power. Or how, sometimes, that only makes us stronger in the end."

"He also has no idea just how complicated—and healing—a fated-mate bond can be." Keira's kind smile returned.

"Damien and I no longer have our marks," Scarlett felt it wise to admit. "I'm not even sure what to make of that."

The three females exchanged glances before Tess leaned forward. "The bond is tricky. For each of us, there was a time when it offered as many challenges as it did advantages. Mastering control of our gifts didn't come until each of us found not just extraordinary love but extreme trust and faith."

Scarlett told them honestly, "I have that for my Alpha."

"Yes," Keira said, "but what about for yourself?"

Scarlett stilled. Her mouth opened and shut.

She absolutely did not trust herself.

Dahlia nodded as if they'd found their answer. "So simple, and yet one of the hardest things of all."

"Well, hells." Scarlett plopped back down on the mattress. "How do I fix that?"

Dahlia smiled. "Anya, we think you can likely give Scarlett the most help on this front."

"Me?" Anya looked shocked.

"Yes. Out of all of us," Tess said, "you've had the least trouble with your gift."

"Why do you think that is?" Keira pushed.

Anya considered. "Because I'm awesome?"

Scarlett laughed.

"Exactly," Keira agreed. "You have confidence. Life's handed you some ugly moments, but you've had enough love and support from your brothers to keep it from eroding the core of who you are."

Anya nodded, her expression softening. “That too.”

“So, what would you suggest?” Heart beating fast, foolish hope once more surging through her veins, Scarlett leaned toward the other omega.

Anya remained silent for a long while. Then, finally, she said, “Maybe don’t worry about trying to stifle your gift so much.”

Scarlett recoiled. “But... but that’s all I do. Push it down. Lock it away. It’s the only way to protect everyone.”

“Except yourself.”

She had no response to that.

“Only another omega truly understands what we have to contend with every rotation,” Anya continued, her voice low, as if imparting a secret. “The rage, the bouts of helplessness, the restrictions that corrode the soul.” Her voice trembled, but not with sorrow, with unapologetic fury. “So perhaps it’s not such a surprise that you’re angry and striking out. We all are. Even those of us lucky enough to have great brothers know a thing or two about dark despair and rage. Perhaps what’s surprising is how long you’ve lasted, keeping it locked in and directed at yourself instead of at the bastards who deserve it.”

Stunned, Scarlett could only nod.

Because every beautiful, wise word was so true. And even more shocking, the darkness inside her seemed to think so too, roaring to full wakefulness at Anya’s words but not slamming against her ribs in fury as it usually would. Instead, it simply quivered in watchfulness, as if waiting for a sign—or, more aptly, a new target.

Could it be that simple?

But if it wasn’t... If she stopped trying to tamp down her rage and power, she could bring down ceilings and rip open floors. Worse, she could destroy those she loved and become as much of a monster as the ones who’d made her.

It was a huge risk.

“We have no idea whether this avenue of exploration is enough to keep your gift from killing you.” Dahlia spoke once more. “But we do think if anything can, it’s this.”

“You can trust yourself, Scarlett,” Tess urged. “The doc can speak of science and what he observes with his tools, but we have proven time and again that so much more is possible. We know because we are like you. We have the same power surging inside us. We have the same rage and hate, and



we know how powerlessness can twist it. But we also have the same extraordinary love.”

“We know you can handle both. *Use* them both. Fuse them inside you to take back what was stolen from you,” Keira added. “Because it is possible. Especially with the kind of love and support you have now. From all of us, and most especially, from an Alpha who might be terrified of losing you and ridiculously overprotective at times but will always be there to remind you of just how amazing you are.”

“Because he knows,” Anya finished, “you’re a force to be reckoned with.”

Their confidence fueled her.

“Omega.” Damien prowled into the room, something clutched behind his back. “I...”

He stopped short, taking in the scene before barking out his questions in a rush: “What’s going on? Where’s Luc? Why aren’t you in bed? Why does Anya look like she’s worried I’ll be pissed? And why are there three familiar omegas on screen, staring at me way more intently than the doc ever did?” He hustled closer. “Is everything okay?”

“Everything’s better than okay.” Scarlett opened her arms.

He walked right in and swept her to him. Holding her close, he buried his face in her neck. “Good to hear.” His lips traced the column of her throat up to her ear, where he whispered, “I fucking missed you.”

Collective omega sighs of approval echoed from across the room.

She barely noticed.

Damien didn’t seem to either.

Instead, he just stared down at her. Long enough and with enough hunger for her to realize the panic and desperation were gone from his gaze. What he looked like now was... determined.

Uncertainty whispered through her at his mood, so different from before he left. “Damien, what’s going on?”

He didn’t answer. Instead, he pulled back and held out something red. “I need you to put this on.”

“Put this on?” Scarlett repeated, taking the soft fabric from him while trying—unsuccessfully—to get a read on his expression.

“Yes, and then come with me.” His tone grew even more commanding. “And the rest of you will come too.”



DAMIEN

“**W**here are we going?” Scarlett hurried by his side, her palm soft in his, the silky fabric of the red gown that showed off flashes of her taming chain and fit her to perfection—replicated in record time thanks to Maxheim—fluttering behind her as they hustled down the shuttle hallway.

Anya, having transferred the other females to her portable comms, followed close behind. Alexi had been summoned and joined the females as well.

“You’ll see.” Impatient, Damien swept Scarlett into his arms.

“Damien!” Her fingers clutched his shirt as she steadied herself.

He just held her tighter. He refused to waste another moment.

The wounds inside him bled. But he pushed the pain and dark thoughts aside.

This moment was not for grieving. Or regrets. Or even for anger, though fuck knows that pulsed within him even now, his rage over the unfairness of it all almost as vast and bleak as the pain he knew was coming. But it wasn’t here yet...

Which was why this was a time for living.

And one he intended to enjoy. With his female by his side. Giving her all he could. All she deserved, and more.

He reached the viewing room at the back of his shuttle: a cozy room usually used for staring into space during flights. Now, however, it had a new function.

“Here we are.” He smacked the panel with his elbow and waited for the

door to slide open, then ducked through the doorway, carrying Scarlett over the threshold.

Her delighted gasp echoed through the room. “It’s gorgeous.”

Satisfaction swept through him. He and his brothers had worked hard but fast.

The viewing room was cylindrical with tall, curved, transparent crystal on three sides and a matching ceiling, offering panoramic views of the golden shimmering desert beyond.

But he and his brothers had made it even better.

His favorite part was the central aisle they’d put together. A walkway that, thanks to Maxheim’s ingenuity, was lined with floating holographic crystal flowers swaying in a nonexistent breeze. All the blossoms colored in the stunning, sensual hues that were Scarlett: carnal reds, creative purples, tranquil blues, playful yellows, elegant golds, and even bold, fearless black. Each and every flower was a reflection of her. Each and every one of them beautiful and precious and worthy of worship for however long they existed in this galaxy. *Always and forever.*

Just as special, the aisle led to a slightly elevated circular platform with an arch of flickering golden crystals that glowed with almost as much light as the female he loved.

His brothers, minus Alexi, waited there now, crowded together in a semicircle. All dressed, like him, in their leathers, each steady and strong and ready to stand by his and Scarlett’s side whatever came their way.

Next to them, equally as important, were Luc and Kadon—Scarlett’s family, and now his as well. *Forever and always.* Again, no matter what any of them faced in the future.

Only one thing was missing.

“Anya, need you up there.” Damien jutted his chin toward the platform. “And take the omegas and Alexi with you. This wouldn’t be the same without them here too.”

Thankfully, for once, Anya did as he asked without argument.

Leaving him alone with a trembling, wide-eyed Scarlett in his arms.

“What is this? What have you done?” From the wonder in her voice, he got the sense that, despite not being sure what this was, she loved it anyway. “Is this for us? It’s... incredible.” Her awed gaze bounced from one item of decor to the next. “Like a dream.”

He set her on her feet but turned her straight into his arms when he was

done. “You are my dream, Scarlett.”

She sucked in a soft, sweet breath.

Damien shifted again, turning so they stood side by side, and held out his hand. “You ready to begin again... again?”

Her breath hitched.

“Yes.” Scarlett grabbed his hand, her beautiful eyes glassy in a way he suspected matched his own. “I’m not sure what this is, but as long as it involves being with you, I’m in.”

If they were back on Abzal, he’d have supplied her with the softest, most elegant, gorgeous dress he could find, handpicked the best food from across the galaxy, and had her tell him everything she loved most so he could have had it there for her. He’d have spared no expense and loved having the chance to spoil her as she deserved. He still intended to do that.

But it all seemed so trivial and meaningless compared to simply being here with his family and with her. Stealing one moment out of time.

Breathing her in, holding her close, her skin pressed to his, her fingers threaded tight through his as he absorbed every scent, every breath, every sound. Imprinting. Memorizing.

So it would stay with him. So *she* would stay with him. *Always and forever.*

“Then get ready to hold on, wild thing. Because this is just the start.”

Together, they marched up the aisle to the dais.

Once there, Damien turned her to face him, his palm wrapping around the back of her neck as he pressed his forehead to hers. “You are mine. I am yours.”

“Yes.” Scarlett didn’t hesitate. But he could tell she was still trying to figure out exactly what was going on, her gaze darting to the others before rushing back to his.

He got it. They had nothing like this ritual in the Golden Dome. Hells, it didn’t really exist anywhere, but it was what he wanted for the two of them. Another extraordinary memory to add to all the ones they’d already created.

And she’d understand soon enough.

“Okay, Stormhart, let’s get this done.”



Scarlett

Scarlett started. *Kadon?* Now she really wasn't sure what was going on.

Clearly, it was a celebration of life. In a stunning setting. Given to her by the sweetest, sexiest Alpha in the galaxy.

But she honestly couldn't figure out why everyone was there. Or why she and Damien weren't naked and rutting on the dais, among the crystal flowers.

Now, *that* would have been a celebration.

"Scarlett, have mercy." Nostrils flaring, Damien groaned low.

It dawned on her then where her thoughts had taken her—in front of an audience, no less—and she reeled them in fast. "Sorry."

He drew her closer. "Save it for after the ceremony."

She smiled wider.

The hand around the back of her neck contracted. "Kadon, do your part now. No more stalling. I want this done."

"I don't take orders from you," the other Alpha grouched, but there was no heat behind his words.

"Kad," her brother admonished, "get to it." His somber stare found hers. "There's no one who deserves her happiness more. You might have been born property and a prize, little sister, but you've shown us all the true meaning of strength."

Scarlett bit her lip to keep from getting teary-eyed all over again.

Her brother's gaze returned to the other male. "Also, the sooner you get to it, the sooner we can have our own."

Kadon stood by her side in the next heartbeat. This time, she stifled a laugh.

"For you," Kadon said, his voice gruff, as he pulled a small screen from his pocket and held it out to her.

Or tried to.

She had to wait for Damien to release his hold so she could examine it fully.

Which he did. Eventually.

Scarlett immediately recognized the document pulled up on the screen. It was the contract she and Kadon had been forced to sign to make her his prime omega.

Even seeing the thing brought a stab of pain, a sense of wrongness.

Damien grabbed her hand.

Kadon cleared his throat. "It was a privilege and an honor to serve as your

Alpha lord. And I hope you know..." His voice wavered. "Despite my mistakes, my selfishness, my fears, I hope you know how much I love you."

A rush of overwhelming gratitude, sorrow, and exaltation came over her.

Now she understood what was happening.

She understood why Damien's brothers were there, all of them somber, serious, and a little scary, but staring at her and her Alpha with the kind of affection that made her excited to get to know each one.

She understood why Anya and the other omegas were there, waiting to become the sisters of her heart and to be there however she and Damien needed.

She understood, too, why Kadon and Luc were there. Her family. And now Damien's also.

"We are all a family now." She swallowed hard and forced the words out past the swirl of messy, beautiful emotions seething inside. "Thank you, Kadon, for watching out for me and Luc while we waited for our chance to be with the right ones for us. I hope you know I love you too."

"And I hope you both know," Damien growled, pulling her to his side so she was pressed against him, "that even though we all realize it's a sister and brotherly love, you'll be keeping those words of affection to yourselves."

She couldn't tell if her Alpha was joking or not, but shockingly, even as a storm of emotions raged inside and shadows and bursts of color flickered across the walls, she smothered a giggle.

Trust Damien to make her smile amidst all this. Trust him to know exactly what she needed.

What they both needed.

Her breath came faster, excitement whipping through her. She hadn't realized how badly she wanted this—until now.

"Go on then, Stormhart." Damien was back in command mode.

"Right." Kadon stood straighter as he held up the contract. "I hereby renounce all claim to Scarlett of the Consortium as my prime omega." He smiled at her as he recited the traditional words used to sever such a connection. "I give up all privileges as her Alpha lord and relinquish all rights." Then he added something she'd never heard before: "But I do not cede my right to serve as one of her protectors."

Damien growled low.

"With these words," Kadon continued, "I set her free to live, to love, to be whoever she is meant to be."

Kadon took a deep breath and performed a formal bow, then pricked his thumb with a fang and smeared his blood onto the screen. They all watched as it was absorbed into the crystal, making it official.

Their union was over.

Scarlett felt the dissolution from her chest to the tips of her toes. But it wasn't painful or brutal. It was glorious. A parting that ripped away a dark, heavy weight and left her light. As if truly unburdened.

She inhaled a deep breath, and when her gaze locked with Kadon's, she saw the same rightness reflected in his eyes.

Forced to bind to the wrong souls, they'd been stuck. Now they were free.

"Fucking finally." Damien's hold tightened.

He turned to face her once again. "Now you become mine in one more way."

Her heart beat faster.

"Scarlett of my heart." He gripped her shoulders, his fingers caressing her skin. "Second chances are rare in our galaxy. Forgiveness, trust, and deep, all-consuming love even more so." His voice thickened. "I'm a simple male. Most of my life lived in violence, struggling to survive. To endure. But the moment I met you, you colored my world. You've shown me there's so much more to life than I ever knew. I wish"—his deep voice shook, but he pushed on—"I wish I could wipe away every pain, cut down every obstacle in your path. I wish... I wish I could give us forever."

Her breath stuttered inside her chest.

"But as you've told me time and again," he continued, "it seems even I can't do everything. But I can promise to be with you every step. To give you all within my power to give. To treat every rotation with you as the gift that it is and love you with everything inside me for as long as you'll allow."

She clutched his forearms, swayed by the beauty of his vows.

"In this lifetime," he rasped. "In the next, and in every one after that, I will always find you."

Soft, muted sobs came from nearby.

But Scarlett felt far too happy to be sad.

For so long, she'd wanted to be Damien's in every way. Every night for the past four planetary rotations, she'd thought of him and wished. Never once believing it would happen.

Now it was real. And more beautiful than anything she'd ever imagined.



“Nothing in this world could keep us apart,” he growled, his tone as ferocious as she’d ever heard, “and nothing ever will.” He pressed his forehead to hers. “Do you believe me, love?”

“I do.”

“Are you mine forever?”

“Always and forever.” She held him just as fiercely. “And you, are you mine?”

“Forever and always.”

A tear rolled down her face.

“Don’t cry, baby.”

“These are happy tears.” In a moment of inspiration, she lifted a fingertip to the wetness on her face. She turned his palm over and glided her damp fingertip across his skin, familiar strokes forming a word they both knew well.

**MINE**

Her gaze found his. “We’ve made these marks in dirt, blood, cum, and now tears. They may wash off, but the claim is enduring.” She curled his hand into a fist and grasped it as best she could. “I will always be yours. You will always be mine.”

Nikolai stepped forward. In his hand, he held a different small screen with a new contract, this one written in an elegant, glittering script that sparkled like the ice peaks of Abzal. “Let’s make it official.”

Damien raised her hand to his mouth. Gaze locked with hers, he carefully, gently, pierced the pad of her thumb, growling low as the blood welled on her skin.

“Worth it,” she murmured.

Together, they placed her thumb at the bottom of the contract and smeared her acceptance.

Next—far rougher and faster—Damien did the same with his own blood.

“It’s done.” Nikolai’s gruff pronouncement carried across the room.

Cheering erupted from the dais.

“Finally.” Damien’s smile was as wide as she’d ever seen.

“Always and forever.” She rose to her tiptoes, face tipped up, expecting a kiss as his head descended toward hers.

Except his lips kept right on going, along with the rest of him, until the top of his head sat even with her belly, and then, before she could fully register what was happening, he tossed her over his shoulder.

“Damien!” She pressed her palms into his back to give herself some leverage.

“Sorry, baby. But once I start claiming that mouth, I’m not stopping.” He strode toward the doorway while his brothers chuckled, Luc scowled, and the titter of knowing omega laughter echoed through the room. “You guys celebrate. Tomorrow, we take action and trap our enemies. Tonight”—his palm covered her ass cheek— “Scarlett and I will be busy making memories enough for a thousand lifetimes.”



## SCARLETT

Scarlett's eyes fluttered open. She was fatigued, experiencing twinges in muscles she hadn't realized she possessed, but she was also happier than she'd ever been.

As quietly as possible, she slipped from the bed, her taming chain—Goddess, she loved how Damien used that thing—settling comfortably around her hips.

Exhaustion tugged at her, and the sudden motion made her dizzy, but she shoved it aside. Refusing to think about the doc's words, she focused on the beauty of the previous night instead.

Totally worth it.

Moving slowly, she picked up the stunning gown crumpled on the floor beside Damien's leathers and slipped it on.

She had no idea how much of her life she had left.

But without question, she could say that thanks to Damien, she was grateful for every precious moment.

Every time they came together, every time he touched her, was more memorable than the last.

Fingers threading the ties on her gown, she smiled down at the huge, gorgeous male in the bed.

Even in sleep, he was a force to be reckoned with. An Alpha in his prime, his dark hair splayed wild across the pillow, his sprawled body taking up most of the mattress, hides kicked to the bottom, which was fine, as he kept her plenty warm when she was in bed and now, left her free to stare at every perfect, chiseled inch of him.

She still wanted to trace his every gorgeous dip and valley with her tongue. Run her fingertips over the faint crescent nail marks she'd left on his back when he'd made her scream over and over with pleasure.

Damien was hers in every way.

Few in Anarchheim realized their dreams. She'd been lucky enough to get hers.

The shuttle floor creaked as she shifted her weight. Damien stirred, but he didn't wake.

No wonder. They'd done a great deal of celebrating. Although she was already hungry for more.

But she was also just plain hungry, and given the energy he'd expended, she suspected Damien would be too.

Since the replicator in their room was noisy, and didn't offer the same selection as the one in the galley, she'd decided to sneak out and bring back a feast.

Damien had done so much for her. She wanted to surprise him.

Plus, they'd need fuel to continue their celebrations, and while she knew reality would soon intrude, and their plan to trap Darvish and Andor had to be carried out as soon as possible, Scarlett hoped to steal a few more moments with her Alpha beforehand.

Just thinking about how he'd used the taming chain to drive her pleasure higher and higher made her shiver all over again.

Goddess, she loved her Alpha's wildness. His endurance and creativity. His stamina. His playfulness. And the way he pushed her to the edge and over, so she soared free and bold, just like him.

In fact, she needed to go fetch the food so she could return to this room—and do all of that again.

Scarlett turned toward the door.

A hand seized hold of her wrist. "Come back to bed."

She gasped, laughing out loud as she tumbled back onto the mattress. In the blink of an eye, Damien rolled so she lay beneath him, a wall of solid muscle pinning her to the bed.

He buried his face in her neck. "This is more like it." He growled low. "A prime omega belongs in her Alpha lord's bed."

Scarlett smiled wide. A sleepy but commanding Damien was sexy.

"You're crushing me." She pressed her palms to his chest, not to push him away, just to feel him steady and strong against her skin. Her Alpha lord.

Hers.

With a grunt, he slid partially off but kept her secure beneath him, his face still buried in her neck.

She thought he might actually be falling back to sleep, but then he murmured, “You’re not too sore?”

Her heart soared. His care for her was so beautiful.

“Far from it.” She nipped his earlobe. “I can’t wait to do it all again.”

His head popped up, his expression no longer sleepy but hungry. “That sounds like a plan.” His mouth descended toward hers.

“Agreed. But”—this time, she added some weight to her push against his chest— “first, I’m going to feed us.” Her stomach rumbled as if to emphasize her point.

Damien sighed, but it was playful. “My prime omega. So demanding.”

She gave him a mock warning glare.

He grinned. Then, palms resting on the mattress on either side of her, he pushed up in one motion and hovered over her, his biceps bunching. “I’ll get it.” He nuzzled her nose. “Whatever *my* prime omega wants, she gets.”

“No.” It was kind of him to offer, but she wanted to take care of him too. “You stay here.” She pressed a kiss to his jaw, then the corner of his mouth, before shimmying out from under him. “Keep the bed warm.” She winked as she stood. “If we’re lucky, we’ll manage a few more stolen moments.”

He studied her, and there was no missing his inner conflict at the idea of her leaving.

“I’m fine, Damien.” They’d need to find their new normal after the doc’s diagnosis, and her Alpha lord would have to learn to keep his natural caretaking protectiveness in check enough to let her give back to him too.

“This is what you want?” He was still debating.

“Yes, Alpha. We take care of each other. That’s the way this goes.”

He nodded. “Okay. Hurry back.” He dropped back to the mattress, eyes sinking shut, body sprawling out once again.

So easy. Like them. For however much longer they had, she knew it would be this good.

“Of course.” Smiling to herself, she tiptoed from the room and into the hallway.

The crystals in the ceiling lit her way as she headed toward the galley.

Quietness reigned. It was early enough that everyone else was either still in bed or at least in their rooms.

But they'd all be up soon and—  
She bumped into something solid and stumbled back a step before righting herself.  
What in the blazes?  
Her gaze shot to the space in front of her.  
There was nothing there.  
Nothing but wall and the faintest of smudges.  
Then it clicked. Maxheim's cloak.  
She opened her mouth to scream, her legs tensing to run. But it was too late.  
An arm shot out, a tranq blaster gleaming silver.  
Something sharp punctured her throat.  
Her legs crumpled, and everything went dark.



Damien

Damien prowled along the hallway, stomach grumbling, his chest even more so.

He wanted back in bed with his female now.

He suspected she'd gotten waylaid by family when she'd snuck down to the galley to fetch food.

The only meal he wanted was her. He was nowhere near done celebrating.

So he hoped she was ready to be tossed over his shoulder in front of their family again.

Picturing her shriek of outrage, he smiled.

Despite everything, he was happier than he'd ever been, and he knew she was too.

Scarlett was finally his prime omega. And, fuck, he loved her more than words could ever express.

As he neared the galley, he heard the clatter, the laughter. Maddox's snark. Anya's quick retort. Luc's answering groan. Nikolai's gruff rumble.

Damien's chest tightened. So many he loved united. And soon, he swore, Zaya would be with them too.

They'd set their trap this rotation, and Darvish would tell them where

Zaya was, then they would bring her home. She would meet Scarlett, and he and his omega would make more beautiful memories like the ones they'd made the previous night.

For as long as he was able, he would hold his family together as best he could.

It might not be everything he wanted and not last nearly as long as he wished, but it would have to be enough.

Maxheim's door slid open, and his brother flew out, almost clipping him in the process.

"Whoa. Watch it, big brother. There's plenty of food left—"

"I have news."

The look on Maxheim's face froze Damien in place, his muscles tensing.

"I was up all night doing what I do best." His brother grabbed Damien's arm and led him back the way he'd come. "I'll break down what I know while we walk."

Damien simply nodded and hauled ass.

"First," Maxheim continued, "I found out who Andor is and why he's working with Darvish."

"That, I can't wait to hear."

"Second, I picked up chatter on the monitor. An anonymous source, aka Darvish or Andor, tipped off the Brotherhood about someone stealing huge chunks of funds from the Golden Dome—and thus from them—and that they're being hidden by the Skolov family in the dome. A few Brotherhood family heads and their soldiers are on their way to collect the three named culprits from us and bring them in for questioning and execution."

"Not fucking going to happen," Damien snarled. "I'll take on the whole damned Brotherhood before I let them near Scarlett or her brother and Kadon."

Maxheim just moved faster and kept on talking. "Third, I've been tracing Darvish's payments, trying to figure out where he's spending his money and who he might be paying off. About five heartbeats ago, I discovered one name none of us will like."

His brother stopped in front of the med room door.

Stomach dropping, fangs flashing, Damien caught up quick.

"Fuck." He slammed the door panel, and the door slid open.

Empty.

A frantic search of the rest of the shuttle revealed that both the doc and



Scarlett were gone.



## SCARLETT

**S**carlett woke to the sound of raised voices.

She rolled her tongue against the roof of her mouth. Strange. Her mouth was dry, her head fuzzy, and her limbs heavy. No... not heavy. Restrained.

As the memory of the gleaming tranq blaster slammed through her, she jerked upright.

Her wrists stayed pinned down. Metal clanked.

Her heart crashed against her ribs.

She was manacled to a narrow cot. In some kind of sterile med bay. And she was definitely no longer on Damien's shuttle.

Head still woozy, she sank back against the mattress and tried to think.

The rumbling voices outside her cell grew louder.

An argument.

Worse, she recognized both shouters.

"You said you'd wait. Let Kadon contact me. Track his comms." Andor sounded furious.

"It would not have done any good." Darvish's tone was equally harsh, though he sounded far less distressed and more exasperated. "You heard what the doc said. We would have been walking into a trap."

"Whose fault is that? You were the one who insisted on leaving the recording on Crex on the off chance it would somehow bring Scarlett to heel."

"Your part would have come out eventually no matter what. It just happened sooner than later. Accept it. Damien found out the truth about you.

Kadon knows too. We had to improvise, and a new situation presented itself.” Her ex-employer chuckled. “I had no idea Nikolai and Maxheim would come to the dome or that they’d bring the doc with them. It was too good an opportunity to pass up.”

“You mean you wanted to rub it in their faces and show them how easily you could strike at them. But in the meantime, you blew up one of our best advantages by exposing the doc as a sleeper agent.”

“So what if I did?” Darvish snarled, his mood shifting lightning fast, as always. “That Enforcer bastard took my pet.”

“Not this again.”

“The Skolovs think they can have whatever they want. Whoever they want. Well, he can’t have her. And soon, they’ll have nothing at all.”

“Fine.” Andor appeared to have heard it all before. “You don’t want them to have her? Then dispose of her now. We can’t take her with us. It’s too dangerous. If that gift of hers acts up in flight, we’ll all be dead. What will happen to your precious plans for revenge, then?”

Scarlett’s panic grew.

“Do not mock me, Andor.” Darvish’s voice dropped to a lethal rumble. “You and I work well together, but I am not a youngling anymore. You might have thrown some guilt money my way when I was small, but I’ve paid you back a hundredfold in wealth and influence. I’m the one who took your angry, bitter ramblings about the past and turned them into a concrete plan for vengeance. I’m the one in charge of this operation. Don’t ever forget that.”

“We have history.”

“Which is why you’re still alive.” Darvish paused. “Now, I will explain this only once. The doc will keep my pet tranq’d throughout the trip. I have a reinforced cell specially prepared for her upon our arrival. All will be well.”

“Why risk it?” Andor, a dominant Alpha himself, was not so easily cowed.

“The doc will work with her once we reach our secure location. I’ve promised him the chance to find out what makes her tick. That incentive, more than the money, is the reason he agreed to betray his employers. They paid him generously and treated him well, but the Skolovs would never allow him to be as *hands-on* with his study of their omegas as he wanted. I will.”

A shiver ran through Scarlett.

“The doc says she’s dying.”

“Yes, sadly. Perhaps he can save her. If not, she’ll prove useful in another respect. When the moment is right, and she’s primed, her gift unstable and ready to implode, I’ll use her to draw Damien out. We will give him a location and he’ll come running to save her, straight to his death. She’ll do our work for us, killing the Enforcer and striking the kind of irreparable blow that will make the rest of the Skolovs easier to take out too.”

Scarlett’s gift stirred, punching against her chest, the rage inside her surging once again.

She sucked in a sharp breath.

Out of habit, she tapped it down—and it struck at her ribs. A sharp jab that hurt.

Then she remembered.

Anya’s advice: *Maybe don’t worry about trying to stifle your gift so much.*

Luc’s statement: *You might have been born property and a prize, little sister, but you’ve shown us all the true meaning of strength.*

The omegas’ encouragement: *You can trust yourself, Scarlett... We know you can handle it. You’re a force to be reckoned with.*

Kadon’s vow: *I set her free to live, to love, to be whoever she is meant to be.*

And most of all, Damien’s love: *I don’t care about the pain. The risk. The dark. It’s part of you, and I’ve experienced life without you, Omega. The truth is, Scarlett, I’ll take you any way I can... You are my dream.*

They believed she was strong. Worthy. All of her, even the less-than-perfect parts.

So why didn’t she?

She’d grown up under the Consortium’s harsh rules, been trained since birth to do as she was told. To please others.

Bit by bit, without her even realizing, they’d chipped away at her power. Until all she knew was to dance on command and smile behind the walls of her cage and even while making plans to run away, she’d wondered if she truly had it in her to stand on her own after all.

Life under Darvish’s thumb had been more of the same, just with higher, uglier stakes.

And all the while, her rage grew and twisted back onto herself.

*Behave or else.* That’s all she’d known.

Until Damien.

The darkness inside her swirled faster, mushrooming into a cosmic tempest of charged particles and violent impulses, but this time, she didn't let herself fear it.

She'd not let those bastards steal from her again. And she refused to allow Darvish to turn her into a weapon to use against Damien and those he loved.

Darvish, Andor, and the Consortium had already taken far too much.

She'd just gotten her dream, her Alpha returned to her. He was hers in every way.

In her heart, she knew Damien would be scrambling to find her even now.

So she was *not* giving up. She'd *not* let their ship take off. And she was *done* behaving.

She'd become the omega she was always meant to be.

She would trust herself.

Outside, in the hall, the Alphas' discussion continued.

"Have I ever led you astray?" Darvish was back to smug. "I've been planning this for a long time, and we've come far together."

"Your schemes worked at first because the Skolovs didn't know you existed. Now? Things are unraveling."

"Don't you fucking dare say that!" Darvish shout was a near shriek. "I have everything under control. Plans are underway. The army is almost ready. Zaya is right where I need her to be. And now, I've got a weapon tied to that cot that will make the Skolovs weak."

"You cost me my son," Andor snarled, and Scarlett suspected he'd finally revealed what he was truly furious about.

"I thought I was the son you never had."

"Do not trifle with me. Your mother was the one who decided to shame me and her Sartin kin by spreading her legs for Burian Skolov *after* I'd agreed to make her my prime omega. Instead, she played the whore and humiliated me, rutting with that second-rate Skolov space trash. Do you know how long it took to live that down and regain my respectability among the Brotherhood?"

Goddess! Scarlett jerked against her restraints. Damien's father stole Andor's prime omega to be. That's why he plotted against the Skolovs even now. Like Darvish, he was intent on punishing the Skolov heirs for the sins of the father.

There was a crash outside in the hallway. Then a gagging sound, as if someone was choking.

“Do. Not. Speak. Of. My. Mother.” Darvish bit out every word.

“Get”—Andor gasped for breath— “off.”

Another crash. More heavy breathing.

Finally, it appeared Andor was free, his voice a painful rasp as he snapped, “Fine. Do as you like, then.” There was also a note of resignation in his tone. “You always do anyway. I told you not to tip off the Brotherhood about Scarlett and the funds until we were away, but you didn’t listen to that advice either.”

“And I told you, there might be over a hundred Consortium guards surrounding this shuttle launch, but it will not be enough. Thanks to my tip, the Brotherhood believes the Skolovs are protecting criminals and has come to claim them. That means more distractions for the Skolovs. If they’re fighting the Brotherhood and the Consortium guards, they won’t be fighting us, and the two sets of armies together might just be enough to let us slip away from Damien the Enforcer and his brothers with my pet and my plans in place.”

“Hells.” Andor blew out a loud breath. “You may be right. But I want the doc tranqing her again. I want him dosing her with so much drug there’s no chance she’ll wake up until this shuttle’s long grounded.”

“That was always my intention.” Footsteps headed away from her cell. “I’ll send the doc to her straight away. Now, enough discussion. Let’s get to the cockpit, strap in, and let the pilot get this shuttle out of the Golden Dome. I’m anxious to get home.”

“Do you think”—now it was Andor who sounded sly— “your precious Zaya misses you half as much as you miss her?”

“You do not fucking say her name.” Darvish’s outrage was a near-match to when Andor referenced his mother.

“So touchy.” Andor chuckled. “I only—”

*Boom.* A powerful explosion rocked the ship. Scarlett’s cot shook from the force of the vibration.

“It’s begun.” Darvish sounded positively gleeful.

“We need to go.” Andor’s voice held more panic. “Now.”

The pounding of their footfalls echoed down the hall, moving farther away.

Her time was running out.

But Scarlett was determined.

It took a heartbeat to figure out how to proceed.

From an early age, she'd gotten used to keeping the less-than-pleasing parts of herself inside. Tamping down her wildness, her wants, and her rage.

But Damien had been teaching her something different all along.

So she pictured the mud, the ferocity, the taming chain, the sheer, raw freedom of being outrageous with him. Of being truly herself.

Her colors burst from her, splashing along the med bay wall. Richer. Bolder. Brighter than they'd ever been before. A cacophony of hues and patterns that wove together and overlapped, zigzagging and swirling, blending into a visual symphony.

It was dazzling.

It was her.

And right alongside those colors, framing them, cutting through them, highlighting them, were thick, jagged slashes of black. Vicious rage and a thirst for vengeance.

Also her.

Then came the rattle of the door as it slid open.

Chest rising and falling fast, Scarlett drew her gift back into herself and slammed her eyes shut.

The soft patter of feet echoed through the med bay.

She didn't need to open her eyes to know who it was.

Scarlett waited.

A puff of air whispered across her cheek. Followed by the soft bristle of fur against her arm as the doc leaned over to inject more drugs into her.

Her eyes flashed open.

There was time only to notice the intense curiosity in the pink-and-gray-streaked eyes staring down at her. The flare of excitement. As if he couldn't wait to find out exactly what made her tick. Whatever it took.

So she let the rage out.

Thanks to the life she'd led and the monsters she'd met, the darkness was a part of her, and it always would be. Moreover, it had given her the means to save herself.

There was nothing wrong with being a monster sometimes if it meant you got to take down other monsters worse than you.

Before she'd even finished her thoughts, her gift shot from her.

The doc flew back with an open-mouthed scream.



He dropped just before hitting the wall, the slight clatter of the tranquilizer the only sound as both struck the floor.

Angling her head, she registered the doc's empty, dead eyes; whatever knowledge, whatever sick curiosity had been there, wiped away.

Shockingly, the whole endeavor had been surprisingly easy. Unlike every time before, she wasn't even fatigued. Nor was there any pain, or ceilings or floors giving way.

With her emotions focused, apparently, her gift was as well.

Confidence growing, she tilted her chin and focused on the manacles at her wrists.

They snapped too.

Though her gift also punched a hole in the wall and crumpled the legs of the cot. Which meant she slammed to the floor with a hard jolt to the spine.

But she got the job done.

So she might need some more practice and time to refine her ability, but she was free.

Even better, a quick check revealed no fresh bruises—even the faded ones had disappeared. Her energy levels were better than they'd been in a long while.

She wanted to laugh out loud. But there was no time.

The noise had alerted two guards.

They surged inside—just as another deafening boom sounded, and the ship rocked yet again.

It didn't matter; her gift leaped from her almost before she thought to let it out. Hungry. Frenzied. Undeterred. As with the doc, it sent the guards soaring backward.

By the time they hit the floor, they too were dead.

Scarlett sat up, listing to one side. She didn't think it was her gift, though. She was still a little shaky from the tranquilizer.

But she couldn't afford to delay.

Damien would be searching for her.

Some kind of battle was already underway outside the shuttle, where Brotherhood and Consortium soldiers converged, their targets her Alpha and those they loved.

Plus, only Darvish knew for sure where Zaya was.

She could not allow this ship to take off.

She shoved up from the floor and headed to the door, her steps

determined.

While she had no idea if using her gift sped up the process of cell degeneration, it damned well felt like the opposite.

Energy pulsed through her, swirls of color and slashes of black splattering the walls with every step she took.

Perhaps it was wishful thinking, but she'd only ever felt this alive when with Damien.

She made it as far as the next corner before four more guards appeared.

This time, her gift was more surgical. As if it was learning. As if the more she acknowledged it, respected it, and gave it its due, the more it allowed itself to be focused and molded.

Scarlett stepped over the downed guards and kept going.

In one of the shiny hallway panels, she caught a glimpse of her reflection. Hair floating. Eyes glittering gold. She was exactly the force the Skolov omegas believed she could be.

At the next set of space locks, she took out six more guards.

The alarms blared.

Someone had noticed.

The shuttle rumbled, its engines firing up.

Scarlett reached the cockpit.

She couldn't kill Darvish. At least not until she learned where he was hiding Zaya. But she could use her gift to ground the shuttle until help arrived.

Gift primed, she pressed her fingertips to the door panel.

The door slid open, and she stuttered to a halt.

"Come in, pet." Darvish stood in front of a flashing console with a huge monitor at its center. Andor Stormhart loomed by his side. A pilot, frantically pressing buttons as the engines rumbled, sat in an ergonomic swivel chair at the far end of the room while at least twenty guards ringed the room, a curved bay of windows just beyond.

And, just as significant, off to the side was a portable vid storage unit someone had secured to the wall for transport. A storage unit full, no doubt, of the incriminating vids from Darvish's private headquarters. The *exact* vids Scarlett wanted.

She couldn't even begin to imagine how many souls might be freed from under Darvish's blackmailing thumb if she could destroy that storage unit.

Determination whipped through her.

“It would seem you’ve been causing trouble.” Darvish was still talking. “But that ends now.”

He gestured toward the monitor, and Scarlett received another surprise. A beautiful, young, dark-haired omega sat framed within—a dainty version of Maddox Skolov. Her neck bent, she pored over a document.

It was obvious the female was unaware of being recorded. The space around her—four walls of crystal that revealed a night sky and a simple table and chair—gave nothing away, but the female herself seemed in good health: her skin and hair healthy, her body lean but well-fed. Besides the slight, studious V between her brows, she seemed untroubled.

That was a relief.

Until the recording panned out, and the tip of a laser barrel pointed directly at the female came into view.

“No!” Scarlett lurched forward.

“Meet Zaya.” Darvish nodded at the monitor. “She has no idea of the danger she’s in, but you do. You want her to live? Behave.”



## SCARLETT

“**Y**ou bastard.” Scarlett’s rage surged higher.

“You’ll be punished for that insult later.” Darvish stroked the curled tip of his single horn, his tone smug. “Right now, I think you know as well as I that this little rebellion of yours has come to an end.”

“Don’t hurt her.”

“Do as you’re told, and I won’t have to.” The monitor faded to black, and Zaya disappeared, but the blinking light at the bottom of the screen indicated the comms line remained open. “If you continue to misbehave, I’ll give the order, and Zaya dies.”

Scarlett didn’t buy it. When discussing Damien’s missing sister earlier, Darvish’s tone had been laced with something akin to twisted affection, and even more significant, Scarlett got the sense Zaya was integral to his grand plans and therefore not as disposable as Darvish pretended.

Still, she couldn’t risk it. “I’ll do as you say.”

“Good.” Darvish didn’t sound surprised. But then again, pressing a taser to Luc’s temple had always worked to cow her before. “It’s time to take you to your new home, Scarlett.”

She shivered at the thought.

“Too risky.” Andor’s objection came fast. “You saw what she did to those guards in the corridor. You need to kill her.”

“Shut up, Andor,” Darvish snapped. “I know my omega. She’ll do whatever it takes to save sweet Zaya. And it’s clear Scarlett’s more in control of her gift than before; otherwise, this shuttle would already be destroyed.” He snapped his fingers and pointed to his boot. “Come to heel, Pet. This was

always your fate.”

The rage inside seething higher; she forced her feet forward.

As she did, she took in both males.

Darvish was a handsome Alpha, even with only one horn. Not too much older than Nikolai Skolov, with a similar skin tone, shiny black hair, a strong jaw, and the same commanding bearing. Except where Nikolai just seemed hard, Darvish exuded cruelty.

Although wearing the top-of-the-line robe and fine trousers he always wore when visiting the Golden Dome, this time, his usually sleek hair was a little disheveled and one of the ties to his robes laced incorrectly.

Darvish was rattled.

While he might pretend otherwise, he was not as in control as he tried to appear.

Her gaze shifted to the other Alpha, Kadon’s sire. A generation older than Darvish, Andor was shorter than him but wider. Strands of gray threaded through his deep brown hair and bushy beard. At one time, she’d been nervous about meeting him, anxious to make a good impression since she knew that, deep down, Kadon cared what his sire thought and because Andor was Brotherhood and powerful. Back then, though, she’d thought the warlord’s worst sin was that he was controlling and more interested in an idealized version of a first-born Alpha than the real Kadon. Now she knew Andor was far worse than she’d ever imagined.

As she approached the console, the engines hummed louder, and the floor vibrated.

The shuttle was preparing for flight.

Heart beating fast, she picked up her pace.

“I watched you on the monitor as you dealt with the doc.” Darvish’s eyes glittering with that familiar, sickening fascination she’d never gotten used to. “I was most displeased when Damien Skolov took you, but clearly, it had its uses. Your gift has become even stronger. More vicious. You’ll be even more invaluable than I imagined.”

She moved closer.

“No fated-mate marks this time around, I see. Is that because of me?” His gaze shifted from her throat to her wrist, his grin widening. “I bet it is. Broken, in the best of ways.” He chuckled. “I never rutted and knotted you because I assumed your gift would kill me. But it looks like Damien Skolov found a way around it. With Zaya’s life as her motivation, I suspect my pet

will find a work-around for me as well.”

Gooseflesh rose on her skin at the disgusting thought.

Andor’s cold expression never altered. “Not even *that* pussy seems worth the risk to me.”

She could not believe such a reprehensible male had produced Kadon. But then again, it was also hard to believe Damien shared blood with Darvish.

Only an arm’s length away from the two males, she stopped, her skin crawling as Darvish’s eyes lit with hunger. “To your knees, Pet.”

“You know,” she whispered, staying right where she was, “killing’s not the only skill I refined while away from you.”

His brows drew together, but before either he or Andor could react, she let her gift out, slamming it straight into the console.

Splashes of color and black smudges splattered everywhere. But, best of all, orange and purple sparks burst from the instrument panel, followed by smoke.

The engines fell silent.

The comms signal blinked out.

There’d be no sending orders to hurt Zaya now.

“No!” Darvish raised his arm, preparing to backhand her.

“Scarlett.” Her name was a roar.

A red blur streaked by her and barreled into Darvish.

Damien!

The two males flipped backward over the console.

Andor followed, leaping over the instrument panel.

Chaos ensued.

Several guards charged her at once, lasers raised, their yellow glow indicating their weapons were set to stun. A sign Darvish hadn’t altered his mandate to capture her alive. She knew, without a doubt, he’d not given the same order for her Alpha lord.

She lost sight of Damien as the guards surrounded her.

Her gift struck out.

But the rage and terror were too much, her control over her gift too new, especially with her fear for Damien added to the mix.

The guards flew backward. Dead. But that wasn’t all. An enormous hole punched straight through the shuttle hull, the sights and sounds of the battle outside rushing in, clear and terrifying.

Inside the ship, debris rained down all around her.

Shards cut into her skin. A chunk of wall crashed to the ground. The storage unit containing the vids tipped over onto its side.

Guards crowded through the doorway and filled the cockpit.

Her gift exploded again. Attackers, lasers, and fragments of debris swirled everywhere.

Amidst the pandemonium, she searched for Damien and found him on his back, fighting both Darvish and Andor. His forearm, slick with blood, locked around his half brother's neck while he kicked out at Kadon's sire.

Her gift clamored to strike again, but she feared killing Damien.

Or Darvish.

She realized Damien was hampered by the same challenge, as Darvish couldn't die until they obtained information on Zaya's location.

Rough hands seized Scarlett's shoulders, ripping her pretty gown. Her gift reacted.

The hands disappeared as the guard flew backward, but a tear split the hull ceiling as if it were fabric.

Pieces of wreckage continued to plummet to the shuttle floor.

"Damien, watch out!" A large panel crashed to the ground near him.

On the plus side, it forced Andor to jump aside to avoid being sliced in two, leaving Damien to contend with Darvish alone.

Still, she needed to pull it together.

Repeating the words that had inspired and centered her earlier, the sounds of the battles beyond the shuttle reached her. Shouts. Screams. The grunts of Consortium guards dying. The hiss of shuttle-gun blasts. Her and Damien's families fighting against the Brotherhood and the Consortium for their shared future. Fighting for Zaya.

A guard charged, clutching a tranq blaster tight in his shaking hand.

It was a smarter strategy, but not smart enough.

She sent out her gift.

The guard crumpled at her feet. Further proof that she could channel her power when she tried.

But standing right behind him, murder in his gaze, loomed Andor. "You were never worthy of being a Stormhart."

"You're the one not worthy of that name." Scarlett pulled more of the hate and rage and, yes, love for those who deserved it into herself and recharged. "To think you did all this out of foolish pride and ego."



“Burian took from me.” Andor bled from a cut over his eye, but his fangs and claws were out and primed. “I want his line ended. The Skolovs never deserved to be anything but space trash.”

“Kadon will bring back real glory to the Stormhart name,” she told him with pride. “With Luc by his side.”

“I will die before I let those two be together. And you’ll die too.” He surged toward her, claws outstretched. “Since I couldn’t have my prime omega, Damien Skolov won’t either.”

Andor’s claws slashed toward her throat, but right before her gift exploded, he jerked to a halt, his eyes opening wide.

His body twitched.

He sank to his knees. Then his face smacked into the ground.

Damien stood behind him, claws dripping blood. “For Kadon,” he snarled, his gaze locked with hers.

“For Kadon,” Scarlett whispered back.

She ran into his arms.

He jerked her close, his grip so tight she could hardly breathe, then he shoved her behind him and hustled them backward toward the closest wall. “Stay close.”

“Where are the others?” She feared for them all.

“Kadon, Luc, and Maddox are dealing with the Consortium guards while Nikolai and Maxheim handle the Brotherhood.”

“And Anya?”

Damien shook his head. “She wanted to come with me. My elder brothers locked her in the containment pod used for transporting prisoners.”

Anya would not like that.

But there was no more time to address it.

“They murdered Andor. Kill them both.” Darvish’s outraged order echoed through the cockpit. “Now!”

Twenty lasers swiveled in their direction. All with barrels that glowed bright green.

“Damien!” She clutched at his back.

“Always and forever, wild thing. In this life and the next.” He stepped more fully in front of her, his hands gripping her hips to secure her behind him. A selfless act of love. Like so many before.

But this time... this time, she was equally confident in her ability to protect him.

His touch grounded her, his energy fusing with hers, steadying her, pushing her. Making her better, stronger, more fully herself.

Her gift erupted.

It blew back the closest ring of guards, but even better, even *more* miraculous, the swirl of colors and jagged dark slashes hovered in the air, dancing like particles of dust, yet somehow binding together to become a glowing, curved barricade that deflected every laser shot.

No matter how many guards fired, the lethal beams of green energy bounced off her colorful shield, the good and the bad blending together to create something truly solid, strong, and everlasting.

Because that was her and Damien.

And she'd always find a way to protect her Alpha and the love they'd fought so hard to reclaim.

"Holy shit." Damien's rasp was filled with wonder. "Look what you can do, baby."

Even some of the guards had stopped to stare.

Scarlett would have smiled, but she was too busy noticing something else extraordinary: her throat and wrists burned.

Hope coursing through her, she raised her wrists. Delicate golden filigrees snaked around each one. Her fated-mate marks had returned.

Whatever had been holding her back was finally gone.

More power flowed between the two of them—and something new and fragile and beautiful as well.

Her colors and shadows erupted everywhere, a dazzling light show.

Damien was affected too.

His body glowed, colors flashing across his skin as he leaped through her shield and mowed down twelve guards at once. He then took out another handful as if it were nothing, his movements faster, the force of his strikes more powerful than they'd ever been.

Together, they were invincible.

Before long, there were no guards left—only Darvish.

Scarlett moved to stand beside Damien.

Darvish's face was twisted with venom, a stunned look in his eyes.

For so long, he'd ruled over the Golden Dome. Passing judgments and destroying lives to suit his purposes. He'd tasted success after success, spinning his plots in secret.

No more.

Now the Skolovs were onto him. Now she was ready to fight back. Now they had the incriminating vids he'd used to destroy so many lives.

Now he would truly begin to feel what it was to be powerless.

She could kill him in an instant.

But she wouldn't. Not until they knew where to find Zaya.

"Give up now, Darvish." Damien closed in.

Darvish stumbled back a step. "Never."

"Tell us where Zaya is, and I'll make your death as fast as Andor's. Otherwise, you'll suffer, and I'll enjoy every fucking moment of it."

Goddess, she loved Damien's gentleness with her. But she loved his bloodthirstiness too. Especially when it came to Darvish.

"You think you've won." Darvish shuffled back another step.

"I have the female of my dreams, and she loves me as much as I love her. I've got family. Friends. No matter what else happens, that will always be the case. Of course I've won. Can you say the same?"

Darvish's nostrils flared, his body curling inward as if the words had found their mark, but his eyes stayed hard. "You think you know everything. You think you have everything, and that gives you strength. In reality, that just makes it easier to take it all away."

The hairs on the nape of her neck prickled.

"You, Scarlett, should know better than to underestimate me." Darvish raised his fist, fanning it open to reveal a small rectangular device.

"Damien!" She'd seen a remote like that before. "He has an exploding device hidden somewhere on the shuttle."

But it was too late.

Darvish's smirk grew as he pressed the remote.

The shuttle shook. Hard.

She toppled off balance. Damien's hand wrapped around her upper arm, pulling her to him right before she smacked into the console. Fire licked along the shuttle walls.

Taking advantage, Darvish sprinted to the emergency hatch, draping Maxheim's stolen cloak around his shoulders as he ran. He wrenched it open; his twisted stare landed on her one last time. "Such a fucking waste."

Scarlett's stomach dropped. She knew exactly what that meant.

Darvish raised the remote, pressing it again as he leaped from the escape hatch.

She swiveled, her gaze locking with Damien's as she opened her mouth

to scream at him to run. His body collided with hers, and he hurled them through the hole she'd accidentally punched in the hull.

They hit the ground hard, Damien underneath, cushioning her fall—as the ship exploded.

Damien rolled to cover her.

Shuttle fragments smashed to the ground all around them. Smoke and ash filled the air.

Five heartbeats later, the only sound was the crackling of the flames and the slamming of her heart.

She cradled Damien's jaw in her hands. "Are you okay?"

"A few scrapes and cuts. Nothing that won't heal. You?"

"I'm fine." She pushed against her Alpha's broad chest. "He jumped to the left. He can't have gone far."

Damien didn't move.

"We need to hurry." Shoving harder, she tilted her head and searched through the smoke and wreckage. "I don't see him." Despair sharpened her voice.

"It's okay, beautiful." Damien held her tighter. "Settle."

"We have to go after him."

"Shhh." He pressed his forehead to hers. "He's gone, baby. That cloak will make him impossible to track. I wish it wasn't the case, but it is. Plus, as I'm learning, a fighter has to know when to let anger and ego go, pause, regroup, and hit back even harder. We hurt Darvish bad this rotation. The vids he used for blackmail and leverage are gone. His partner too. He's weak. More isolated than ever. We'll get him."

"But—"

Damien kissed the corner of her mouth. "Right now, I'm going to hold you. Remind myself that you're safe and in my arms and take the win."

Scarlett's heart swelled.

"Thank you for coming for me." She wrapped her arms around him. "How did you know where to find me?"

"Wasn't hard. I knew he'd take off with you as soon as he could, and the mass of Consortium guards converging on this shuttle dock helped narrow it down. I'd have been here sooner, but I had to cut through the Brotherhood soldiers and Consortium guards, and that betraying bastard doc stole Maxheim's only working camouflage cloak."

A giggle bubbled up inside her. Totally inappropriate, but she was alive,

getting a handle on her kick-ass gift, and wildly in love with a sexy storm of an Alpha. “I’m glad you made it.”

“You were brilliant, Scarlett.” The pride in his voice made her heart skip a beat. “Wielding your gift like that. Grounding the shuttle. Creating that shield. I’ve never seen anything like it.”

She squeezed him harder and said what she needed to say: “I saw Zaya on the monitor.”

Damien stilled.

“She looks cared for. I-I have no idea what Darvish has planned for her, but she’s okay. She... she actually looked at peace.”

Her Alpha let out a shuddered breath.

“We’ll find her.” She ran her palms along his spine, soothing him as he so often did her. “In the meantime, take heart from the fact that she’s not suffering or scared.”

And yes, she knew Darvish had threatened to kill Zaya if Scarlett disobeyed. However, now that Scarlett was back with Damien, Zaya’s usefulness as leverage against the Skolovs lay in keeping her alive, and Darvish was too smart not to take advantage of that.

“My brothers will be glad to hear it.”

It wasn’t nearly enough, but it was something.

“It sounds like they’ve had luck as well.” The sounds of the battle had quieted, and she seized the opportunity to add that to the list of good things for them to keep in mind.

“Yes. With Andor dead and Darvish gone, the Consortium guards are leaderless. Few will continue to fight now.”

“And the Brotherhood?”

“By now, too, Nikolai and Maxheim will have gotten through to them and sent shockwaves through the organization by revealing Andor’s treachery. It will give them a new target for their ire and shift the focus away from you, Kadon, and Luc.”

That would definitely be nice.

“How do you feel?” Damien nuzzled her with his nose. “You used your gift a lot. And what you did... It didn’t take too much out of you?”

“I honestly feel better than I have in a long time.” She didn’t want to give him false hope, but she’d no longer leave things unsaid. “I think... No,” she amended, “I *know* I’m strong enough to handle my gift and keep it from destroying what we have.” It felt strange to say it aloud but also wonderful.

Scarlett saw the doubt in his eyes.

“Take a look, love. No bruises. No pain. No exhaustion. Whatever was making my gift strike out at me is gone.”

Her throat closed tight as his eyes sank shut.

“Yeah?” He whispered the word.

“Yeah.” It felt great to be able to gift him with the same hope he’d given her. “I’m not going anywhere, Alpha. I’m here. In this galaxy. By your side until we’re old and gray. Our future is bright.” She held up his wrist and traced the thick fated-mates band with her thumb as the invisible tendrils stretched between them, stronger than they’d ever been. “And there’s a lot of it left for us. Together.”

His mouth claimed hers, his kiss fierce, hungry, and possessive. And filled with such hope that it set her colors and jagged black slashes swirling through the surrounding air.

When she finally broke away, she was breathing hard. “Always and forever.”

Damien grinned. “Always and forever. My inspiration. My mate. My heart. I’m going to show you the galaxy, wild thing. Just like I promised four planetary rotations ago.”

Then, without warning, he rolled and jackknifed up, taking her with him.

He pushed to his feet still holding her in his arms. “But first, we’ll make sure the others are okay. Then I’m taking my female back to bed, and we’re not leaving it until we reach Abzal.”

Scarlett wound her arms around his neck. “Deal.”

They no longer needed a thousand lifetimes.

With Damien by her side, this lifetime alone would be extraordinary.



DAMIEN

“**Y**ou getting those panties filthy wet for me, wild thing?” Damien growled the words, just like his girl liked, while the low hum of the shuttle let him know they’d left Golden Dome airspace and were on their way back to Abzal.

Finally.

“I want that lucky little toy priming that pussy.”

“Gods, yes.” Hips squirming, Scarlett ground herself on him and the toy stuffed into her panties, her tits straining against her sexy red dress, her legs straddling his—while vivid crimson, scorching vermilion, bold amethyst, and spirals of fierce, passionate black splashed across the walls of their sleeping quarters, their big bed, and best of all, his skin.

It was all so fucking gorgeous.

And, since he was tied to the headboard, he couldn’t do jack shit about it.

The night they first met, he’d promised Scarlett he’d let her tie him up. She’d never forgotten.

Nor had she forgotten about the toy he’d given her.

So, one quick trip to the replicator for what they needed, and here they were.

Because his prime omega was as adventurous, wild, and filthy as him.

Because he would do anything to make her happy.

Because he kept all his promises to the female he loved.

Because they’d survived hells, and she felt better, and her bruises were gone, and their future was suddenly breathtakingly bright and full of possibilities.



And because it was hot as hells watching her hungry gaze bounce from his arms, spread wide and cuffed to the headboard, to his chest, to the fat, slick head of his cock standing at attention between her thighs. As if she wanted to look everywhere at once. Touch him everywhere at once.

“You’re so beautiful.” Scarlett sounded almost anguished. Like she didn’t know where to explore first.

The toy he’d slid between her thighs before letting her cuff him couldn’t be helping matters either.

Damien shifted his weight, his arms flexing as he did so. He hid another smile as she whimpered and ground harder against him.

She was the true beauty. But what could he say? His female loved his body.

Thank the gods for that.

Because he loved hers a whole lot more. Then again, he loved everything about her.

And he knew exactly what she liked.

“Turn off the toy and leave it on the mattress.” He hid another smile at her soft exhalation of protest and kept his voice stern. “Stand up, wild thing. At the bottom of the bed. I want that dress off. Then the panties.”

She shivered.

“Make it fast. I expect my prime omega wearing just my taming chain before I count to five.”

Purring low—the sexiest fucking sound in the whole galaxy—Scarlett ground her hips against him and the toy one more time, then hustled that beautiful ass up and off the bed, following his command.

Her cheeks flushed and gorgeous eyes bright with need, she loosened the ties of her gown. The fabric pooled at her hips before slipping to the ground.

“There you go, baby. Good girl.” He might be tied up, but he was still Alpha, and dominance ran in his blood. Plus, his female liked when he took charge.

“You have three more heartbeats to give me the rest. Shimmy those pretty hips up to my mouth now.”

Eyes half-lidded, she did as she was told, crawling up from the bottom of the bed, her gaze fused with his as her silken hair and soft skin whispered along his flesh.

Until, on her knees, she hovered above him, her wet, slick pussy level with his mouth.

He kissed her pretty cunt. Tongued her honeyed slick. Worked her clit until her hips were grinding against his chin.

He had so many plans for them. Not all of them sexual.

She'd never been anywhere but the dome. When they first met, he'd promised to show her the galaxy. And as soon as they found Zaya, he intended to do just that. He'd take her to the Aurora Vineyards, the Stardust beaches of Draxon, and the Skyward Falls. He wanted to share every wonder in the stars with her.

In the meantime, though, he planned to ensure every experience in his bed was just as great an adventure. And equally as memorable.

Which was why, despite that fact that he could have kept tongue fucking her forever, he wrenched his mouth away and gave his female another command. "Stay still."

Sliding up as far as the restraints allowed, Damien licked the sensitive, quivering skin at her belly—and the length of the taming chain.

Instantly, the vibrations began.

Scarlett moaned low.

He smiled big. "Next time, I'm going to put you on your knees and bind you to the headboard while the taming chain pushes you higher and higher. I'll keep you on edge for hours until you're soaked and begging, then I'll rut and knot your pussy and ass until the next moons' risings."

She shivered, her eyes flashing gold and hair fluttering off her shoulders. The headboard crumpled.

Not all the way. Just a few dents. But a sure sign she approved of his suggestion—and his dominance.

"Come here, baby. Time for you to climb on top and bounce that gorgeous body up and down my cock. I won't stop until I flood your pussy with cum and my knot swells so wide we're locked together. Forever."

And that's exactly what they did. Twice.

Until her body lay limp on his, her face buried in his neck, and he finally felt his chest loosening as the reality that she was here with him, safe and sound, actually sank in.

This was them.

This was going to be their life from now on.

And it was so good. So. Damned. Good.

At present, Maxheim was busy following Darvish's money trail with Maddox's assistance to glean more clues to where their half brother had

gone. And Nikolai was ironing out any remaining issues with the Brotherhood, ensuring Scarlett, Kadon, and Luc would be safe from their retribution. With Darvish's vids destroyed, that had gotten a lot easier. It helped too that Kadon was with Nikolai to assure the Brotherhood he had no interest in retaining anything related to his father and was fine ceding the Stormhart holdings to the other warlords. Damien was certain Luc was worried about that choice, but Kadon hadn't hesitated. All he wanted was the freedom to be who he was, with Luc by his side, and now he had that.

Of course, things were far from perfect.

Darvish had slipped through their fingers, and Zaya was still out there, missing.

However, while that would have sent him into a tailspin not too long ago, he had a different perspective after facing the real possibility of losing Scarlett permanently.

As long as Zaya was alive, there was hope.

As long as he had Scarlett and his family, he knew they'd find their sister and bring her home.

So he would never stop searching for Zaya, but he'd also never stop appreciating what he had right in front of him for as long as he had it.

He'd been so angry when he returned to the Golden Dome.

Primed to spill blood. Out for punishment.

He'd had no clue everything in his life was about to change.

Or that he could be this happy. This crazy in love. This... centered.

The hot-headed frenzy inside him was gone, the need to prove anything to anyone erased.

He understood now what really mattered. And she was pressed against him with such love and trust, her sweet body, and sweeter heart, giving him everything he could ever need.

Then she went ahead and gave him more: snuggling deeper against him, she whispered, "I'm breeding."

Damien froze. "Say what?"

She pressed her lips to his ear. "I wasn't sure. But remember how hungry I was? Like Maddox-level hungry? Then, when our bond snapped into place and our fated-mate marks returned, I felt not just our bond, but a new tie as well. It took me a while to realize what... *who* it was, but now, I'm sure. We're having a baby."

The cuffs snapped.

Within the next heartbeat, she was in his arms and on her back, her body pinned beneath his. “Say it again.”

“You knocked me up.” Scarlett raised her hips. Rubbed her tight nipples against his chest, her voice teasing. “It’s still very early, but in a little while, there’ll be a mini-Damien running around wreaking havoc like his father, so we’d better make the most of now.”

A family of his own. A youngling to protect alongside his prime omega. Everything he’d always wanted.

He drew in a slow breath, his throat tight. “I waited for you, baby. Only you would do. No one else.” His scarred hand covered her belly. “And I’ve come so close to losing you so many times.” His voice shook. “Thank you for being strong enough to fight for us. For showing me your colors and your strength and just how beautiful this galaxy can be. Thank you for this too.”

“Always and forever.”

He took her mouth.

*Knock. Knock.*

“Go away.”

An annoyed groan, one he recognized. Then a muttered, “They’re at it again.”

“Yes, we are, Maddox,” he yelled toward the door. “So go the hells away.”

Scarlett giggled.

“With pleasure, big brother. I just need another override code for the containment pod. The code you gave me didn’t work, and Anya’s refusing to come out.”

Damien stilled. “Refusing?”

“Not even answering the door.” Maddox sounded exasperated. “I didn’t know she had it in her to be silent for this long.”

Damien and Scarlett exchanged a look.

They were both up and dressed in a heartbeat.

The door slid open, catching Maddox mid-crunch, something purple in his mouth. “What in the hells?”

Damien didn’t bother answering.

He shoved past his brother and charged down the hall; his fingers flew over the locked door panel of the containment pod.

The door slid open.

Empty.

Worse, the comms his sister was supposed to wear around her wrist so she could reach her brothers, and, yes, so they could locate her with even more speed than through the tracker in her blood, lay discarded on the table.

The air was stale. As though the room had been empty for a while.  
So where the fuck was Anya?

# **BONUS EPILOGUE**

ANYA

Anya slid bottom first through the shuttle's air duct, the sound of Darvish muttering to himself creeping her out.

Had this been the smartest plan? She wasn't sure yet.

However, she did know she'd been furious when her brothers locked her up. *Again.*

She was beyond sick of their foolishness.

The small ship rattled, and Anya braced herself, trying to keep from making any noise that might alert Darvish to the fact he had a stowaway.

Her brothers meant well. She understood they'd had it hard early in their lives, losing too many they cared for too soon. She also understood how tormented they were over Zaya.

But enough was enough.

They seemed plenty capable of acknowledging, even worshiping, their prime omegas' powers, but their little sister's? Not so much.

But, newsflash, she was an omega with powers and urges, just like any female of her kind.

And what's more, she was a Skolov. Which meant that, despite having a vagina, she knew how to take care of business too.

Zaya was her sister as well.

And, like her brothers, Anya was tired of losing those she loved.

She was also sick of losing out on her dreams.

So, here she was.

Because, after breaking out of the containment pod—easily, she might add, thanks to her gift—she'd done what she could to assist Kadon, Luc, and

Maddox.

In truth, it hadn't been that much since she had to either be touching or directly in sight of her target to have an impact, but it was still something. She'd managed to shut down a whole bunch of comms and lasers during the battle, despite her limited vantage point perched on a nearby shuttle's wing.

That's how she'd seen Darvish toss Maxheim's cloak over his shoulders right before he leaped from his shuttle. It was also how she'd, thankfully, caught sight of Damien propelling himself and Scarlett safely from the ship right before it exploded.

She'd been busy thanking the gods that Damien and Scarlett were safe while cursing Darvish's escape when it dawned on her that he'd be scrambling for an alternate escape from the planet. What's more, he'd want it to happen fast.

From there, it had been a simple matter of beating her enterprising half brother to where the smaller, single-pilot ships were docked. After using her gift to disable all but one, she'd climbed inside the only still-functioning shuttle and, in a familiar move, hidden inside the ducts.

A furious, frantic Darvish had stumbled on board a few heartbeats later.

It honestly was close to genius how easily she'd outmaneuvered the monster.

She'd have liked to reach out to her brothers to explain her plan in real time, but first, there hadn't been much time to do anything but put her scheme into action. Second, she was pretty sure they'd have told her to back off and, once they'd gotten hold of her, locked her up again.

So she'd wait until she could patch into the shuttle's comms and give them a location. Or, if worst came to worst, they could trace the tracker they'd had inserted in her bloodstream. Another overprotective gesture she deliberately hadn't told them she could turn on and off at will with her gift.

But this time, she'd be leaving the tracker on, so her brothers could follow her signal, run down Darvish's ship, capture the bastard, and *finally* acknowledge she was a contributing Skolov family member.

It would have been nice, of course, if she could have had Darvish restrained and Zaya's location revealed by the time her brothers arrived. But she suspected that was beyond even her abilities. She might be bold, but she was no fool. Even she knew she wasn't strong enough or well-trained enough to take down an Alpha in his prime, especially one as vicious as their half brother.



The ship rattled yet again.

Anya stifled a curse. She'd chosen a rusted piece of space trash for Darvish to steal, wanting to slow him down and give her brothers time to catch up, but it wasn't the smoothest of rides. The ship she usually flew was nothing like this.

It shook again.

Still, there was no point in worrying. She'd handle what came next. Just as she always did.

Since there was little to do but wait—and using her gift had taken a lot out of her—Anya allowed her eyes to sink shut, the hull's rattle lulling her to sleep.

“Warning.” The shuttle's impersonal robotic voice woke her sometime later. “You have breached Federation airspace.”

Now fully awake, Anya shuffled closer to the duct opening.

Darvish's broad back loomed in front of the console, his fingers tapping away at the instrument panel.

“Identify yourself immediately,” the voice blared, “or you will be shot down.”

*No, no, no.*

The Federation sector of the Anarheim Galaxy was a subset of hells unto itself.

Not that she or the ship she was on would ever reach it.

Everyone knew Federation airspace was on serious lockdown. Some said it was for safety reasons, but the truth was the shield mostly served as a blockade to keep its subjects in. There were plenty of horror stories of souls trying—and failing—to get out. But almost no stories about fools attempting to get in.

And yet, as she watched, Darvish continued piloting straight there.

The sector was notorious. No one visited just for fun. All of its Alphas, except those in the Federation military, and all its omegas, were required to take suppression drugs to limit population growth and reduce aggression. There were stories of trials, public floggings, stocks, and daily executions. It was said, too, that the only way anyone ever left the sector was on a slave ship. Her friend Tess was proof those stories were far from just rumors.

So what was Darvish up to?

She'd read enough to know the barricade was equipped with defense drones that wouldn't hesitate to neutralize any threat in a heartbeat.

The alarms inside the ship blared louder. “Identify. You have five... four...”

Darvish tapped something into the console.

“Apologies. Clearance accepted,” intoned the same robotic voice as before. “Please proceed. Welcome.”

Anya allowed herself a couple of long, slow, deep breaths. But she had little time for relief—or to mull over why Darvish would have access codes to enter Fed airspace—as the reality of her situation struck.

The Federation barricade acted not only as a shield but also as a blanket, neutralizing all outside comms—and trackers.

There was no way for her brothers to trace her now.

She took a few more deep breaths, then surveyed what she could see of the landscape through the viewing panels at the front of the cockpit.

Everywhere she looked, drab, angular structures made of dull, gray metal sprawled as far as the eye could see. There was nothing beautiful about the place. Or even alive. It looked dead, as if all the vitality had been sucked from the place.

And in the center of the city—right where Darvish was headed—stood a massive, gray circular building that towered over the rest, its fifty stories casting a vast shadow in all directions.

Anya’s stomach clenched.

She knew the building. It was the notorious Federation Detention Center.

It was said that many Federation citizens spent time there, either in the reeducation and correctional unit, the interrogation unit, or in solitary lockup—from which few returned.

No one had ever broken out of the prison.

Her brother Maxheim had come closest, freeing himself and his omega, Tess, while in transit to the place. But rumor had it that they’d increased security during transit and at the facility since then.

“Warning.” The automated shuttle voice blared again. “You are entering Federation Detention Center airspace. Only authorized employees may proceed. If you do not have permission to enter Detention Center airspace, turn back immediately.”

Even worse.

Still, it didn’t surprise her when Darvish returned to typing, and the alarms ceased.

“Thank you. Please proceed.”

Anya sucked down a deep breath as the ominous building loomed closer. If Zaya was imprisoned there, no wonder it had been impossible to find her.

But sometimes, it took an omega to get the job done.

*I'm coming, Zaya. And when I find you, I'm getting us out of there and taking you home.*

Nothing would stop her.



Flynn

*Five rotations later...*

Commander Flynn Anderson marched along the hall, looking neither left nor right. Mostly because he had somewhere to be.

But also partly because he didn't give a shit about the nervous junior officers and trainees scurrying out of sight, all the while praying his gaze didn't alight on them.

He knew what they called him: Stoneface. The Disciplinarian. The Warden. The Breaker. Seemed they had as many nicknames as they had complaints, and no one wanted to find themselves in one of his cells, undergoing his unique brand of interrogation. Particularly since the fuck up that had allowed Maxheim Skolov and his omega to escape while in transit.

Face expressionless, spine ramrod straight, he stalked down the corridor, the flickering lights painting everything a sickly green. But mood lighting wasn't exactly a prison requirement.

Misery was.

And each and every scum moaning in the cells that lined his solitary lockup deserved exactly what came their way.

*Obedience Breeds Order. Defiance Begets Doom.*

*Unity Through Control. Prosperity Through Submission.*

Flynn didn't need to see the words etched into the panels on the curved gray walls to absorb their messages. He'd had those mantras burned into his brain ever since his conscription into Federation military life as a youth.

"Commander, sir." A pale-faced trainee rushed forward, dread written in every line of his young face. "I—"

"Not now."

“But—”

“We have a new arrival.” That strange sensation that had whispered across Flynn’s skin for the past few rotations grew stronger with each step he took. “I already issued my orders. No. Interruptions.”

Details on this newest prisoner were sparse, though her list of alleged crimes was troubling.

She’d been caught and dragged in for questioning this sun’s rise. No one knew where she’d come from, how she’d suddenly appeared in the Federation sector without papers or identification and wearing clothes usually found outside the protected barrier, or why she’d been skulking around his detention center.

It would be his job to restore order once more. Like always.

And, yet, for some strange reason, anticipation thrummed in his veins this time.

An odd sensation.

He didn’t usually do excitement. Or any emotions, for that matter. He hadn’t since he was youngling, and everything changed.

“Have I made my orders clear?” Flynn kept his tone deliberately steady as he addressed the trainee. He’d long ago perfected the ability to erase any natural aggression from his voice.

What he felt on the inside was another matter. But that was a problem for another rotation.

“Yes, Commander.” Shrinking beneath his icy stare, the trainee slunk away.

Flynn barely noticed. His attention was already on the door of cell number 2479.

His wrists burned, and before he’d realized what he was doing, he lifted his chin to sniff the air, his fangs pushing against his gums—

*Shit.*

He locked down the impulse immediately. Archaic Alpha behavior was not tolerated here. Slips such as that could buy an Alpha a one-way ticket to a cell himself, and that was not happening to Flynn.

*Obedience Breeds Order. Defiance Begets Doom.*

*Unity Through Control. Prosperity Through Submission.*

He was the youngest Federation commander for a reason: he got shit done and followed the rules.

2479.

He stiffened when he realized he was standing directly in front of the cell door number, and he'd made it there in record time.

The hair at the back of his neck prickled while an odd humming sensation coursed through his veins and his wrists and throat burned like hells.

What was going on?

Flynn took a deep breath and did something he hadn't had to do in a long time. He reminded himself he had two missions.

One: to keep the citizens of the Federation safe. Two: to bring down the Brotherhood and all the criminal scum associated with it.

Which meant playing by the rules. No slip ups. No Alpha aggression. And absolutely no deviation from his goals.

Whoever was behind this door was just a means to an end, another chance to reinstate order and prove to the higher-ups that he was more than capable of continuing to rise through the Federation's military ranks.

No way he'd fuck that up.

Pressing his palm to the cell panel, he engaged the unlocking sequence.



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