



# Einar (The Brigands of Ruk #2)

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**Category:** Fantasy

**Description:** Rowan

After years of captivity, I finally escape, and in the process of running from one monster, I find myself in a world that defies belief. I've been abducted by creatures that only exist in mythology and every time I open my eyes, there's a new level of hell. I pray for it all to stop. Just when I'm moments away from peace, a beast comes out of nowhere, picking me up in his huge arms, offering me what I've always dreamed of. Out of the darkness comes an opportunity, a second chance, and all I have to do is find enough courage to reach out and grab it. How can I believe he's going to make it better when he's a monster too?

Einar

The gods have forsaken my family. We were abandoned in a world where we were forced to fight and steal for survival. My brothers and I raided a bug ship, expecting to loot it and leave. Instead, I found her broken and moments from death. That is when I realize everything I was subjected to prepared me for this moment. The gods knew my Starshine was broken, and I was the only one that could possibly erase the emptiness in her eyes. Can she see past the beast to the male inside?

This storyline ends in a HEA, but continues on throughout the remaining series as each book concentrates on a particular couple. Have questions??

Keep reading, all will be revealed....

**Total Pages (Source):** 43

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: August 3, 2025, 12:33 am*

## Chapter One

ROWAN

“ Hey Sis ! Whatcha been up to since we talked last?”

“ Oh , the usual. Had a dress fitting yesterday for a benefit Robert has later in the week and other than that, I’ve just been fiddling with things here at the house. What about you?” I reply, forcing cheer into my voice.

Ruby pauses and I see her eyes darting across my face. However , I feel my husband’s cold, dead eyes boring into me the longer I talk to my sister on our FaceTime call. So now isn’t the time for her scrutiny, and I prompt her to reply quickly.

“ Sis , are you listening to me?”

“ Sorry Rowan , my mind drifted off there for a second.”

After years of marriage, I should be used to the level of intrusive control that he exerts over every miniscule facet of my life, but I’m most assuredly not.

Did I use getting a drink of water, the only thing I’m allowed to have without restrictions, as a cover to move across the room and situate myself just so? Absolutely , yes I did. Am I now standing in front of my bathroom vanity wearing the shortest sundress in my closet knowing that it’s Tuesday , the allotted family phone call day? Knowing that Ruby would be able to see my legs in the mirror just outside

the door?

Yes , I sure as shit did!

The look in my big sister's dark brown eyes as she takes in the bruises that cover the back of my legs almost has me cringing. This is my hell, my secret, my embarrassment. And as much as I've tried to stay strong by hiding the horrors of the life I chose, I must get out before my mind splinters. I've tried to be strong on my own, but I need help and she's all I have in this world. I know my sister and there's no way that she won't immediately start making plans to get me out of this hellhole if I say one simple word. A word we've used since we were kids to keep each other safe. The one I've wanted to scream out loud, only to whisper it in my mind over and over every time I thought I wouldn't survive another day.

“ Rowan ? What the fu...”

I've let my mind float off, and now Ruby's voice spreads terror through me because I can't let her finish that sentence. Robert is watching, like he always is, and I won't risk him knowing that I allowed my sister to figure out what he's doing to me.

Pasting an even bigger and brighter smile on my face, I shake my head as minutely as possible. My sister isn't stupid and instantly stops mid-sentence and switches gears. Her beloved face creases into her fake smile.

“ Hey , I was thinking of stopping by on Thursday . I'm going to be traveling that way to pick up some new uniforms in the next city over from ya. I'm sure the boss wouldn't care if I swung by on my way back.”

Thursday ...she would want to come on Thursday . Nausea begins roiling in my gut as I force myself to airily respond to her.

“ Ohh , Thursday won’t work for me, Ruby . I’m sorry, I would have loved to see you. Robert has a few of his colleagues coming over that evening and you know my main job is to be a good hostess.” If only she knew exactly what being a delightful hostess entailed...

The bottom drops out of my stomach when she replies. Knowing Robert is listening, I fight to keep the small amount of food he allowed me to have for breakfast in my belly where it belongs.

“ Hey , I’m a waitress, so hosting is what I do best. I don’t care to help you out.”

Ruby can’t be here. We look so similar that many people mistake us for twins, and I refuse to allow Robert to get his hands on the only person on this earth that loves me and whom I love in return.

“ Absolutely not!” My words come out in a harsh snap, and I hide a wince. Robert doesn’t permit me to raise my voice, and I’ve no doubt he’s going to use that as an excuse to educate me on how a lady comports herself.

Softly , I clear my throat, making a concentrated effort to gentle my voice and lose the edge to my tone.

“ Sorry , didn’t mean to snap at you, but Robert is so picky about how he wants things done. You would probably be in the way more than anything else.”

Movement out of the corner of my eye catches my attention and I freeze. Robert has decided that my conversation with my sister has lasted long enough and he’s on his way to make my excuses for me. His cold voice reaches me as I put a hand over the speaker on my phone, so Ruby can’t hear what he says.

“ Rowan , my precious pet, you’ve exceeded your allotted phone time today. Wrap it

up now, or your punishment for raising your voice on the phone will worsen...drastically.”

I feel myself nod, numbness beginning to seep in. It’s the only way I’ve managed to survive this long being married to a depraved monster.

“ Sis , I need to go, Robert needs me. Call me Thursday and I’ll see if our plans have changed. I love you, go have fun!”

Even though I know those particular plans won’t change, no matter how many times I’ve begged whatever god or gods that were listening to end my suffering.

My thumb is moving to end the call as I feel my husband’s hand wrap in my curly, waist length red hair, viciously yanking me away from the bathroom counter. My flailing knocks the half-empty cup of water over, the liquid spilling across the marble surface dripping onto the floor as my husband drags me across our bedroom to the closet.

Both of my hands are gripping his wrist, trying to alleviate the pressure on my scalp. Thankfully , he allows me to do that since most of the time, when he drags me by my hair, I’m required to crawl alongside him like a good, obedient wife. I close my eyes and will myself to get through this...just one more time.

I can hold on and survive now that Ruby knows about the bruises. She’ll come to my rescue, just like she always has. She’s my big sister and has always looked out for me. Even when I’m the one responsible for landing myself in this mess.

Robert hasn’t said a word since he grabbed me, but then he never does until he gets me to his playroom .

He’s a United States Senator and makes sure that none of his perversions become

common knowledge. Robert knows that he wouldn't survive the scandal his... preferences entail. The mansion we live in employs a large staff that are in and out of various locations all day, so he had a special room made to indulge in his vices.

Much to my dismay, if only one person in this godforsaken house was trustworthy and not terrified of my husband, I might have been able to escape without involving my precious sister.

The clicking sound of the latch on the hidden door at the back of our closet makes me flinch. Which in turn, causes the hand in my hair to tighten and twist, brutally pulling and forcing my face up so he can see the expression written there. My gaze drifts over his face, wondering how something so handsome can be so evil. His classical Romanesque features, dark brown eyes and dark hair dusted with silver at the temples hid so much.

So . Very . Much .

“ I see that talking to your sister has revived some of your spirit. I don't know whether to allow you to speak to her more, so I can have the pleasure of breaking you all over again, or to forbid you from doing it anymore, as your disobedience vexes me greatly. Have I not given you everything a woman could ever want? Have I not taken years to painstakingly train you to be the perfect wife and toy?” His icy words rip into me, cutting at the fraying edges of my mind. It's always far worse for me when his words are slow and measured versus his normal, loud outbursts of rage.

He drags me the rest of the way into the playroom and throws me against the St . Andrews cross positioned in the middle of the floor. Pain explodes in my shoulder where my body hits the hard surface of the disgusting sex toy. Taking slow measured breaths, I force myself to breathe through the pain, wishing it ... all of this away. Nevertheless , I know it's only the beginning.

“ Strip !”

His harsh words make me flinch, but I don't hesitate to begin removing my clothes, closing my eyes as I do.

Once naked, I raise my arms and spread my legs, assuming the position I've taken many, many times before.

As he securely fastens the cuffs around my wrist and ankles, I allow my consciousness to drift into that gray, in-between place. It's the only thing that has saved me from completely losing my grip on reality.

The first strike of the cane against my shins comes as a shock. The pain emanating from the strike flows across my mind, attacking it and feeling like shards of glass have been shoved into my skull.

“ You will thank me for being a good husband and taking time out of my exceptionally busy schedule to remind you of all the things I do for you. How lucky you are to have such a loving man at your beck and call.”

He sneers before backhanding me across the face so hard my head snaps to the side. The sensation of wetness trickling down my chin tells me that he's busted one or both of my lips again. It's a small wonder he's never knocked any of my teeth out.

Seconds later, he grabs my cheek roughly, running his fingers through the blood dripping from the corner of my mouth. “ Oh , my dear wife, how I love this look on you.” I close my eyes as those words flow through my mind. ‘ God help me’ is all I can think when he rears back, slapping me again. His laughter is all I hear as dark spots appear before my eye starts to swell shut. He keeps asking me something, but with the ringing in my ears I can't hear him. This disobedience just enrages him further and I become nothing but a human punching bag. But Robert is smart about

my so-called punishments. He has learned through trial and error just how hard to hit me without doing permanent damage. Although his last punch to my side has me moaning aloud; a rare sound I never allow myself to make when I feel something crack.

Tears streak down my face, blurring his handsome outline in front of me. Cussing , I hear him pick up the discarded cane and brace myself for what's next. The cane whistles through the air, an ominous foretelling of the pain I'm about to feel. The throbbing in my shin is a pale echo of the suffering yet to come. Robert continues to rain strikes down upon my body, never striking the same place twice, and after every impact of the cane, he stops just long enough to demand the humility of my words.

“ Thank you, husband.”



## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: August 3, 2025, 12:33 am*

### Chapter Two

#### ROWAN

Wednesday dawns and I can barely move. In fact, any movement, no matter how small, sends shards of pain all over my entire body.

I raise my head and look around. I'm still in the playroom, but Robert didn't leave me tied to the St . Andrews cross this time. After I passed out from the pain, he must have unbuckled the restraints and let me fall to the ground. It's obvious he left me where I landed, since I'm lying in a small pool of my own blood. Breathing is difficult, but that has become the norm, as I felt more than one rib crack while he was hitting me in the torso.

At least...

He didn't leave me trapped on the platform. It's hard to recall how many times he's forced me to come-to while still strapped to that torture device.

Slowly , I ease into a sitting position, panting through the pain in short, sharp little breaths, since I literally can't take a deep one. Fear slices into me because I know Robert won't take me to the hospital because of my ribs.

Pausing , I force myself to calm down and assess the state of my body. Freaking out won't fix anything and will only waste my time. If there's anything I learned from my mother, it was that breaking down never solved anything. With the life I lead, if I had a weak mind, I would've been dead a long time ago.

Methodically , I run my fingertips along the sections of my ribs that sustained the most damage while forcing myself to take small, even breaths. I've had cracked ribs before, so I know what that feels like, from the inside and out. I feel an inkling amount of relief when my inhales don't result in a dry, hacking cough, my heart racing, or cause me to be overly short of breath. My lungs have become weakened from years of asthma attacks, as well as these regular beatings from my husband.

Due to my asthma, I must be exceptionally careful. My lack of an immune system means that I'm at a higher risk of infection.

Bracing myself, I force myself to stand, muffling the groans that result from my body protesting any movement. I desperately need a hot shower. The congealed blood on my face is grotesque and the heat will alleviate some of the tightness in my body. It takes me far longer than it should to shuffle my way out of the playroom, through the closet, across the bedroom, and into our opulent bathroom.

For once, I'm glad I'm still nude. I doubt I'd have the strength to get any clothes off in my current state. I ease into the stall and sit on the seat built into the wall. I fiddle with the controls until the water is steaming hot and hitting me in all the right places. The sole boon Robert granted me last night is that he didn't rape me before, during, or after my punishment. A lack of vaginal pain tells me I was spared that particular wifely chore.

A sigh escapes me as the hot water begins to do its job. The water sluices down my face, washing the dried blood away, turning the water a garish, dark pink as it runs in little rivulets down my body. The color clashes with the freckles that liberally dot my entire body.

I don't dare linger, especially since I have no clue if Robert is still home. Shower sex is one of his favorite things because of the easy clean up. Grabbing a towel off the counter, I refuse to look in the vanity mirror as I wearily walk passed it to focus on

the task at hand. I gingerly begin to clean myself up, ignoring the slight tug of the delicate chain that connects my nipples, navel and hood piercings together. Something else that was forced on me by Robert . It was his way of reiterating that my body doesn't belong to me; it belongs to him, and it is his to do with as he chooses.

The punishment Robert meted out against me last night is one of the worst in a while. Especially since he has a guest coming over tomorrow, and more specifically, since I'll be the entertainment for the night...and if he wants, possibly the entire weekend. It's always hard to tell how long Robert will allow his friends to play with me. The sick bastard gets off on letting his cronies rape me in front of him.

All I can think is that his temper got the best of him last night. He normally refuses to let anyone see me looking less than perfect. The thought that he is willing to allow others to see me in this state is alarming to say the least. Because there's no way any of the swelling in my face or body is going to dissipate in the next twenty-four hours, it means things are changing, and that never ends well for me.

Lately , Robert has been acting like he no longer cares to keep up his charade in front of his lackies. If he is allowing them to see me like this, then he has far worse plans in store for me. Possibly more abhorrent than what I've endured for the entirety of our farce of a marriage.

There's no way I'm going to continue to exist like this. I just can't do it anymore. The situation I'm in now may be my own fault, as Robert is just one of the many bad decisions in my life, but he is slowly, insidiously killing me. I think he's growing tired of me, and that could be good or bad.

The very thought makes my stomach cramp in disgust.

He knew I'd never tell Ruby what was happening to me, especially since I did

everything in my power to keep her from his sphere of influence. He has tortured me for years with the threat of tracking my sister down ... making me watch as he broke her in front of me. The only thing that has stopped him is my continued obedience and the fact that he hasn't quite figured out how to pull off having a wife and a mistress, while also keeping his flawless "family man" public persona yet.

If he were seen with another woman, it would drastically affect his poll numbers during elections, and the only thing he loves more than sexual torture, is power.

So , I finish my shower, dry myself off, and put on my softest, comfiest pajamas. Then I climb into bed, praying that he is gone for the day and that I can get some rest.

Reaching for my cell phone that is on the bedside table, I realize Robert must have picked it up from where it landed after he grabbed me. I gather what little bit of courageous spirit I have left and do something that, if he finds out, will either make him kill me or beat me within an inch of my life. I download a texting app and send a message to the only person in this world that really, truly loves me.

As teenagers, we had a safe word. If we were on a date and a guy was making us feel uncomfortable, all one of us had to do was call and say the word and the other would come immediately, so this is a message only Ruby will understand. Even if Robert is still tracking my phone usage, he shouldn't have been able to see this brand-new app or this one short message that I'll delete once it's sent. I send up a prayer that Robert is not monitoring my phone.

The message simply says: Boudreaux and Thursday .

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: August 3, 2025, 12:33 am*

### Chapter Three

#### ROWAN

It's Thursday , a day that has become synonymous with pain, degradation, and betrayal. I must say I hate Thursday ; it's the worst day of the week by far. Most folks hate Mondays , but not me. They are a day of reprieve after my weekend, which begins most of the time on a fucking Thursday .

As I lay here in bed, basking in the early morning sunshine streaming in through the bedroom window, it feels like a lifetime has passed since I talked to Ruby on Tuesday . After my punishment, Robert roughly woke me up as he slid into bed that night, telling me that he would allow me to stay in bed all day the next day, Wednesday , to “recover and think about what I had done to earn my punishment.”

How kind ... Not !

Thankfully , Robert was far too busy today with his political duties to watch over me, and the help isn't permitted in our bedroom while he's out of the house. That has certainly worked to my advantage, since I look and feel like death warmed over. Not to mention this quiet time has allowed me to once again try to find a way to escape this hell without endangering my sister further.

During the early years of our marriage, Robert had duplicated my phone on various devices that only he had access to; specifically, his smartphone, tablet, and laptop. For whatever reason, roughly eight months ago, he removed that other tracking software, only monitoring my phone calls now.

If he was still tracking my phone on any other level, he would have already confronted me about the text I sent to Ruby yesterday. Since I haven't seen or heard from him since Tuesday night, it's safe to say that he's unaware of what I've done. Thankfully, his side of the bed was cold and empty when I finally got out of bed yesterday morning, and again this morning. Although, I did hear him in the hallway earlier instructing the staff to leave me alone, only to be interrupted by the ringing of his cell phone.

As he was walking away, I heard him say that he will be out of the house for an hour, maybe two, this evening and that they could do as they wished with me. The only person he would grant that kind of carte blanche power to is his best friend, Mark. This means he'll be gone for part of the festivities, and Mark is not nearly as intelligent as Robert. I close my eyes as his words sink in; the one moment I've been praying for is finally in front of me. Just when I know I can't take it anymore, this path is laid before me. I know this will be my one and only chance to escape. If I fail and get caught, Robert will surely find a way to dispose of me secretly.

Maybe there is a higher power, and I'm finally getting a bit of good luck after all the years of shit. Robert alienated me from everyone I loved years ago. Any friends I had before our marriage are nothing more than a fond memory now. Robert, at that time, gently told me that they were not quite up to his level in society, and I needed to start cultivating new friends with the wives of his business associates.

That endeavor did not go well, much to Robert's aggravation. None of Robert's closest friends were married and the more respectable congressional representatives wouldn't allow their womenfolk to associate with me. They knew something was amiss with Robert, they just didn't know what, so they took extreme measures to ensure that their women were never left alone with myself or Robert.

It's still early enough in the day that I won't see Robert, or anyone else for that matter, for several hours. Trained dog that I've become, I know Robert's schedule for

his Thursdays . I should be left alone until midafternoon or early evening. It just depends on when the festivities are to start, something I'm never allowed to have any input in.

What it did though, was make it easier for me to make preparations for tonight. I know my sister is coming to get me, as evidenced by her dot on the map getting closer to me as the day progresses. This being the case, I don't have any time to lose. I must get everything in place well before she gets here and before I'm summoned.

Throwing the covers back, I carefully ease my battered body out of bed, testing my mobility as I do. Excluding my ribs, eyes and lips, the rest of me is in fairly good shape, even if I am covered in bruises in various states of healing. However , the slight wheeze at the end of my breaths is moderately concerning. My regulatory medicine isn't relaxing my bronchial tissue like it's supposed to. This breathlessness, while annoying, is my normal asthmatic response when my body has suffered too much.

I make myself go through the motions today as if it were a regular Thursday . I can't afford for anyone to guess what I have planned, not if I want to succeed. Especially since I never know who is on Robert's payroll and who truly feels sorry for me, as all the workers always look the other way when I approach them. With that in mind, I select a dress that Robert will find appropriate for me to wear this evening. That's to say, only he and his filthy companions are the ones who would find dresses like this to be appropriate outside of the bedroom.

That chore done, I move on to the small collection of comfy clothes I'm permitted. Just as I am rummaging through the drawers, a small, soft, black bag with white writing on it catches my eye. It's the little cloth bags that you get at large events, for grab bags and such. I remember keeping this because it's one of the few happy memories I've had over the last few years. A rare occasion that Robert let me out of the house to go do something I enjoyed, and I had taken full advantage of his good

humor. The literary event had been a bit of a drive down to Tennessee , and the traffic awful, but it was one of the most wonderful experiences.

So .

I feel it's totally appropriate that this little bag, representing a rare happy moment, will be the one I chose to hide the clothing needed to make my escape. It will work perfectly for what I have in mind. Snagging my favorite baggy hoodie, a pair of leggings, a sports bra, undies and a pair of socks, I take a second to think about what I'm missing. Ohhh ... I'll need shoes as well. Looking amongst the vast array of designer heels, I spot one pair of Coach ballet flats. Grabbing them, I roll them up inside the bundle of clothing I've gathered and walk back into the bathroom.

Finished with that, I peek around the edge of the closet doorway into the bedroom. This next part is even more important than a set of getaway clothes. Ruby and I are going to need cash and things to sell in order to get away. When I see the coast is clear, I crawl to the back of the closet. I peel the carpet up in the furthest corner away from where Robert walks in every day to choose his suit and shoes. I'd found the loose carpet by accident one time when Robert locked me in here for a couple of days.

Under the carpet, I'd found a small hole. Something that may have been cut for a water or gas line at one point in time before the house was remodeled. Over time, I worked to make the hole large enough to fit a small duffel bag. I've managed to steal roughly seventy-five thousand dollars right out from under his nose. The safe on his side of the closet doesn't have a camera pointed at it and he's so arrogant he never thought that someone would dare to steal from him.

Reaching down into the dark hole, it takes me a second to find the soft material of the duffel bag. A sigh of relief escapes me the second my fingers graze the bag. Carefully , I pull it out and replace the carpet, ensuring it looks exactly the same as it always



has. Easing the zipper open, I peer down, making sure the money and my extra medicine is exactly as I left it. Rising slowly to my feet, I reach out with one hand against the wall, bracing myself as a wave of dizziness hits me.

Both bags in hand, I exit the closet, making my way over to the vanity, and the copious amounts of jewelry to be found there. Picking through the array of expensive items, I choose midrange pieces that are not unique enough to stand out at a pawnshop but are worth enough that it'll make us money.

Task completed, I creep to the bathroom.

I give my reflection a brief glance in the mirror as I walk through. My multihued blue, green, and gold eyes reflect my suffering. They were what had caught his attention and the first thing he complimented me on when he made his approach. Releasing my gaze from the mirror, I pace over to the toilet stall.

The toilet is in its own little room, complete with a door. Easing into the small space, I quietly close the door and click the lock in place. My heart is beating so hard and fast I'm afraid it's going to beat right out of my chest as I take the tank lid off the toilet and position the little blue bag where the straps are down in the tank reservoir. Using one hand, I hold the bag in place while carefully putting the lid back on with the other.

After securing my getaway clothes, I take the bag of money, extra medicine, and jewelry and shove it into the decorative toilet paper holder. I always thought the little cabinet was a gaudy thing. Far too large and ostentatious, but it's enabling me to hide the money I need to escape, so I can't bring myself to hate it anymore.

I close the little door and make sure the latch on the toilet paper holder is secure before standing. The roll that's on the holder attached to the wall is full, so there's no reason for anyone to go into the small cabinet and consequently find my bag. Forcing

myself to keep up appearances and just in case, I flush the toilet, pausing to make sure it's going to refill, before I exit the bathroom.

Glancing down at my phone, the “ Find my location” is already up on the screen and it's easy to see that Ruby is on her way. At the rate she's driving right now, she should be here mid-evening.

“ One more time, Rowan . You can do this one more time. Ruby is coming to get you. Just get past tonight, once more, and you won't ever have to suffer a man's attentions ever again.”

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: August 3, 2025, 12:33 am*

### Chapter Four

#### ROWAN

Later that day. Early evening.

The smile I have fixed on my face is as fake as they come. Nothing like knowing the living hell you're willingly walking into but tonight is different. The end is in sight. A quiet, heavy sigh escapes me.

But .

One must keep up appearances. Or that's what Robert has drilled into my skull over the years. I've never become accustomed to the type of clothing I'm expected to wear to functions such as this.

The black gown is made of a sheer fabric, to the point it's completely see through. Although , this is one of the few pieces I own that actually has fabric. There are cutouts around both of my breasts, fully showcasing the hooped nipple piercings and delicate silver chain that trails down to the piercing at my navel. That part is "covered" with material that is meant to tease a man's eyes as to what that chain might be connected to. Not that these pricks don't already know where that is.

The hem is so short it barely extends past the curve of my ass cheeks, ensuring easy access to their wandering hands. I can't imagine I look all that appealing tonight. Not with two black eyes, a slightly crooked nose and two busted up lips. These are in addition to the multitude of bruises that were already scattered across my skin.

Smoothly , I open the door, instantly noticing Robert and Mark seated in two of the larger chairs in the center of the room, two empty glasses sitting on the ornate coffee table in front of them. Robert's slight nod to the empty glasses is my cue. Mark , as usual, is the first to arrive. He never misses an opportunity to fuck his best friend's wife. I loathe him just as much as Robert , his smirk as I approach them to retrieve their glasses makes my skin crawl.

It is truly unfortunate that he is just as good looking as Robert , but with green eyes and blonde hair. Such a beautiful exterior hides a truly hideous interior of these predators, men that can only get it up while injuring another. I've had enough of handsome men using me as nothing more than a fuck toy.

Robert and Mark are having a discussion about the next presidential election and who they are going to support as a candidate while I make their drinks. In this room, the private den/parlor, I am whatever Robert tells me to be. Regardless of whether I want to be or not. Such an opulent room for the type of activities that often occur here. Red and gold brocade walls with cream door jambs complement the rich red patterned carpet and dark masculine wooden furniture. It screams sin, unfortunately for me, that's appropriate. A golden chandelier hangs from the center of the room, casting shadows in the corners where strategically placed pieces of furniture reside.

Clenching the crystal glasses in my hands, I stride over to the full bar built into the wall across the room. They would pick the chairs on the opposite side of the room, just to make me walk back and forth with my tits and ass hanging out but compared to the other atrocities I've suffered in this room, it's a minor inconvenience. As I open the decanter, the stench of scotch makes me wrinkle my nose. I despise Scotch . The scent, the taste, even the appearance of it in a glass. All the schmucks that come here only ever drink Scotch when they're in this room, as if the high dollar liquor somehow elevates what they do to me.

I don't dare dawdle. If Robert thinks I'm deliberately delaying any of the festivities,

he won't hesitate to make my sessions with the others last twice as long. Pouring two glasses takes less time than I want it to. Gently , yet resolutely, I set both glasses on the sterling silver serving tray, turn gracefully on my four-inch stiletto Louboutin heels, and saunter back over to where Robert and Mark are sitting.

Per Robert's instructions, his guests are to always be served first, so with this in mind I approach Mark first. As I reach them, I bend at the waist, offering Mark his drink while flashing my bare pussy at Robert , and then repeat the motion as I give Robert his drink. I jolt as a harsh crack lands against the exposed curve of my ass, the heat from the strike blooming across my fair skin.

“ Your wife has the most beautiful, freckled skin. It always blooms so prettily for me.”

His leering comment makes me cringe internally. I'm nothing but a piece of meat to Mark .

“ Yes , she is a rather lovely creature, is she not?” His lifeless brown eyes bore into me, ensuring that my facial expression hasn't changed from what he expects. I maneuver myself to stand at his side, waiting for my next instruction. If my smile dips or I act anything less than grateful, and elated to be here, he will call more than the regular two or three guests and make me service every single one of them. Well versed in this game, my smile doesn't falter. I have a goal, and I am going to achieve my goal or, literally die trying.

I checked my phone just before I left the bedroom and Ruby's location showed that she was only about an hour away. That was a little less than half an hour ago. I just have to make it until Robert leaves for the evening, and then I can give Mark the slip. I no sooner have that thought than Robert's phone dings with an incoming text message. He pauses for a moment, reads the screen, and then looks over at Mark . “ I need to go to my office. There is something there that needs my attention.”

My eyelid twitches as Mark snickers.

Ah .

So , Robert is having an affair. No wonder I haven't had to suffer his attentions in that particular manner recently. Robert isn't old per se, but he is in his late fifties. His stamina isn't what it once used to be. Which is completely fine with me. More than fine if the truth must be told. I refocus on the conversation going on around me as Robert and Mark both stand and shake hands.

“ I shouldn't be more than an hour, possibly two, Mark . Feel free to enjoy yourself. Rowan will satisfy your every need. Won't you, Rowan ?”

The implied threat in his words is blatant.

“ Yes , husband. It will be as you say.”

My meekly uttered words must pacify him, and I watch as Robert confidently strides out the door, slamming it shut behind him. The crash of the door makes me flinch, which causes Mark to snicker. I brace myself as Mark turns his full attention to me.

“ Hello , pet. Let's have some fun, shall we?”

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: August 3, 2025, 12:33 am*

### Chapter Five

ROWAN

Think , Rowan . THINK !

What do I tell Mark that will be convincing enough to let me out of the room?

Ruby is here; I can feel it. Growing up together, and only having one another to rely on created a deeper connection than most siblings. That's how I know she's here, and I'm out of time.

Just as Mark reaches for me, inspiration strikes. Pervert that he is, Mark will use every orifice on my body. However , he's extremely particular about how a woman prepares herself for his attentions. One stray pubic hair, bad breath, or a less than scrupulously clean anal cavity and he gags. You might even say that he has an overactive gag reflex. His weak stomach might be my only opportunity to escape this hell. Gathering what little courage I have left, I speak out of turn, stopping him in his tracks.

“ Mark , before we begin, I do have to warn you. I wasn't able to attend to all the housekeeping chores you prefer. I wasn't informed you would be one of this evening's guests. If you wish to take me ... everywhere, I need to go to the bathroom and clean up.”

The disgust that comes over his face at my words makes a warm sort of excitement rise in my chest. He's going to buy it! They think I'm so broken that I will acquiesce

to whatever they want. No matter how vile and depraved.

“ Ugghh ! What a disgusting little bitch. You know better than to skip any of the required tasks Robert assigns you before his little get togethers. You’re lucky it’s me here instead of him. The sight of blood does nothing for me, so I won’t punish you the way Robert will when he learns of this. Well , don’t just stand there staring at me like a simpleton. Hurry the fuck up and get the rest of your personal grooming done and come right back here. You have fifteen minutes before I come looking for you, and I assure you, you don’t want that.”

His words end in a threatening hiss, and I don’t delay in nodding my understanding as I skitter past him to make my escape out the door. I have to force myself to move normally after I leave the den of horrors. Robert has cameras everywhere in this part of the house, so I can’t make a mistake now. He enjoys watching anything and everyone in what he sees as his dominion. Walking unhurriedly, I make it to our personal wing and enter the bedroom.

After I pass the threshold of the doorway, I become a flurry of motion. I don’t have to worry about Robert seeing me in here. He would never chance his preferences being on a hard drive somewhere that some unknown enemy could hack. A quick glance at the clock on the bedside table shows six o’clock. It couldn’t have taken me longer than a minute or two to get here, so I have a small window of time left. Darting into the bathroom, I head towards the little room the toilet is in. Shutting the door behind me, I flick the lock into place and, as silently as possible, retrieve the blue bag from behind the toilet.

In a tiny fit of rebellion, I rip the disgusting excuse of a dress from my body and fling it on the floor. I would rather die. I will never wear something like this ever again. Rapidly , I snatch the clothing from the blue bag and pull it over my emaciated body, ignoring the delicate chains that connect my piercings as I do so. There isn’t anything I can do about them right now. The chains are small and fine, but they’re still chains.



The fact that they're connected with a tiny, bejeweled lock is just the icing on the cake.

Once dressed, I slide my feet into the flats I've packed. They're not much, but they're better than nothing. Reaching down, I open the ugly little toilet paper cabinet and grab the black bag out. My eyes fall on the blue bag I hid my clothes in. I can't leave that there for anyone to find, so I roll it up, unzip the pocket on the black duffle bag and shove it inside. I turn around and lean against the door, pressing my ear to it, straining to hear if Mark followed me. If he's outside this door waiting for me ... I'm going to die.

Anxiety fills me as I click the lock and slowly ease the door open. Only to find the bathroom completely empty. A heavy sigh of relief escapes me.

I conquered my second hurdle of the evening.

As stealthily as possible, I creep out of the bathroom and to the bedroom window. I've never been more thankful that I don't live in a multi-storey house than I am right now. Looping the handles of the black bag over my shoulder, I slide the latch open on the window furthest from the bedroom door, praying to whatever god is listening that it won't make any noise.

I've never dared to open a window, so I have no idea if the tracks have been oiled or not. It's something Robert would do to make sure any window in this bedroom was easily heard if it were opened without his knowledge. I don't breathe as I wrap my fingers under the bottom of the window frame and push up. To my relief, it doesn't make a sound.

Raising one leg, I stick it through the opening, making sure I don't knock my head or elbows on the frame as I bend my torso. I suppress a wince as my body protests this particular movement.

Once I'm outside, I reach up and pull the window closed, forcing myself to move slowly and methodically. I can't afford to lose my shit right now, no matter how badly I want to. Not when I'm this close to my freedom.

Glancing down at my phone, I press my thumb on the home button to open the screen. The dot shows Ruby's location just a short distance from the front gate, and the time is 6:08pm.

Perfect .

This is going to work. It has to! Maybe there is a God after all because she's parked right in the area where there's a slight break in the wall. It's a miracle none of the guards have ever found it, and the only reason I know about it is because I'm allowed to wander around the grounds on days that Robert's in a good mood. My only solace these last couple of years has been what I've managed to find in nature. Trees and ornamental bushes flank the exterior fence along its entire length. It's meant to look fancy, and it does, but it's also designed as a way to make it hard to sneak onto the property.

Luckily for me, I don't want to sneak in; I want to get the fuck out of here.

The downside is, there is a massive open space where the side of the house meets the edge of the manicured yard that extends all the way to the boundary of the greenery running parallel to the exterior fence, I have to make it across the yard without being seen to get to the fence. Fortunately , the sun is going down and my clothes are all dark.

Peering around, my eyes strain trying to ensure I'm alone. Robert has guards everywhere. Flipping my hood up to cover my bright hair and pale skin, I make sure I'm as unnoticeable as possible. I know there are several guards, but I'm not sure what type of rotation Robert has them on. Taking a deep breath, I move as fast as I

can across the lawn, a constant silent prayer, a litany in my head. I'm terrified that any second I'll hear someone shout and my escape will be foiled.

But .

That never comes.

Reaching the edge of the trees, I check the time on my phone. Only two minutes have passed since I first checked it, so I have roughly five more minutes before Mark gets suspicious and comes looking for me. Moving deeper into the trees, I look for the maintenance gate. Night is falling, and it's getting difficult to see, so I use the flashlight on my phone but turn it down to the lowest setting.

A few seconds later, the dim rays of my cell phone shine on something metal to my left, and I move that way.

I've found the gate.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: August 3, 2025, 12:33 am*

### Chapter Six

#### ROWAN

Easing through the gate, I find myself amongst some large bushes. Ruby's old Civic is literally right in front of me. I start to step out of the shadowed edge of the shrubbery until the sound of the front gate opening halts me in my tracks.

Who's leaving?

I smirk when Robert's town car drives by as a tiny amount of triumph fills me. He was still in the house when I snuck out!

Victory is quickly followed by terror.

Robert was still in the house when I snuck out!

My stomach starts churning as I think about how close I came to death. If he had caught me ... If Mark had decided to go find Robert ...

I glance down at my phone. It's 6:14 and my time is almost up. Peeking around the corner of the bush I'm hiding in, I see the taillights of his car turn the corner and disappear from sight.

Stepping out of the shadows, I quickly walk over to Ruby's passenger side door and just as I'm reaching for the handle, the door opens. I quickly sit down in the seat and pull the door closed behind me. My fingers haven't even reached for my seatbelt

when it takes off.

“ Drive normally Ruby . None of them know I’ve snuck out yet. I told Robert’s buddy Mark that I needed to use the bathroom. He will be looking for me when I don’t return in a few minutes. Especially since I’m the unpaid entertainment for the evening. The moment Robert finds out they can’t find me, he’ll rush back home, setting his dogs free to find us.”

Eye’s soft with concern glance over at me and I can see she’s trying to peek around the hood I have pulled over my face.

“ How did you know I was out here?”

“ After I sent you that text yesterday, I started tracking you; preparing the best I could to get the hell out of there. Robert seldom leaves me alone with his friends. He enjoys watching too much, but I heard him tell Mark yesterday that he was going to have to leave for an hour or two and that he was free to play with me all he wanted. I stashed these clothes in the back of the commode and hid this bag in the toilet paper holder next to it. I knew I would only have a brief window to get out of there. If you hadn’t gotten here when you did, I was just going to keep walking until you got closer. All day long, I’ve been watching your location on my phone. I never should have waited this long, but I was scared to involve you.”

“ What aren’t you telling me, Rowan ?”

The sharp bark of her words makes me flinch a bit.

“ A lot, but it’s not something I can talk to you about yet. I need to work through this on my own. I made a mess out of my life, and I’ve dragged you into an impossible situation. One that could quite possibly get both of us buried in a shallow grave, but I knew I was only a few more punches away from a nervous breakdown. The safe

place I had created in my mind to escape the things he was doing and allowing to happen to me, was no longer enough. I felt my grip on reality slipping, and I knew you were my only escape.

We need to ditch this car as soon as possible. You won't be the first person he looks at, but it won't take long to connect the dots."

I reach over and pick up Ruby's phone, before asking, "Is there anything on here you can't live without, passwords, bank info?"

"Nope, wrote it all down when I took a pee break earlier and I withdrew all the money out of my bank yesterday before work."

Nodding my understanding at her snappy reply, I roll my window down and toss both phones out of the car at the same time, and roll the window back up. I hesitate for a second before reaching up and pushing the hood off my head. At the sight of my face, I hear Ruby gasp. I see her open her mouth to start in on me but I can't handle an inquisition. Not right now maybe not ever. I raise my hand in a 'stop' gesture before saying,

"Not right now, Ruby. I promise I will tell you in time, but not now. I need you to be my big sister and get us the hell out of here."

"I will kill him!" The venom in her voice almost makes me smile. Maybe if it was another time, or another topic, I would. I've always envied my bold older sister.

"You could never get close enough to even try. He's untouchable, Ruby, take my word for it. If there had been a way, I would have already taken it. I've had years on the inside and couldn't figure out how to make this nightmare end. But you just took his favorite toy, and he will be on the warpath to get me back. I won't go back, Ruby. No matter what, do you understand what I'm saying?"

“ Loud and clear. As long as we’re together, he will never touch you again. I have an idea of where to go, but I need to find a way to get us there with what little cash I have.”

Reaching down, I slide the zipper open on the duffle bag before asking, “ Is this enough?”

I know what she sees. Cash lines the entire bottom of the bag, and she doesn’t even know about the jewelry inside yet.

“ It’s sure gonna help, baby sister.”

Exhaustion beats down on me, and I hunker into the seat. I don’t really feel like talking, and I think Ruby understands for once. The tears, when they come, almost catch me by surprise. I didn’t think I had any left. I can feel my sister’s eyes on me as the streams of water roll down my cheeks. I allow myself to set some of my misery free in a silent deluge of salt water, my eyes locked on the passing scenery, seeing none of it.

Even now, I don’t make any noise as I let my pain loose. Too many years of silence have left an indelible mark on my soul.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: August 3, 2025, 12:33 am*

### Chapter Seven

#### ROWAN

Time and miles pass by as Ruby drives through the night.

As we pass through the town of Waverly , an older model SUV catches my eye. Apparently , Ruby sees me do a double-take, because her next words are full of apprehension, her eyes darting to the rearview mirror as she asks,

“ What is it?”

“ Turn around, there is an older SUV for sale back there.”

Nodding at my explanation, she whips a U -turn in the intersection at the next red light, and heads back the way we just came from. Just as we pull up to take a look at the SUV , an older man in an armed forces cap comes walking out of the house. I grab the edges of my hood and yank it back over my head, hiding my face from view.

“ Just stay in the car. The last thing we need is to have to explain those bruises of yours. How much can I safely spend on this? I have like five hundred on me, but that’s it.”

“ I have almost seventy thousand stashed in here. Let’s just say it’s several years of severance pay for all the times he sold me during our marriage.”

Frustration is written all over my sister’s face as she looks at me before exiting the



car. I see her facial expression change to a friendly smile before she turns to greet the older man walking toward us. I don't want to be unaware of what's being said, so I reach over to crack the driver's side window and mine on the passenger side, being cautious to keep my face hidden beneath my hood.

Ruby doesn't beat around the bush as the first words out of her mouth are about the car and not pleasantries. "Hi there, saw your car here as we were passing by. What're you asking for it? Is there anything wrong with it mechanically?"

The older man's voice is rough as he replies, "Asking four thousand. It's a solid little ride that I would trust to take me anywhere. It was my daughter's and she used it to get back and forth to school because it was easy on gas. She just got a big promotion and doesn't need it any longer."

"I can give you thirty-five cash right now if you have the title handy."

Her prompt words make me duck my head a little further and turn slightly as I see the older man look over toward me in the Civic. His next question has a bit of suspicion in it.

"Don't you want to drive it first?"

"I'll take your word for it."

I can hear how firm her tone is and it makes me wince just a bit.

Way to be obvious, Ruby.

"Many wouldn't, but it seems you girls are in a hurry. Are you in some sorta trouble, Miss? Nothing wrong with asking for help if you are." Just like that, the suspicion is gone, and genuine concern takes its place. Maybe there are good men left in this

world. I just didn't get lucky enough to find one.

“ Nahh , we're good, sir. Simply wondering about the car is all. Are you going to take that deal, or not?”

Ruby is trying to reassure the man, but I can see her body start to slump as she starts to turn around before the older man's next words stop her.

“ Cash , huh?”

“ Yeah , I have it with me.”

“ Go get your money youngin and I'll get the title. My daughter has already signed it, so all you have to do is take it to the title agency to get it transferred over.”

“ I'll meet you back here in a minute, then.” I watch as the man just nods his head and turns to walk back toward the house. Ruby watches him for a brief moment before turning and hurrying back over to her car. I reach down and unzip the bag at my feet, quickly counting out the money we need to buy 'the new to us' car. Rolling the window down the rest of the way, I hand the necessary funds to Ruby , speaking as I do.

“ I'll take your car and meet you at that Walmart we passed a few miles back. You'll find me parked out back near their service area.”

“ I'll be there as quick as I can, Rowan .”

Plan in place, I climb over the console and into the driver's seat. Turning the key in the ignition, I start the car and after looking both ways, pulling out onto the highway headed to the Walmart . Thankfully , driving is like riding a bike because it's been years since I've been behind the wheel of a car.

I refuse to get cocky, so I drive cautiously. I can't afford to be pulled over for something stupid like speeding, or failure to yield. My eyes dart around for any sign that we may have been followed. I know I'm being paranoid, but I don't care. Very few people can understand the depths of hell I've lived in for almost the entirety of my marriage. It doesn't matter what anyone thinks about how cautious I'm being. Ruby understands, and that's all that matters.

The trip back up the road to Walmart doesn't take long, and I breathe a sigh of relief when the vehicle service bay comes into view. It doesn't take me long to find a parking spot under a light, ensuring Ruby can spot me easily.

Thankfully , I don't have to wait very long.

Spotting Ruby in our new wheels, I pop the trunk on the Civic and get out of the car. Ruby must have seen me the open trunk because she pulls up directly behind her soon to be old car. The hatch on the back of the small SUV is slowly opening as Ruby gets out and grabs the bags out of her car.

Walking around the Civic , I open the passenger side door, grab my little bag, shut the door and walk back over to the SUV , tossing my bag in the back as I go. Glancing at the license plate on Ruby's car, I realize we will have to do something about that. We can't leave an abandoned car here that is directly attached to Ruby's name, nor can we be driving around in an SUV that doesn't have a plate on it at all. Kneeling down, I see a dime on the ground and pick it up. I take it as a sign that I'm doing the right thing.

Using the dime, I painstakingly turn the screws holding the license plate on until I have it completely loose. Moving over to the back of the SUV , I put the Civic's plate on the empty spot on its bumper. Hopefully , Ruby and I don't give a cop a reason to run the plates because they won't match at all.

Something to worry about later, if it even happens.

As we get in the SUV , I see Ruby shoot a small, melancholy glance at her car. Regret fills me; she wouldn't be in this mess if I had listened to her about Robert . Her next words pull me from my musing.

“ Hey , Rowan ? I almost forgot to ask, but do you have your meds with ya?”

“ Yes , I have them tucked in the bottom of this bag. Should have enough to last me a few months if I don't have a bad attack.”

I don't know if I'm trying to reassure myself, her, or both of us.

“ On the way here, I noticed a gas station up ahead. I'm gonna pull in and get us some snacks and a burner phone. Instead of driving in no particular direction, I need to make a few calls.”

Reaching down into my bag, I pull out an old flip phone. It's ancient, but it should work. I found it in a junk drawer the servants in the house kept, and along with the phone, there had been a solitary charge card to add minutes to the phone. There's no clue who it used to belong to or who tossed it in that drawer to be forgotten. No one knows it exists, especially Robert .

“ Wow , that is a magic bag, isn't it?”

I'm sure she wants to get some sort of reaction from me that isn't negative, but I just don't have it in me.

“ I've had a lot of time on my hands, Ruby . This is all I've got; the rest is up to you.”

The low murmur of my words makes her face crease with unease. She's not used to

me being so soft-spoken.

And .

Well .

Broken .

“ Well , then dial this number and give me the phone.”

I watch as she pulls a receipt out of her pocket and hands it to me. Peering down at the haphazardly written numbers, I power the flip phone on and dial the number. The moment it starts ringing, I hand the phone over to Ruby . Tension fills me as I watch her. Surely someone should have picked up by now.

Ruby starts to pull the phone away from her ear when a tinny voice on the other line says a faint hello. Ruby uses her thumb to click the volume button all the way up so I can hear both sides of the conversation.

“ Is this Janet ?”

“ Depends on who is asking and where you got this number!”

I jerk a bit at the brusque, no-nonsense voice barking out of the phone.

“ My name is Ruby . I found your number on an old phone book ... me and my sister are in trouble.”

“ Then yes, I’m who you’re looking for. Just so you know in advance, I’m one for being cautious because many depend on me. Do you understand?”

“ Yes , ma’am I do.”

“ I have no idea where you’re at, but I have multiple places we can meet up. Are you coming from the north or south?”

“ We’re leaving Ohio right now, so tell me where to go and we’ll be there.”

“ There’s a place called The Truck Stop on I -40 right outside the Texas border. Call this number when you get close, and I’ll meet you there. Don’t do anything to bring attention to yourself. As a matter of fact, there is probably no way you can make it that far today. I want you to head toward a roadside motel in Arkansas called JJ’s . It’s also next to a truck stop, and it should be about halfway. I have friends there that I’ll let know you’re coming.”

“ Thank you, Janet ,”

“ Don’t thank me yet, let’s get you here first. Pay attention to your surroundings and no matter what, stay away from crowded places. There are eyes everywhere and you can trust very few of them. See you tomorrow.”

Ruby and I share a glance.

Time to go.

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: August 3, 2025, 12:33 am*

### Chapter Eight

#### ROWAN

Time wears on as hours and miles pass by. Ruby attempts to get me to talk to her several times throughout our drive, but I don't. I'm not sure if it's because I don't want to or just can't. In fact, the very thought of conversation is exhausting. I might not ever want to discuss my time with Robert , and that's something she will have to learn to deal with. That won't be an easy concept for my meddling big sister to grasp.

I know I'm different. There's no way I could be the same person now as I was before Robert got his hands on me. Hopefully , that isn't something she has her heart set on, or she will just become one more person I have disappointed in my life. Ruby must have gotten the hint because after a while she stops trying to pry and falls silent. The hum of the tires on pavement and the soothing embrace of the night lull me into a fitful sleep. I have no idea how long I've slept when a gentle shake wakes me.

“ Hey , get up. We're at the motel; I'll be right back.” I groggily nod my head, sleep still clinging heavily to my mind. Rubbing my eyes, I watch Ruby open the glass door and walk into the lobby. The sign on the closing door reads, “ JJ's .”

We made it.

Ruby reaches the front desk, and an older woman appears behind the counter. I observe their conversation as they go back and forth. Apparently , we are in the right place because the lady hands Ruby a room key. A few more words are exchanged before Ruby turns, making her way back out to me in the SUV . I shoot her a

questioning look as she gets in the vehicle.

“ Looks like we have a room in the back.” Again , I just nod. Ruby’s lips tighten in annoyance at my lack of interaction, but I’m worn thin like butter scraped over too much toast.

Putting the SUV in drive, she pulls around to the back of the building and backs in between two other cars. She hops out, popping the latch to the back as she goes.

Numbness is setting in. My flight or fight adrenaline is gone, and the nap I took on the way here did nothing to help the bone deep weariness within me. Opening the passenger door, I get out of the SUV and just stand there, looking around with little care as to where I am.

It’s not with Robert , and that’s all that matters.

Ruby’s soft voice pulls my attention to her. “ Here Sis , take this key and find the door with no number on it while I get a few things out of the car.”

I hesitate. I’m safe as long as I’m with Ruby , but it’s dark...bad things happen in the dark.

“ Hold up, I’ll come with you.”

Relief floods through me. I don’t have to make a decision, and I don’t have to be alone. Ruby finishes getting her bags out of the back, closes the hatch, and moves around the car toward me. The wheels on her suitcase have a slight squeak to them. The sound seems overly loud in the surrounding darkness.

Moving in unison, we walk down the sidewalk in front of the rooms. Glancing down at the key, I notice it doesn’t have a room number on it as I scan the numbered doors



we're passing. Absently , I note that Ruby literally just told me to look for the door with no number, so it should stand to reason the key wouldn't have one either.

Am I finally losing my mind?

I have no idea if we're going the right way or not. Thankfully , it's not long before we find our room. It's tucked into a corner, and I look over at Ruby as she motions for me to swipe the card, thus unlocking the door. Heeding her unspoken request, I slide the key card into the slot. A soft click and a green light grant us access to the room. Pulling the door open, we both walk through the doorway.

Looking around, I notice that the room isn't anywhere near as lavish as some of the places that I've stayed with Robert , but I don't care. A gilded cage is still a cage, and it definitely wasn't worth the price I paid. The room is larger than I expected; one might even say spacious by midrange hotel standards, and it's decorated in a calming light blue and cheerful yellow colors.

Two full-sized beds with matching duvet covers take up the majority of the space in the main room but curiously, there are doors on either side of them.

I wonder where those go?

Locking the door behind us, I notice that Ruby wastes no time after entering the room. She tosses her bag on the first of the two beds and then goes to check out where the other two mystery doors lead to.

Naturally , she chose the bed closest to the door leading outside.

Typical Ruby .

Ruby opens the first door and it appears to lead to a small kitchen area with a sitting

room type space connected to it. They've mounted a television on the wall, creating a space to sit and relax.

Ruby's soft gasp pulls my attention to the other door. Retreating from my perusal of the common area, I walk over to the other door and enter the room behind her. There is a gorgeous, yet massive claw-foot tub dominating the space. The far wall boasts double vanities and the remaining one a walk-in shower.

I guess Ruby sees me gazing longingly at the tub because she says,

“ Hey , I'm going to take a quick shower and when I get done, you can go ahead and take a nice, long bath. Edith said we're welcome to use anything in these rooms, like the clothes or any of the personal care stuff. But I have some extra things in my bag that should fit you if you'd rather use them instead. I'm gonna grab something out of the fridge to eat and then watch TV for a little bit until my mind calms down while you're taking a bath. She also said that she was going to bring us breakfast around eight. I'll need to get to bed soon if I'm going to finish the drive tomorrow, because we still have quite a ways to go.”

Mutely , I nod my agreement. Words are just too much effort right now. Leaving Ruby to her privacy, I close the door quietly behind me and walk over to the remaining bed. Easing my sore body down on the soft surface, I sigh in relief. Sitting feels nice.

I'm not sure what time it is or even what day it is at this point, and I don't really care. The lack of movement is a balm to my battered body, and I feel my mind start to drift. I haven't had any true privacy or alone time since I married Robert . It's a novel concept for me now. Thoughts roil around in my mind like snakes writhing in a pit.

Regrets .

Recriminations .

I'm so lost in thought that I don't hear the bathroom door open when Ruby steps out. Her intentionally softly spoken words, when my sister is anything but timid, pull me from my reverie.

“ Rowan , I'm done in the bathroom. It's all yours, sis.”

I don't even have the energy to nod at her. I just stand up, walk back to the open bathroom door, and slip past her into the steamy room. Pushing the door closed behind me, I turn the lock. The soft snick seems overly loud in the quiet of the room, causing me to wince ever so slightly. I'm sure that rankled my sister ... but there are things on and in my body that I'm not ready to share with anyone. So , she can get over whatever pique my locking of the door causes.

Sluggishly , I take off my clothes. Being careful as usual not to snag the chains on my body as I disrobe. I hate the piercings and everything they represent.

But .

Always the inevitable, 'but'.

Unless I can get my hands on a stout pair of wire cutters, I won't be able to take the chain off. Robert also had infinity loop jewelry put in all the piercings. This means that a licensed piercer will have to take them out, and since they're connected to my nipples and clit, I'm terrified to try to take them out by myself.

Ignoring the mirrors reflecting my gaunt body, I reach over and turn the hot water on all the way while using the cold to make the heat less scalding and more bearable. Once I'm satisfied with the temperature, I look around the bathroom as I wait for the tub to fill. A cute woven basket on the ground next to the tub catches my attention.

It's filled with every type of product a woman could want in a bath. I see bubbles, bath bombs, Epsom salts, and more.

The lavender bubble bath with melatonin, coconut/vanilla bath bomb, and plain old Epsom salts sound like a winning combination. Decision made, I toss in a bomb, squirt in the bubble bath and dump a large amount of Epsom salts into the rapidly filling tub. The water turns a milky white as the bomb dissolves and the combination of scents fills the air.

Carefully , I swing one leg over the side of the tub only to find the bottom of the tub is textured to prevent slipping, so I waste no time in getting in the rest of the way and easing down into the water. Once the tub fills to the depth I prefer, I reach up and turn the water off. Leaning back against the tub, I soak in the heat and relief.

The tears, when they come, almost catch me by surprise.

I thought I was all cried out, but the soothing embrace of a hot bath and the tentative safety I'm experiencing bring it all back to me; the memories slamming into me with the force of a freight train. Years of conditioning prevent me from making any noise as I cry. The behavior is so ingrained, I no longer consciously realize I'm doing it until I notice Ruby hasn't come knocking on the door in concern.

I don't know how long I lay there crying, but when I'm done, I don't feel any better than when I started. I linger in the tub until my skin prunes and the water begins to cool.

Time to get out.

Standing , lukewarm water sluices off my emaciated body. Disgust fills me as I look down. What a broken creature I've become.

### Chapter Nine

#### ROWAN

Fully dressed in clothes I found in discreet cubbies in the bathroom, I exit the room. Ruby jerks at the sound the door makes and peers at me from where she's sitting. The drone of the television fills the room, eliminating the oppressive silence. Concern is clearly visible on her face. I know my face is swollen from Robert's last session and the extended crying jag did me no favors. I'm sure I look like hammered dog shit. Not that there is really anything I can do about it right now.

I hear the TV click off as I turn down the covers on my bed. I've no more than settled myself when the overhead light cuts off and the comforting warmth of Ruby's body slides in next to me. She pulls me into the curve of her body as she starts humming the song mom used to sing to us before bed.

Even with the comfort of my sister's body and the bolstering sound of her humming, I still can't relax. My anxiety keeps my entire form taut with tension and it's a long, long time before I fall asleep. The last thing I remember before nodding off is the quiet hitch of Ruby's chest as she cries into my hair.

Knocking wakes me.

Terror shoots through my body as I jerk awake.

He's found me!

My heart feels like it's going to pound out of my chest, it's beating so hard and fast.

“ Girls , it's just me, Edith . I have your breakfast.”

The sound of the older woman's voice is a balm across my fractured mind. I can feel the rigid tension slowly easing from my body as I hear Ruby whisper and talking to herself as usual. “ Damn , I must have overslept. Hell , I don't even remember the alarm going off ...”

She calls out to Edith , “ Sorry , Edith ! Give me a second, and I'll get the door.”

I notice her sideways glance at me, but I'm still too dazed to fully acknowledge it. The dread of Robert finding me hasn't had time to leave my body. It must look worse than it feels because her next words are nothing but reassuring.

“ Hey , look at me. It's ok. I'll check the door before I let her in.”

Ruby hops out of bed and immediately stumbles when her feet hit the ground before making her way over to the door. Peering over the edge of the bed, I see the culprit. Ruby kicked some of the covers off the bed just like she used to do when we were little.

I watch as she checks the peephole in the door prior to opening it. Edith's next words drift through the door. “ Ruby , I can leave this here if it's a bad time.”

Ruby flips all the locks on the door and eases it open slightly. Just enough that the door could be considered cracked, not actually open. Squinting through the sliver of light beaming in, I can barely make out the figure standing on the other side. Thankfully , it is the older woman Ruby talked to last night in the lobby. She's standing there patiently, as if she's got all the time in the world to wait on us to answer the door.

Assured there isn't an active threat at the door, I ease out of bed and make my way over to the bathroom, leaving the door open so I can hear what's going on out in the main room. The sounds of their voices float across the room as I'm tending to my morning ablutions.

“ It's fine girls. There's no one here right now, and the few that were here last night have already checked out. I have some instructions from Janet that I need to give you two before you take off.”

Something strikes me as a bit odd in her demeanor, and then it hits me. She isn't looking around furtively at all; she's basically talking to a mostly shut door.

That isn't suspicious at all.

“ Please , forgive my manners, Edith . I promise I was raised better than this. It's my first time being on the run, so I'm still trying to figure out how to think like a criminal. I should have watched a few more documentaries.”

Leave it to Ruby , of all people, to apologize to the older lady for any perceived rudeness. No matter the extenuating circumstances.

“ You do need to be cautious, dear. You should know that I've been watching all the local news channels, and they haven't reported either of you missing yet. That's a good thing because it gives us more time to get you to safety. Let's settle in the kitchen and talk for a bit. Ruby , we'll wait until your sister joins us, that way I'm not telling you guys this twice”

At Edith's words, I turn the sink off and dry my hands, making sure my sweatshirt is completely covering me before I walk back into the main room. It's bad enough that I have to look at my injuries, I sure as heck don't need anyone else seeing that shit.

I see Edith shoot me a poignant look before looking back at Ruby and note the almost imperceptible shake of my sister's head.

Great .

Avoiding further eye contact, I walk over to the table and sit down. Shortly after my butt hits the seat, I hear someone approach before softly spoken words register and I realize Edith is talking to me.

“ May I have a look, dear?”

Indecision fills me and I shoot a somewhat desperate look over at my sister before meeting Edith's knowing gaze. Her next words are even more gentle than her earlier question. “ I won't touch anything but your face. We need to see if anything is broken, honey.”

Taking a deep breath, I pull my hood down and close my eyes, tilting my head up so Edith can take a closer look. The first whisper of contact along my jaw makes me flinch, no matter that it's light as a feather. Her fingers glide from my jaw up to my cheek and across my nose to the other cheek. I can feel a hint of a touch at the cut in my eyebrow, then down at my busted lips.

I hold back even more tears.

This is the first time in longer than I care to admit that someone, or anyone excluding my sister in the last day or so, has touched me with such care.

“ Honey , your nose is broken, but that can be fixed. I think the rest is just muscle and flesh damage, but some places are still too swollen for me to tell.”

Her words cause my eyelids to flicker before I open them. Looking up into her tender



face, I can see the compassion in her eyes as she pats me on the shoulder before turning to the food filled tray, talking as she starts handing us plates. “ Go ahead girls, eat up before your eggs get cold. Your ears still work while your fingers feed the body. Janet wanted me to give you the directions to where she’s going to meet up with you. I’ve already spoken to her on the phone, so she knows what you’re driving, and is preparing a room for both of you now.

“ The truck stop is on a main road, so it’s not hard to find, but I’ve written detailed instructions down on this piece of paper for you to make it easier. I understand more than you realize what you’ve been through and what you’ll be facing in the future.”

I absently note the piece of paper she references as I slowly ease food into my mouth. Eating hurts, but I’m starving so I don’t have a choice. Chewing slowly and methodically takes up all of my concentration, so I don’t react when Edith reaches over, gently patting my arm as I poke the bacon I want to devour with my fork.

Edith’s next words catch me by surprise.

“ Dear , right now you feel like a failure, worthless, and not important enough to put your sister in danger, or anyone else for that matter. Let me tell you, all of that is in your mind. You are worth something too! Every time you doubt yourself, say those words over and over in your head. It takes a huge amount of faith, trust, and strength to escape the world you’re running from, but one day, that single step will have been worth all of this. You see, it’s the hardest, that first step of anything in life is always the most trying. You’re already over the worst of it, doll. Now it’s time to heal and find your new path forward.”

I don’t know how she knew the exact right words to use, but she did. My hunched posture straightens as her words bolster some part of myself I didn’t know was still left. If I look up, I’ll start crying, and I’m sick and tired of it ... but those words...they give me enough strength to finish the eggs and the bacon on my plate.

Ruby speaks for me. She's such a good sister.

“ Edith , you have been so kind to us, and we'll be forever grateful for all your help. What do we owe you for the room and this wonderful breakfast?”

“ Nothing . All I ask is that one day you pay it forward to another. Whether it be a kind word or picking someone up out of a ditch. Maybe it will be as simple as saving a stray animal. You'll learn that nothing is more fulfilling than kindness to another.”

Abruptly , Edith gets up. “ Leave your dishes in the sink. I have a girl who works here part time to clean the rooms, and it will give her something to do. You two need to get on the road sooner rather than later. Men are dangerous when their toys are taken away, so get as much distance as you can from those who seek to hurt you. One last piece of advice for you both is never stop looking over your shoulder. You might be able to run, even separate yourself from your past, but nevertheless, it is still yours to follow along behind you. I wish you both God's speed.”

### Chapter Ten

#### ROWAN

A small smile creases my face as I watch Ruby wave at Edith as we pull out of the hotel parking lot, heading south. As soon as the hotel leaves my sight, the smile slips from my face as I stare out the window. Once again, I'm lost in dark thoughts about all the things I've done wrong up to this point in my life.

“ Sis , we have several hours before we get to the next stop. Talk to me.”

My head falls just a bit at her words. I knew this was coming ... but she's not going to like anything I have to say, and I know she won't stop badgering me until I tell her something.

“ I don't know what to say, Ruby . I'm scared ... I've ruined everything for us both.”

My hesitant words instantly get my spicy sister's attention.

“ What the hell are you talking about?”

Her question is a harsh bark that makes me flinch a bit, but I push that aside and force myself to answer her instead of fading back into the blank space in my head.

“ Ruby , this is all your life will be from this moment on ... running. Forever looking behind you, never trusting in anyone, no roots anywhere, and always wondering if someone is going to recognize you every time you're out and about. Continuously

expecting the worst out of people, no matter how good they are to you.

Sighing heavily, I fully explain my situation to her, the words so painful I must force them from my tortured throat. “ He isn’t going to divorce me, Ruby . It would cause a scandal, and he won’t do anything to hurt his career. Robert isn’t going to stop until I’m back, and this time he’ll make it feel like I was in a funhouse before. I won’t survive even one night if I go back, but maybe that would be best for all of us. I’ve not only ruined my own life by my stupid bad decisions, but now yours too.”

“ The fuck you will Rowan ! Stop this shit right now! You’ve never been the type to cry ‘poor little me’ and you’re stronger than you realize right now. Hell sis, less than twenty-four hours ago, you escaped a really bad situation in one piece. Yes , I know you feel and look like crap right now, but those wounds will heal inside and out.

I get it, your whole life has been upended by a single decision. You’re questioning yourself, and that’s normal. Right now, you can’t see the light at the end of the tunnel, but at least you’re moving forward. As for me, hell, I haven’t had roots in years. You know that better than anyone and you know I don’t do anything I don’t want to, ever. You haven’t messed anything up for me. I was walking in circles before you called, and my life was going nowhere.

Little sister, as crazy as things are right now, we will find a way to get you away from that bastard permanently, one way or another. Do you understand me? I will not stand by and allow that monster to lure you back, even if you think it’s for the best. Because I can guarantee this isn’t going to be the first time you think if you go back, it will all be better. But you know that’s simply a lie you’re telling yourself, even if you don’t want to admit it right now.

As sad as this sounds, that house of horrors had become comfortable, your version of normal. Now you’re out here struggling to figure out which way to go and what’s next. You knew the moment I saw those bruises in that mirror, let alone when you

said our safe word, that I was coming. And don't think for one moment I didn't come there willingly. You didn't drag me there, Rowan . I reckon the only way I can make you see this differently is by asking ... if this situation had been reversed, would you have done the same for me?"

" You know I would have."

And I would have. I'm not sure how, but I would've managed it.

I would have ... Ruby is my sister .

Her words strike a chord within me because she's right. Everything she just said is right and I know it.

" Then let's do this because that dick can't touch us if we stick together. We'll rest and get you healed up, and then we'll figure out our next steps. But at some point, we're going to discuss the ' why's' of you waiting so long, and the ' what' trigger it took for you to finally say enough is enough. For now, enjoy these moments of peace. You escaped, baby sister, and the hardest part is already behind you. Together , we'll find our purpose in this world, I promise ya."

Apparently , that's all she has to say because she reaches over and turns the radio up, effectively ending our conversation.

I'm thankful for the reprieve. She's given me a lot to think about.

But , if there's one thing I know about myself, I wouldn't ever go back to Robert voluntarily unless Ruby's life was in danger. That's the only reason I voiced that option earlier. Because I know Robert would finally kill me. My miserable existence would end, and Ruby would be free of the responsibility she feels toward me. It's morbid, but true. The burden on my sister would be gone... but considering how

pissed off she is at me right now, I don't think she wants to be unburdened.

Hours pass as Ruby drives. We both made sure we went to the bathroom right before getting in the car so we wouldn't have to stop for a while. Edith was kind enough to pack us lunch, so we didn't stop for a midday meal either.

I'm on edge when the truck stop finally comes into view. Not that you could miss it. The building is huge and there were multiple signs informing drivers about it on the way here. I've been counting down the miles with every sign we saw and my anxiety has done nothing but build with each passing mile.

Ruby pulls into the parking lot and eases her way to the front of the building, winding the SUV through the overwhelming number of cars coming and going. It takes a bit, but she finally finds a spot out front and parks. Sitting there, we both look around for several minutes. Ruby starts to unbuckle her seatbelt to get out when a woman approaches the driver's side and motions to for Ruby to roll the window down.

“ Ruby and Rowan ?”

“ Yes Ma'am , that's us.”

“ I'm Janet . Edith called to let me know what you were driving. I need you to pull around back and park in spot number eleven. We'll leave your car here for a few days, just to make sure they've not found a way to track it.”

The woman, Janet , doesn't wait for either one of us to say anything before she turns and walks off. Sliding the gearshift into reverse, Ruby checks her mirrors before backing out and heading around back. It doesn't take long for us to find the designated spot and Ruby pulls the front of the vehicle up, almost kissing the sign that says “eleven.” The click of a seatbelt gains my attention, and I see Ruby releasing the strap across her chest as she gets ready to exit the SUV .

“ Rowan , do you want me to go in alone, or are you coming with me?”

“ If it’s okay, I would prefer to stay in the car instead.”

It would only draw unnecessary attention to us if I went in. I’m still covered in bruises and hiding behind a hoodie in the bright sunlight will also draw attention our way.

“ I won’t be long.”

As soon as Ruby gets out, I immediately lock the doors. It doesn’t matter how reassuring she is. I refuse to take any chances, especially when I’m alone. Ruby hesitates slightly before walking through the side door, her steps full of sassy confidence.

I used to be like that. Full of life with a pep to my step.

How did I end up like this?

A broken, worthless woman who was too trusting and far too gullible. I was so desperate for love that I allowed myself to be trapped by a soulless predator.

Was it so wrong that I didn’t want to be alone, that I dreamed of a loving husband and maybe a child or two?

I’m pulled from my inner self-flagellation when a turd-brown minivan pulls up in the spot next to me. The color makes me crinkle my nose just a bit.

Who voluntarily buys a vehicle the color of poo?

Reaching up to pull my hood further across my face, the woman gets out and I

recognize Janet . She closes her door, walks to the back of the van and I see the rear hatch go up. Unlocking the SUV , I ease to the rear of the SUV and do the same. Janet glances over at me and her eyes linger on my battered face for a few seconds before she speaks. “ Let’s get your stuff transferred into my van. Quickly , now! We need to be on our way as soon as possible.”

Nodding my understanding, I get to work moving bags from one car to the other. Ruby comes around the end of the car and snags the last bag, tossing it into Janet’s van. Once that task is complete, I walk around the side of the van and get in the back seat. Relief fills me as I ease down onto the seat.

I’m still in quite a bit of pain and moving around too much takes a lot out of me. Looking around, I see a comfy-looking blanket folded on the seat next to me. Easing my hand out toward it, I’m pleased to find it feels just as comfortable as it looks. Snatching it up, I wrap it around myself trying to ward off the chill that seems to have settled deep inside me. Ruby starts talking as soon as she climbs into the passenger seat. “ Janet , we swapped my car for this one a few states back. Do you think it could be returned to its owner? We didn’t steal it, but the man knew we were in trouble.”

Yes , it would be wonderful if we could give that nice man his car back. He saved our lives and didn’t even know it. Janet’s next words ease a bit of the guilt I’ve been carrying since we bought the SUV . I know we paid for it, but he could have gotten more money for it than what he sold it to us for.

“ We’ll see what we can do in the next few days You guys sit back and relax because it’s a couple hours’ drive from here.”

Without warning, seventies music fills the interior of the van. It’s a catchy, upbeat tune, and I can feel my toes tapping along with the beat of the music. I’ve always loved music in most of its forms, but Robert expressly forbade me from listening to anything unless it was a political speech he wanted me to study.



We can't have driven any further than an hour or so, but the landscape alters drastically in that short time. Gone are the tall, green trees and in their place is now a somewhat dry looking, hostile-ish environment. The space between homes is getting further and further apart. I'm getting just a bit uneasy and I can tell Ruby is, too.

Janet must have picked up on our nerves because she starts talking as the van begins to slow. “ Girls , I know this is going to seem odd and it might make you a little uncomfortable, so perhaps I should have mentioned it earlier. But I need you both to put these blindfolds on, not only for your own protection but also the other women who are seeking sanctuary here. This is just one of the many precautions I use to keep each one of you safe. My first priority is to make sure no one knows where you are, because many have passed through my doors. If you don't know where you are, you can't tell anyone.

The house is about a mile up on an un-marked road. We use a different route each time we come in and out so that no one realizes anyone still lives out this way. The place is well disguised and very few know of its existence. We even have an underground garage on the other side. When we were building it, we did our best to find ways to keep it hidden.

Many times, the cameras on the property have picked up people walking right over it while hiking, never knowing it was below them.”

I can tell Ruby is flabbergasted.

To tell the truth...so am I . What on earth is this woman talking about?

Ruby digests what Janet just told us for a second before asking,

“ How ?”

“ You’ll see.”

Janet’s mysterious words sound almost...ominous.

### Chapter Eleven

ROWAN

“ It’s safe to take the blindfolds off now, girls.”

The second the word “safe” leaves Janet’s mouth, I rip the blindfold off my face. Memories of the many times I wore one in the past are far too close to the surface, and I don’t have time to unpack all that trauma. Nor do I want to in front of a total stranger, even if she is helping me escape my sadistic husband.

Ruby’s next words are full of awe, pulling my attention back to our surroundings and providing a distraction from my torturous thoughts. “ Wow , Janet , this is sweet. How in the world did you find it?”

“ My husband built it, actually. Days after it was done, I lost him to a drunk driver.”

That’s ...just awful. Poor Janet . Ruby must have had the same thoughts on her mind because she doesn’t stop there.

“ I’m so sorry, I simply assumed.”

Ruby’s stuttered apology seems like it’s almost forced out. There she goes again, apologizing for being rude. I wish that’s all I had to apologize for...

“ No need to apologize, child. You’re right to an extent because our daughter was killed by an abusive man. We tried and tried to get her away from him, but like all the

others, she was scared and felt like there was no escaping him. After we lost her, this place became a labor of love for me and the hubby. At the time, we both felt like we'd failed her in so many ways. It's taken me years to come to grips with the fact that we didn't. Sometimes things happen that are completely out of our control, and it's only natural to wonder if we could've done more. If anything, those horrible things had to occur in order for me to be able to help others in the same, if not worse situations than she'd been in.

I'd be lying if I said it was easy for me to move on. Losing both of them made it hard to function, and it took me quite a while to accept, although I've truly never overcome it. I was wrapped up in my own hell for many years, my heart breaking every time I opened my eyes in the morning. Until I walked into a supermarket one day and found a teenage girl hiding in the bathroom, bruised and scared as hell. From that very moment on, I decided to honor my loved ones the only way I could, by helping as many others as possible.

Come on, we're all tired and that's enough about me for now. It's getting late and you girls have been through plenty these last few days. This place is not on any map and no one besides me and one other woman even knows how to get here from the main road. You're as safe as you can get, for a while anyway. Once I get you girls settled inside, I'll head back out and put the car in the garage. We make sure to never leave anything outside that can be seen by air, or a nosy hiker."

The rest of her explanation fills me with relief. Surely, Robert can't find me here. No one knows this place even exists. I'm not sure I will ever feel completely safe but not having to look over my shoulder, and be in a constant state of vigilance is nice. Wherever we are, the sun is rapidly setting, and shadows are lengthening in the waning light. There is a soft, low glow emanating behind giant glass doors set into the front of what appears to be an underground house.

Are we in a cave?

I've never really thought about being underground and I'm not sure if it bothers me or not. After all the shit I've been through, surely this isn't going to be what pushes my mind to the breaking point. Looking around, I'm trying to decide if I'm scared. Who the hell has these kinds of thoughts? That I'm consciously deciding if this bothers me or not tells me a lot about the state of my mental capacity.

Before I can make a decision about it, Ruby grabs my hand and pulls me along behind her toward Janet .

Oh .

The nice lady was holding the door open for us while I stood there like an idiot.

How embarrassing.

Ducking my head a little, I try to hide my embarrassment from my sister. I don't need her worrying about me over something as simple as making a fool of myself in front of Janet . After entering the room, I'm surprised to see quite a few women loitering around what looks like a common room. There are some playing cards at a small table while others are playing a game of dice.

Janet allows gambling down here?

Dismissing that thought, I notice yet another woman on a comfy-looking couch reading a book. All eyes turn to Ruby and I the second they notice us come through the door and my eyes fall to the floor as my posture curls in on itself. I still can't handle people looking at me, even if it's other women.

Men aren't the only ones that abused me while I was with Robert ...

With a small wave of her hand, Janet introduces us to the women gathered in front of

us. “ Everyone , this is Ruby and Rowan . They’ll be staying with us for a little while. They’ve had a long drive, and it’s late, so we’ll make all the introductions in the morning after they get settled.”

More than a few of the women greet us with a simple ‘ welcome ’ before resuming whatever activity they were engaged in before our arrival. Janet turns to the left and moves down a long hallway with doors on either side. We follow her all the way down to the end before she stops, opens one of the last doors and gestures for us to go in.

Ruby follows her unspoken request and pulls me in after her.

To my pleasant surprise, the room is a lot bigger than I expected it to be, especially since all of this had to be carved out to the surrounding rock. Peering around Ruby , I see two twin beds and a nook that appears to have a bathroom with a door one can shut for privacy.

Thinking of my unwanted jewelry, even more relief fills me.

I don’t want Ruby to see those. Ever .

The sound of Janet’s voice yanks my attention back to the here and now.

“ This will be yours while you’re with us. The bathroom is stocked and there’s also a small refrigerator in the corner with drinks inside. Get settled and some sleep. There’ll be plenty of time to figure out the rest later.”

She doesn’t wait for either of us to say anything, simply shuts the door behind her as she leaves. Well , she’s not very warm and inviting, but I think I prefer her semi-curt manner instead. I don’t want to be coddled by a complete stranger. To be honest, I have no idea how I would process any empathy coming from her. I could barely

handle the sympathetic compassion Edith offered me.

As soon as Janet pulls, the door closed behind her with a click, Ruby throws her bag on the bed to the right of the door, running her hand across the rock wall in astonishment. “ Wow Rowan , I don’t believe I’ve ever seen anything like this place. You would think it would smell like dirt or even be damp on the inside, but it’s not at all. This is sweet.”

I haven’t moved from where she left me. Everything around me feels like it’s moving too fast and in slow motion at the same time, making it hard for me to process all the changes being thrown at me. Out of my peripheral, I see Ruby walk back over to me, reaching up and gently pulling the hood of my sweatshirt off my head. When a hand suddenly appears in front of my face, I jerk back in an instinctive reaction.

Guilt fills me when I see the tears forming in my beloved sister’s eyes.

Fuck . I just keep ruining everything.

“ Hey , talk to me.”

Of course, her first thought is to help me and not be offended that I jerked away like she was going to hit me.

“ I’m scared Ruby .”

Self -disgust fills me with how weak my voice is. I’ve allowed Robert to completely break me.

“ Lord baby girl, I am too, but right now we’re alright, so let’s be grateful for that. Why don’t you go grab a quick shower and change out of this old sweatshirt into something more comfortable?”

“ I don’t want to, I’m just gonna lay down. I don’t feel up to it right now, but you go ahead.”

It’s not a lie.

I’m exhausted and the thought of trying to navigate all my body jewelry right now sounds like a nightmare. Ruby starts to ease me into a hug, and I feel my body go ramrod straight. Never slow on the uptake, she alters her plan, leaning forward to place a sweet kiss on my cheek before moving over to the bed she claimed and start digging in her bag for a change of clothes.

Still standing there by the door, I watch her grab some ratty looking old pajamas before going into the bathroom, closing the door behind her for some privacy. The second the door closes, terror beats at me, and I feel like the rock above my head is going to crush me without the indomitable force of Ruby’s personality there to protect me. Logically , I know that doesn’t make any sense, but I haven’t dealt with logic in some time.

Dropping my bag on the floor next to my bed, making sure it’s out of the way so neither of us trip on it, I hastily climb between the sheets, pulling the blankets up to my chin for comfort. To my surprise, the sheets smell sweet and fresh at the same time. Some sort of essential oil blend for anxiety is what comes to mind as I bury my face in the material and breathe deep. The only light in the room is what’s leaking out from under the bathroom door. It makes the room cozy and lessens my anxiety about the ceiling falling on me.

Out of sight, out of mind.

I repeat that mantra over and over again until I see the light under the bathroom door go off before it instantly turns back on. The brief slice of darkness must have been too much for my sun loving sister because she opens the door to the bathroom and



leaves it cracked. Soft light shines into the room, creating just enough of a glow to move around comfortably during the night.

Soft footfalls tell me Ruby is headed my way, and I close my eyes, pretending to be asleep.

I don't want to talk. It's a cowardly thing to do, but it's exactly what I've become. A coward.

Ruby pauses beside my bed and I can feel her eyes on me, but I make sure my breaths are slow and steady. She doesn't linger long before she scampers walks over to her side of the room and climbs into bed. I can hear the rustling of her bedding as she gets settled in for the night. Bit by bit, the stress, strain, and worry of the day ease, if only a little, but it's enough for me to fall into a somewhat peaceful sleep.

I'm safe for right now, and it's enough.

### Chapter Twelve

ROWAN

SOMETHING'S IN THE ROOM WITH US !

Years of conditioning snap me awake in an instant. Immediately , I think Robert's already found me, even though I have no idea how such a thing would be possible. The room is bathed in darkness, the light Ruby left on has been turned off. If my sister had gotten out of bed in the night, it would have woken me up.

So .

I KNOW SOMEONE IS IN HERE WITH US .

A strange sound, almost like sandpaper rasping over a piece of wood, catches my attention before a horrid stench makes me gag. Just as I go to sit up, something grabs me by the back of the neck and yanks me up in the air, my legs dangling. A flash of blood red a foot above my head catches my attention.

ARE THOSE EYES ?!

Terror robs me of speech, as the thing that holds me shakes me violently for no reason. I'm just hanging here; I'm not fighting back or making any noise. Stifling sobs, I desperately try to see where Ruby is.

Where is my sister?!

Whatever has ahold of me is ... hissing.

And is answered by a distinct set of hisses from across the small room.

I know they have Ruby when I hear her short yell before it's abruptly cut off and becomes muffled. Just as I open my mouth to call out to her, a vile piece of material is shoved against my face, suffocating me and making my lungs rebel with the beginnings of an asthmatic wheeze.

Oh no! OH ! NO !

Whatever is on the cloth is making me woozy and causing me to have an asthma attack. Weakly , I reach for my bag and the lifesaving medicine hidden within it when suddenly a bright light flashes, and I see what has captured us. My mind scrambles for some sort of reference for what I'm seeing when it finally hits me. Robert forced me to attend a diplomatic event once that showcased traditional mythology from all round the globe. The things holding of us are...

Nagas !

Giant snakelike creatures with the head and torso of a humanoid but the length of a massive serpent instead of legs. These creatures aren't pretty like the paintings and sculptures I saw, though. They're massive and their entire bodies are scaled, not just the snake part. Blood -red eyes with vertical pupils are staring at us like we are pieces of meat.

Making eye contact, I reach out toward Ruby , trying to grab her hand as I see her head fall forward into unconsciousness. That's the last thing I remember before the vile, liquid covered cloth on my face also robs me of consciousness.

Why is Ruby shaking me? It can't be time to get up yet, we just went to bed.

“ What ?”

Why am I whispering and also wheezing?

Peering up at Ruby , I see her motion me to be quiet and my mind tries to banish the fog clouding my mind. She pulls me close to her, “ Do you remember anything?”

What an odd thing to ask. I don't understand why I'm so confused right now. I'm never this bleary when I get up. Forcing myself to focus on what I remember, I answer her question the best I can. “ What ? ... No , the last thing I recall was you walking into the bathroom to take a shower. Wait a minute, ... there was something holding you and then a really bright flash.”

The mind-fog vanishes and memories bombard me all at once.

Nagas .

Rotten meat stench.

A vile cloth shoved against my nose and mouth.

I can feel panic creeping up on me, making my already labored breathing worse; a rattling sound deep in my chest tells me I'm on the verge of being in deep shit. Ruby grabs me by the face and forces me to focus on her.

“ Look at me Rowan . I need you to breathe, sis. That's right. ... No , don't look around, just keep your eyes on me. We don't have your meds, so I need you to concentrate on making your lungs expand. Take a few deep breaths in and then out. Now do it with me. Watch my chest and mimic it just like we did when we were kids.”

Focusing on slowing my breathing, I start a simple breathing exercise. Inhale for four seconds. Hold it for four seconds. Exhale for four seconds.

Wash . Rinse . Repeat .

Just about the time I've gotten my airways opened back up a little, the women around us start waking up. Most of them are crying, or in some cases wailing, realizing they're waking up somewhere they didn't go to sleep in. I'm not excited about being ... wherever the fuck it is that we are but thank God I'm not by myself. I know that makes me a terrible person, but I'm glad Ruby is with me. There's no way I would survive without her here to keep me calm.

A blood-curdling scream pierces the surrounding air, jerking our attention in the screamer's direction. Women are darting all around the room, shrieking, crying and running away from something. Through all this commotion, Ruby and I keep a death grip on one another, so we aren't separated in the melee.

The sound of a thud next to me causes me to glance over, only to see a woman lying there with her eyes closed. Squinting , I look closer and see her chest moving.

She's just passed out.

A woman I don't know grabs Ruby by the arm and pulls us toward the back of the room. Her words are so low, they're almost inaudible over the chaos all around us. "Come with me, they always grab the ones closest to the cage door."

They ? Who are THEY ?

Peering around Ruby , what I see makes me freeze and I suck in a breath to let loose a scream of my own ... because it wasn't a nightmare after all. Ruby must have felt me tense up because her hand slaps across my mouth before I can release any sound at

all.

“ Don’t make a sound.”

Her words are just as low as the other woman’s, and I nod sharply, letting her know I understand.

“ Ruby ?”

“ Yeah , sis?”

“ Are you seeing what I am?”

“ I think so.”

“ There is no such thing!”

My whimpered words are lost in the din of screaming women. The colossal creature is ... leering at us. Seemingly enjoying the havoc its appearance is wreaking on the room full of women. Its face is creased in a facsimile of a smile and the hisses coming out of it almost seem like ... laughter.

That sick fuck. It’s enjoying this. Just like Robert enjoyed hurting me.

This creature relishes inflicting terror on those smaller and weaker than it. Terror fills me as I realize I’ve gone from the frying pan and landed in the fire. I escaped one monster, only to be taken by something far worse.

Ducking its head and torso, the Naga enters the room virtually silently, his serpent tail allowing him to move with stealth. Observing it from across the room, I remember the flashes I saw when they grabbed us. These are definitely not the nagas of human

folk lore or any sci-fi romance book on earth. The torso and head do not resemble a man in any shape, form, or fashion. Its face is flat without any protruding features such as a nose and the eyes are set back into the skull with eyebrow ridges protruding out from the face. This thing is basically a semi-upright snake with arms. Nothing sexy about this bastard at all.

Jeez . This thing has to be pushing eight to nine feet tall and dwarfs every single woman here. I can see the light playing off its scales, reflecting the same colors of the room around it, making it difficult to keep track of. This species can camouflage itself as well, creating a predator to be reckoned with.

One woman tries to dart past the bulk of its body and out of the cell, only to be violently stopped with a massive hand around her waist. She's then thrown back into the cell. I hear Ruby whimper when a hood like a king cobra snaps out around this thing's head and neck, as it snarls down at her, gigantic fangs dripping liquid that can be nothing else but venom on to the floor.

The fact that the floor is sizzling with each drop is horrifying.

Reaching up, it snatches a stick looking thing off a harness across its chest and jabs it at several women, including the failed escapee. The stench of burned skin and the screams of agony from the women in front of us makes Ruby push me behind her.

Note to self.

Do not let the stick thingie touch you.

I'm not sure what's happening since Ruby shoved me behind her and won't let me look, but I do notice when the screaming abruptly stops. The only thing I can hear now are a few muffled whimpers here and there. The lady that grabbed Ruby is trying to tuck herself into the shadows, but the naga grabs her before shoving her violently

toward the front of the cage and out the door.

Burying my face in Ruby's hair, I try to ignore what's happening around me as tears leak from my eyes and roll down my face, wetting the skin on her neck as they fall. She pulls me tighter against her and we start moving. I don't know where we're going and I don't care. As long as I have my sister, I know I'll be okay ... well, mostly okay.

Well , okay for me.

She manipulates my body, pushing and pulling me around as she maneuvers us to wherever the Nagas want us to go. After we leave the cage, all of us are forced to line up against the wall in a long, dark hallway. Peeking out from where my face is still pressed against Ruby's neck, I watch as our captors start taking women, several at a time, through a doorway that opens and closes behind their massive bodies without any visible or audible command.

The lady next in line attempts to move to the back, but before she can make it, one of the snakes snatches her up in his arms. She sure does put up one hell of a fight, though. Screaming , yelling, struggling, she fights him with every ounce of effort she can. I see the second one of her nails catches the male across the face. Roaring in anger, its mouth opens wider than should be possible, fangs flashing in the light, and bites her on the shoulder. The sound she emits ... it will haunt me until I die.

It's so bad, even Ruby looks away, and I watch as tears stream down her face. Glancing back at the woman, I see her collapse in the monster's arms as it turns away from us, taking her lifeless body with it. After that, the silence is deafening. None of us are willing to make any noise, less we call attention to ourselves. I'm trembling so hard, I can barely stand and if it wasn't for Ruby , I'm sure I wouldn't be able to walk. She's the only thing holding me up right now. Sooner rather than later, we reach the front of the line, and I know we are about to be separated from one another.



One of the monsters approaches us, grabs Ruby while snarling in her face and I can feel her breathing hitch as she tries not to vomit as its putrid breath hits her in the face. The bastard does his best to pull Ruby off of me, but no matter how hard he tries, she clings to me like a spider monkey. It gives up sooner than I expected it to before shoving both of us out of the room through the automatic door.

Pushing my face back into Ruby's neck, I pray to whatever God is listening to help us. I've been doing it for years with no answer, but I'm desperate.

Abruptly , Ruby starts moving back the way we came, her grip on me is so tight I know I'll have more bruises to add to my collection. Her movement is instantly halted, and a scream of pain escapes her throat before she jolts forward, dragging me with her. A warm, wet sensation catches my attention. Looking down, dread fills me as I see Ruby bleeding from a deep wound in her side.

Raising my head, horror fills me when I realize that we've been herded into an area that looks like a Miss American Pageant gone wrong. There is a t-shaped stage with human women ... and things that appear to be female with those damn Nagas escorting them down to the end and back.

It's the audience however, that makes what little bit of sanity I have left flee.

### Chapter Thirteen

ROWAN

My brain has come to a conclusion that my conscious mind doesn't want to believe.

We've ... been ...we've been ... abducted by aliens.

There are creatures of every shape and size, creating a cacophony of sound as the females are led up and down the stage. A sudden coughing fit catches me by surprise as the scents in the room finally register. I'm not on Earth anymore and there's no telling who, or what I'm allergic to in this room.

I can see the Nagas in front grabbing two females at a time, no matter what species they are, ripping their clothing off them and forcing them to walk down the aisle in the middle of the platform. The " T " shaped stage is the centerpiece of the giant room we've been forced into. Each time a new pair of females is prodded down the length of the platform, the volume of the crowd swells with all sorts of sounds floating across the vast space toward the stage.

The Nagas are showing the females off, twisting their bodies this way and that, ensuring the crowd sees everything each one has to offer. After this goes on for several moments, sometimes a chime will sound and the females that receive the chime are led down a different hallway away from the rest of us. The screams that sound after that door closes are heart wrenching. Females that don't get the chime are escorted to the back of the stage and left against the back wall, with what appears to be one guard loitering nearby.

As far as the eye can see, there are things staring at the hysterically crying females being paraded up and down the stage ... and they all look hungry. In fact, more than one of the beings in front of us has the same look in their eyes that Robert did when he was getting ready to ‘ discipline’ me. Narrowing my eyes, I look closer and when it hits me, the knowledge slams into my brain like a freight train.

The monsters all appear to be MALE .

OH NO , OH NO , OH NO !

Sucking in a labored breath, I emit a high-pitched whine as I start pulling away from Ruby , trying to force myself away from the hell in front of us. My sister doesn’t know. Ruby doesn’t understand , but I do. We are the goods in this market of hideousness. The Nagas are the salesmen, and we are the wares they’re showing off to customers. That’s what the stage is for!

Ruby grabs at me before quietly barking out a question. “ What are you doing? Don’t do anything to make those scaly bastards notice you.”

“ Ruby , I can’t.”

It should shame me to be so weak in front of my beloved sister, but it does NOT when I know what’s most likely to become of us. I would rather die than be some savage’s toy.

“ I don’t think we’re being given a choice in the matter. I’m not super happy about this either sis, but fuck! Do you see a magical door that we can slip through somewhere? I sure as shit don’t and have you looked around at all? Because I believe wholeheartedly that we’re on the other side of the damn rainbow and it isn’t the pretty one, either. This one has led us straight to hell.”

“ Ruby , I’m not like you. My strength and will to live is long gone.”

“ The hell it is! You’re my sister and you are stronger than you’re giving yourself credit for. I can’t do this alone, sis. You’re the only reason I’m not falling apart right now. I need you Rowan , so please, in the middle of everything else, my mind can’t deal with the thought of losing you, too. So , here’s the plan. No matter what they do to us, we do everything we can to stay together. Every time they try to yank us apart, you reach for me, you hear me? We can’t let them separate us, or we’ll be lost to each other forever. I can face this if you’re beside me, but not alone.”

“ I won’t let go.”

Ruby’s words are exactly what I needed to hear. I have to be strong, if not for myself, then for her. I’m the reason she’s in this mess and I owe it to her to do everything I can for her. Guilt threatens to overwhelm me, but I can’t fall apart. No matter how much I want to sink into the blank space inside my mind.

My sister needs me.

I no more than make that vow to her when massive, brutal hands grab at both of us. We were so focused on our quiet conversation that we missed the fact that we were next in line at the base of the stage. One of the Nagas shoves Ruby so hard that I have to catch her before she falls. I don’t know how much blood she’s lost, but the wound in her side has a steady stream flowing from it. Definitely something she needs medical attention for, not that we’ll get any in this hellish place.

The Naga holding us tries to force us apart, to no avail. It hisses out something and a second set of hands grabs us in the effort to separate us. We are putting up more of a fight than any of the other females up to this point. I can feel Ruby’s nails cutting into my arms and I can see the bloody furrows in her skin where my nails have cut her in return, latching onto one another every time our captors tear us apart. I’m fighting

with every bit of strength I have left in me, because this is for my sister.

I owe her and refuse to fail her.

Suddenly , I feel a hand in my hair as one of the Nagas wraps his meaty fist in my long tresses. The powerful pull arches my body away from Ruby , yet I continue my attempt to reach my sister. It snarls down into my face only to pause as its eyes scan my visage, seemingly noticing my bruises for the first time. It grunts something out in its language to the one holding Ruby , and they start hissing back and forth.

It doesn't take a genius to realize that they're not happy about the condition my face is in. The Naga holding Ruby looks out at the crowd that's gotten noticeably louder during the time we've been fighting the sneaky snakes holding us captive. The one holding Ruby growls something out and yanks her forward. Terror fills me at the thought of being separated from the only person I love, so I lunge toward her, catching the Naga holding me by surprise as I manage to tightly grab hold of one of Ruby's hands.

The clanging of a loud bell jerks our attention back to the stage and before either of us knows it, the Nagas on either side of us rip us apart from one another. Long , deadly sharp knives appear in both of their hands as they begin cutting the clothes from our backs. Logically , I knew this was coming, but nothing can really prepare you for something like this. Ruby is fighting back with everything she's got, but I'm too scared to flail around for fear that one of those pieces of lethal looking metal will slip and cut me deeper than the wound Ruby has on her side.

Seconds later, our clothes are laying in tattered heaps on the ground, showing how skilled our captors are in this onerous task. A stinging sensation around my legs makes me look down and I see little trickles of blood running down my legs where the giant snake cut me on purpose. Glancing up at it, I can see the smirk on its face as it glares back at me.

Ruby's head turns my way, and I instinctively curl into myself, bending forward while raising my hands up to cover as much of my torso as I can. She still doesn't know about the jewelry. Out of the corner of my eye, I see Ruby crane her neck to look closer. I know she's trying to see if I'm hurt any worse, but I can't stand the shame of what I allowed to happen to me to be seen.

Not yet.

One of the Nagas grabs Ruby and pushes her forward. Her hand streaks out, grabbing onto my forearm as she pulls me on along behind her. She stumbles a little as we make our way out onto the catwalk. Now that we are up here, we cannot see anyone or anything out in the audience. Lights embedded into the floor of the stage reflect back up at us, highlighting our bodies and obscuring the crowd from us. It's not like that matters all that much.

I can feel them staring.

The knowledge rips a whimper from me, which causes Ruby's head to whip around to check on me. I see her eyes flare in horror as she sees exactly what I've been hiding from her. I know what she's looking at. The ornate, delicate chain that connects two nipple piercings extends down to my navel piercing and goes even lower to the hood piecing at the top of my vagina. My eyes remain fixed on the floor in front of us, avoiding her eyes the best I can.

Ruby grips my hand, squeezing it in reassurance. She's trying to provide me with what little comfort she can, considering the circumstances in which we currently find ourselves.

We may not have much ... but at least we have each other... for now.

The nasty snake holding Ruby jerks her to a stop and tilts her head back. I can see

where its sharp claws are digging into her face. A flash of movement catches me by surprise. There is a little flying orb floating all around us. It floats up and down Ruby's body, pausing occasionally, and I can see a tiny flash every so often.

It's taking pictures of her!

I watch as the flying object takes a photo of the mole on her cheek, which makes her flinch, causing the Naga holding her to grip her face tighter in reaction. Red blood beads in every single spot his claws touch her, and my grip on her hand tightens in solidarity. Refocusing on the robot photographer, I watch as it hovers in front of the tattoo on her hip, and the scar on her knee.

The thing circles Ruby several times before a red light goes off and it makes several beeping sounds. It's inspection of Ruby done, the orb floats over to me and takes twice as long to inspect me as it does my sister. Flash after flash hits me as the sphere takes more and more photos. It didn't take me long to figure out what the UFO was doing; it's categorizing our flaws or imperfections.

No one wants to buy damaged goods after all.

I know what my naked body looks like. Once you get past the body jewelry and the fresh bruises ... my body is liberally covered in scars. Minutes pass as the UFO circles me over and over.

Finally , the light flashes red and it makes the same beeping sound for me as it did for Ruby . Without warning, our captors haul us back up the stage and toss us along the back wall with the small group of women left there. I groan at the impact my fragile body makes on the unforgiving floor.

Hearing my groan, Ruby grabs me and pulls me as far away from everyone as she possibly can. My teeth are chattering, and I know I'm not far from going into shock.

Her hand reaches out and grabs the tiny lock that connects all the chains on my body, inspecting it for weaknesses if I know my sister.

It's so cold in here. Ruby and I are huddling together, trying to share body heat the best we can to stay warm. Clinging to one another, we sit there and watch as girl after girl, and alien female after alien female, is forcibly paraded down and back on that awful platform. I don't know how long this goes on, but eventually there are only two human women left.

The girl that was bitten and the lady that helped us when Ruby woke me up. Just as I think the nasty snakes are going to haul that poor unconscious woman up on stage, he pivots and throws her toward us. Her body hitting the wall next to me makes me cringe in sympathy. If she wasn't dead before, she definitely is now.

Angling my eyes away from the body lying next to us, I watch in horror as the nice lady from earlier is forced down the aisle; the UFO takes her photos and then she's forced passed us and through the automatic door. Her blood-curdling screams are the last thing we all hear before the door slowly slides shut.

Multi-toned bells sound throughout the room and within minutes, it becomes deathly quiet. The overwhelming sounds from the crowd of buyers have faded and silence has taken its place. The Naga guarding us hisses out a sneer in our general direction before it leaves.

Peering out from under my lashes, I realize that we've been left completely alone.

This doesn't bode well.



### Chapter Fourteen

#### ROWAN

It's hard to tell how much time's passed since the last Naga left us. We all watched as the raised platform of debauchery slowly sank into the floor, leaving a truly massive arena sized space out in front of us. It's so cold in here that Ruby and I are both shaking, pressed against one another trying desperately to stay warm.

Ticktickticktick .

What . Is . That ?

I feel Ruby's head lift from where she had it pressed against the top of mine, so I know she hears it too and it's not just a figment of my imagination. Raising my head, I peer into the darkness, trying to see past the halo of light. The sneaky snakes did leave one light on, but it's directly in front of us. So , it's the same concept as the stage lights. We're blinded to whatever is making that sound as it approaches us.

Apprehension fills me as the sound gets closer and closer. The thing that steps into the light makes me throw up in my mouth a bit. It's a massive insect. This thing looks like a cross between a praying mantis and a scorpion. As if the two species came together and made the most perfect, horrifying combination possible. The upper limbs look like that of a praying mantis with the joints bending so that they fold down in front of the body while a freakishly huge tail ending in a stinger reaches over the back just like a scorpion. A triangular shaped head boasts two black, multifaceted eyes and a disproportionately bulbous abdomen rounds out this thing's physical

appearance.

The big one in front approaches us first and Ruby kicks it, her heel hitting one of the bug's lower legs. Her kick must have hurt it or pissed it off because it lets out a piercing shriek before lowering its head and inhaling deeply as if it's sniffing us out as it undulates closer. Abruptly , a vile-looking black tube extends out from where its mouth should be and extends toward me as I try to shrink away from it. Ruby smacks it away with the back of her hand.

A viscous fluid dripping from its mandibles gets on the back of her hand and I watch as the skin there just ... melts off. Without warning, the bug rears up and stabs one of its legs down into Ruby's leg. The pointed tip of the extremity pierces her flesh like a hot knife through butter.

Her screams of agony fill the air as she holds onto me with everything she can. Ruby is violently torn from my arms, and I watch as she's flung into a cage, floating on some sort of hoverboard. Seconds after she lands, she's back up and gripping the bars, screaming my name.

“ ROWAN !”

In my distraction, I failed to notice another bug approaching me. It grabs me and flings me into a second cage next to the one Ruby is in. Landing against the hard metal, I can feel my bones rattle on impact and my head smacks the unforgiving metal. Forcing myself to focus, I grab the bars of the cage and pull myself to my feet and look over at Ruby , my heart in throat.

“ Ruby ! Your leg!”

To my dismay, I watch as she slides back down to the floor, her breath huffing in pain as she does so. “ Shush . There isn't anything we can do about it right now. I

think we may have just gotten the shit end of the stick, sis. The fact that we were left, and these things are what showed up to get us; it doesn't say good things to me."

Silently we watch as the other women and alien females are unceremoniously picked up and thrown into their individual cages as well. They're treating us like pieces of meat, as if we don't matter enough to warrant any kindness whatsoever. The woman the snake bit and then threw into a wall is also scooped up and pitched into a cage. It's not necessarily the right thing to think, but I sure hope she's dead. At least one of us would be spared whatever is coming our way.

Movement under me pulls my attention from Ruby as I watch while we're transported from the arena of hell into a ... well. I don't really know how to describe this. It looks sorta like the marina Robert took me to once that had massive yachts and ornate ships docked in various places. There are slots where what can only be described as spaceships are docked on either side of an extremely wide aisle, with the arena being the sole massive structure at the end of the walkway.

It doesn't take long to notice that all the other beings around us are either shrinking away from our little procession or reacting overly aggressively. Glancing over at Ruby, I vocalize my observation.

"Does it look like all the other creatures out there are warning these bug things away?"

"That's exactly what it seems like to me."

We both watch as something that looks like a Hollywood werewolf snarls at the bugs as it pulls a smaller, softer looking version of itself behind the bulk of its body. The larger of the two bares massive looking sharp teeth at us as we pass, while curious yellow eyes peer out from behind it. The look on its face is one of ... pity.

Grinding metal groans out a protest as we stop in front of a docking station with a ship that looks like it's held together by baling wire and super glue. The ships on either side aren't necessarily larger but they are in much better condition than this one is. To top it off, I think I can see holes in the side of the ship.

Isn't that a thing on Earth ? Don't you have to keep the cabin pressurized or something?

Several of the woman next to us are screaming and begging any passerby for help. To our dismay, not a single being even glances our way.

Some things never change. It's easier to look the other way than to do what's right.

A bang jerks my attention back to the bugs in front of us. The one closest to the rust bucket ship hit the side of said ship. It must be some sort of signal, because a hatch on the bottom squeaks as it opens. One by one the cages are transferred inside the ship. Ruby is up next and when the cage is tilted to the side, she slips in a puddle of her own blood and goes to grab one of the bars, only to scream in pain and instantly let go.

I watch as my precious sister slips and her delicate face makes contact with the unforgiving metal of the cage, busting her cheek open. Her eyes roll back in her head, and she loses consciousness as I scream out her name.

“ RUBY !”

### Chapter Fifteen

#### ROWAN

I don't know how long I've been sitting here, but I'm holding on to my sanity by a thread. The repetitious motion of combing Ruby's hair is the only thing I can focus on right now. Movement catches my attention as Ruby's eyelids begin to flutter. Relief fills me when her eyes open and she looks up at me.

“How long was I out?”

“Long enough to scare the shit out of me.”

My voice is raspy with disuse and the heavy weight pressing down on my chest. I've been struggling to fill my lungs for a while, but there isn't anything I can do about that right now ... maybe not ever.

“Did I miss anything?”

Answering her, I gently run my fingers over her cheek. “No, they dumped us in here and that's the last I've seen of them. I'm pretty sure the ship launched a little bit ago. The air got weird there for a second and then I felt weightless. Thankfully, not long after you passed out, your leg stopped bleeding, but your wrist is black, so it must be broken. God, Ruby, what do we do now?”

Shock fills me when tears fill her eyes, and a jagged sob escapes her. “I've failed you.”

“ Oh , please Ruby , if this is anyone’s fault it sure as hell’s not yours. I’m the reason we were in that place to begin with.”

I barely get the last word out before a deep, rasping coughing fit takes hold of me. The taste of pennies fills my mouth as I reach up and wipe bright red blood from my lips. Ruby’s voice is full of sisterly concern as she asks, “ How long has that been going on?”

“ Too long now, I fear. We have enough to worry about right now. You need to rest while you can. Lord only knows what horrors we’re going to be a part of next.”

Stretching out next to Ruby , we cuddle up next to one another, trying to find a modicum amount of comfort in this hellish existence. Her body starts shaking and I gently pull her closer to me, trying to support her the only way I can as my lungs rattle with every breath.

Somehow , we must have both fallen asleep, because the next thing I know, Ruby is pulling me away from the doorway, jarring me from the nothingness of sleep. Those nasty insects are back. I’ve noticed that they seem to like it best when the women scream, as if our rage and terror excite them somehow.

The limp woman that was bitten by the Naga is the first to be snatched from the floor and drug out the door. A weak moan escapes her lips, and dismay fills me as I realize she’s still alive. Even after everything she’s been through, poor woman. Two more women are grabbed before they seem satisfied and leave the room.

Ruby and I huddle together across the room from the other human woman. Everyone is too scared to talk, just in case the bugs are listening to us. No one wants to bring their attention back to the inhabitants of this room.

Time drags on and I wonder how long we’ve been trapped on the bug ship. It’s

obvious the bugs don't care if we're alive or dead. A while back, a couple of the girls demanded food and water ... they were both removed from the room and haven't returned. Which is the same for anyone else they've taken from our holding cell.

Once you leave through that door ... you don't come back.

I'm worried about Ruby . Her body is in worse shape than mine, even though I'm slowly suffocating to death and my lungs are deteriorating from whatever I'm allergic to in the air in here. Not to mention the fact that we don't have any facilities to relieve ourselves. So , the additional stench of waste is making it even harder for me to breathe. As it is, I can get only the shortest of breaths in me, and each tiny inhalation burns like someone is shoving hot coals down my airway.

I guess I should be concerned about the fact that I'm no longer hungry or thirsty, but this isn't the first time I've been deprived of those two things. Unfortunately , I'm semi-conditioned to suffer.

Ruby however, is not. I know her leg is infected because of the red streaks and the fact that she can barely move it. She's also dangerously dehydrated; her lips dry and cracked.

We've been left alone for a while now. The other bugs ignore our dual huddle across the room and have been selecting women from the large group closer to the door. There isn't much else to do but sleep to pass the time. I'm currently dozing, my mind in that comforting space between sleep and wakefulness, as Ruby gently plays with the ends of my hair.

The swoosh of the door opening pulls me awake as Ruby grabs me and pulls me closer to her. My eyes land on the main bug. The one that stabbed Ruby in the leg when they took us. It seems to be scanning the room, like it's looking for something ... or someone.

An almost gleeful sound comes from its mouth when it spots Ruby and I huddled together. Ruby, ever the big sister, pushes me behind her just as it reaches us and spears her through the shoulder with one of its giant arms. It yanks her limp body from me as it holds her suspended up in the air by her shoulder.

She doesn't even scream out in pain. That's how far gone my beloved sister is. I can't just stand here and do nothing!

“Let her go, you prick!”

I try to scream, but it comes out more of a mangled huff since I can't take a deep enough breath to yell. Launching myself off the ground, I slam into the bug, hitting it with all my might as I ignore the pain that landing against its chitinous body causes me. Screeching anger, it whirls and hits me with its tail, launching me across the room where I slam into the wall. The crack of my head against the unforgiving metal reverberates around the room.

The last thing I see is the giant bug approaching me as I lose consciousness.



### Chapter Sixteen

ROWAN

I'm disappointed when I wake up.

What did we do to deserve this?

I was hopeful that the blow to my head would be the final straw, and my body would just give up the fight so I can rest. A fresh wave of guilt fills me at that thought. I've turned into such a whimpering, self-absorbed weakling.

Ruby needs me.

With that thought, I force myself to open my eyes as I lie in ... this thing, gasping for air. My vision is blurry, I'm nauseas and my head feels like it's been split in two. However , that's not even my biggest problem at the moment. The new room we've been deposited in is humid with air that feels so wet, it's heavy. I've never fared well in humid climates and have had to use my medication when I was far healthier than I am right now. As it is, I'm barely able to inhale at all. My windpipe is almost completely closed and the rattling in my chest is an ominous warning of what is to come.

It won't be long before I suffocate and die. I just can't get my airways to open. This asthma attack has taken its toll on my body and without any of my emergency medications or a hospital, I'm not going to make it. Too tired to even lift my head, I glance around at the ... something I'm laying in. I'm a bit confused at first, but the

longer I look, the more it looks like I'm lying in a sort of nest.

Chills wrack my body, and I start shivering. Experience tells me I'm in shock.

It won't be long now.

The position I'm lying in is not comfortable at all. I should at least be as comfortable as I can be given the situation if this is how I'm going to die. Slowly, I adjust my body only to notice that one of my ankles feels heavier than it should.

Carefully lifting my pounding head, I raise it to see a thick rusted shackle attached to a heavy chain that runs across the bottom of the basin and over the side. Presumably attached to some sort of anchor outside my current accommodations. Easing over on my side, I make sure the leg with the cuff is positioned so that the weight of the metal isn't pressing down on me or pinching any more than necessary as I curl into myself. My movements make the leaves I'm lying on rustle slightly and cause the stench of rot and death to plume up into the air.

Even that small amount of movement was exhausting as I struggle to breathe. Focusing on each breath, the soft sounds of two women speaking catch me by surprise.

“Rowan?”

“If you are asking about another female, there were two others brought in when you were.”

“Hair like mine?” I hear my sister ask, her voice cracked and reedy sounding. Ruby is in the room with me! At least I managed to do something right. I got that bug to take me with him, so she and I weren't separated in the end. Speech is beyond me now. I can feel my windpipe closing more and more as the seconds tick by. My

attention is pulled back to the conversation when the stranger's voice answers Ruby .

“ There is another whose mane is the color of the sun across the room. She has not moved since being thrown into the nest. Not that she could go far, the chains prevent you from leaving the breeding shell.”

I wish I could let her know I was here.

It's got to be killing her, not knowing that I'm a short distance away. But as mom used to say, “ Wish in one hand and shit in the other, see which fills up faster.” A miniscule amount of humor flits through me. Nothing like hearing your mother's words of inherent wisdom as you're suffocating to death on a spaceship after you've been abducted by aliens. I can hear my own laughter in my head at the absurdity of what's become of my life.

Ruby's voice sounds again, and I listen to her conversation with our fellow captive intently. It's not like I have anything else to do.

“ How long have you been here? What do they want with us?”

It breaks my heart just a little more to hear the fear in my sister's voice. She's always been an indomitable force and hasn't ever been a victim. Not like me.

“ My time will come any moment now, as all the others that were brought in before me are deceased. Thankfully , they seem to only want a few birthing at a time, so there is still hope for you and this Rowan you speak of.”

“ Were you taken also?”

“ I was. I did not know until later that the Velgriddix had found a way to disguise their ships. A distress beacon was sent out, requesting permission to land. They were

on the ground before our forces could muster a counterattack. The guards were easily overtaken, and the warnings came too late for the rest of us.

I was in the fields helping with the harvest when they were first spotted. Even though there were safe places where we could hide, our group was too far away. I fought, but their numbers quickly overwhelmed the few females that were there. The only thing that lightens my heart now is knowing that my sacrifice gave others time to run for safety.”

“ How can I understand you?”

Ruby’s next question is a good one. It hadn’t really dawned on me that the person she was speaking to might not be human. Guess I shouldn’t have just assumed I was listening to two humans talking to one another.

“ I have a translator that not only translates your words but helps me reply in your speech.”

“ I could’ve used that when those snakes took us. What are these damn bugs?”

“ Not many have a translator like mine, so most will not understand you, or it would only be one sided. You must be from an outer world to have been obtained by the Jaga ; they are a slither race known for abductions in your area. The Velgriddix , or bugs, as you call them, are the plague of our universe. They like the leftovers that other races deem unworthy.

Even though I was shocked when they brought you in, I’ve never heard of a human being not being wanted. Your kind is coveted by most. All I can think is the scars, drawings, and abnormal markings upon your skin were considered unflattering to the other species at the market, and so you were not sold. That’s how you ended up with them, the Velgriddix . They get inexpensive bodies because they only need us to

remain alive until their eggs can be laid. So damaged goods are fine with them.”

Well , that’s just about par for the course. We were “unwanted” when, apparently, the rest of the universe covets humans.

“ Did you just say ... eggs?”

The word “eggs” catches me off guard. Just when you thought it couldn’t get any worse...

“ You need not know of the specifics.”

The tone of the stranger’s voice implies you really don’t want to know , but Ruby being Ruby , she’s gotta know everything. So I know what she’s about to say before the words even leave her lips, and when she speaks, I’m not surprised at all.

“ Well , we’re going to have to agree to disagree on that one, because knowledge is power where I come from.”

“ In this case, it will simply drive you mad. However , I understand and I suppose you have a right to know what is coming. The Velgriddix that brought you in here is the leader of this ship and the main breeder. That’s why only a few are taken at once. He can only produce so many eggs within a certain span of time.”

“ Are you saying that fucking thing is going to have sex with me/us?”

“ Not in the sense you are thinking, you are nothing to them but a live incubator. A piece of meat that his young can thrive within until they hatch, then eat their way out. The only positive thing about the situation is that you won’t be conscious after the first egg is ingested. They use the venom in their tails to paralyze our bodies so that when ingested, you cannot damage the eggs. Moments after he is done, your body

will die.”

“ Hell’s fucking fire. Do I even wanna know how it gets the eggs inside our bodies?”

“ Their mandibles open, the sex organ elongates and then forces its way down the throats of its victim, uncurling it into their stomach cavity. There , it impregnates you with as many eggs as your body can sustain.”

“ I did ask, didn’t I ?”

“ I warned you.”

“ Lord , God .”

Ruby’s whispered words are nothing short of a plea and she falls quiet for a few moments before I hear her ask the freakishly knowledgeable neighbor yet another question.

“ How’ve you found a way to accept this?”

Ahhh . Leave it to Ruby to try to figure out a problem that has no way to be solved, but I am interested to hear the other woman’s response. Listening to them talk is the only thing keeping the seductive whisper of unconsciousness at bay. Though , I don’t know why I’m bothering. The other woman’s response catches me off guard. I’m not sure what I was expecting, but it wasn’t as profound of a response as she gives.

“ I cried, I fought, then I decided to pray. Not for this life, but for my next one. I would advise you to find some sort of peace with what’s to come because miracles are far and few between.”

“ What’s your name? I’m Ruby .”

“ Kallen , princess of Rukuhks .”

A swooshing sound, closely followed by the tickticktick of claws on the metal floor, announces the arrival of one of the bugs.

Oh no, oh no, oh no, oh no.

The mantra is on repeat in my mind as I wait for the vile creature to stop in front of the basin I'm in. To pick me to be the next incubator. A loud click next to me makes me flinch and I brace myself to be grabbed. Squeezing my eyes shut, I wait.

Seconds crawl by and nothing happens.

Opening my eyes, I see the side profile of one of the bugs. He's moved around the nest to position himself between mine ... and the poor blonde woman the Naga bit then tossed into the wall. The bug has her suspended up in front of him, held securely in its many arms. A soft moan followed by a whimper are the only sounds the woman makes before I see the bug pry her mouth open.

What happens next is worse than any horror film I've even seen, and it's like a train wreck. My eyes are fixed on the travesty before me as if I'm held captive by the scene transpiring in front of me. Its massive tail arcs over, the sharp tip gleaming with venom in the low light, as it impales its stinger into the woman's side right before a long, flexible tube descends from where the mouth on a person would be.

It's dripping some sort of viscous fluid that is black in color. The bug adjusts the woman in its arms, ensuring she's positioned just so, before it shoves that tube in her mouth and down her throat in one swift motion. I can see the woman's jaws stretch to accommodate the girth of the organ that's been inserted into her, and that her throat looks distorted as well.

The bug removes its stinger, and the woman's entire body goes limp. That must be the signal the nasty thing was waiting for. I watch in disgust as lumps emerge from the bug's mouth area and travel down the tube, into the woman. I'm not sure how long this goes on, but I can see her abdomen swelling. It's like I'm watching her progress with a pregnancy before my eyes, but it's more of these disgusting things being implanted into her body.

Once her belly looks like she's heavily pregnant, it withdraws the tubelike organ from her body and gently lays her back down within the basin he snatched her out of. What miniscule amount of air I managed to force into my failing lungs leaves in a rush.

They're going to do that to Ruby and I . That's how we're going to die!

The thing glances over at me and screeches. As if it's taunting me with the knowledge that this is my fate. Without warning, the entire ship trembles and groans. The bug in front of me skitters out of sight and I hear the swish of the door open as multiple chattering voices start sounding out in the hall. All the sounds are abruptly cut off when the door slides shut.

A sudden jolt of the ship launches me forward in the nest, my body weight stopped by the hold of the chain on my leg. Gasping in pain, I weakly crawl backward to alleviate the tension on the metal links. Over the noise, I hear Ruby scream out.

“ Kallen , what's happening?”

“ Hope .”

Hope ...?

That's the last conscious thought I have before what little sanity I have left escapes my grasp, and I finally allow my mind to fade into unconsciousness. One last breath



escapes me in a ragged, pain filled, rattling wheeze.

### Chapter Seventeen

#### EINAR

If my brothers do not stay out of my blasted med bay, I am going to knock some sense into their thick heads. I have told them countless times that I have everything arranged in a specific manner for a reason as I observe the chaos that my once pristine domain has become. Cabinet doors are open, shelves that are labeled with specific medications have had all the jars mixed up.

There is even a phallic shaped drawing on the clear case of the med-pod I notice with a grimace. Bikar and Falon are the most likely culprits, and possibly Ruarc . Slavic is the oldest and rarely pulls pranks this juvenile and Murgul ...well, he has his own issues to deal with and keeps to himself more often than not.

The fact that ours is a family operated ship, is a vastly overrated concept from time to time because no one vexes you quite like family. You are not allowed to kill them...well, not unless there is a justifiable reason. Just because my kind is considered the scoundrels of space, does not mean we have no standards for killing.

We do...it is just not quite the same as the rest of the galaxy.

Rubbing a rough hand against the ridges lining one of the two horns emerging from my forehead, I begin the aggravating chore of reorganizing my shelves again. Thankfully , having a lot of practice doing this particular chore means that it will not be a long, drawn-out process. I have almost completed this unnecessary task when the sound of my brother's voice coming from all around me startles me enough that I

almost drop the vials I am holding in my hands.

I really hate it when Bikar does that, and he knows it. Which is why he tries his best to startle me via the comms every opportunity he can. His voice echoes all around me since he is in control of all the messaging on the ship. He has made sure that his voice comes from every direction, instead of just overhead.

“Awaken one and all, we have a new target on the radar and Slavic wants all of you on the bridge. So, get your lazy backsides up here with haste.”

I sneer at the shelving in front of me, my lips pulled tight across the pair of sharp tusks that stick up past the seam of my mouth.

I must not kill him, our life-giver would be disappointed in me.

All five of my brothers are present on the bridge and are staring at the holographic screen Bikar has projected in front of the control panel. Thankfully, the ship we acquired when we first left our home world was capable of holding our massive bodies easily, or our opulent way of life would make tempers even shorter, especially on long trips without any stops to disembark the ship. The Zenith has plenty of space for all six of us to mingle and not bump into one another, and even a few places to hide when we need our space. Our Life Giver constantly preached the importance of family, but there are times we all need some quiet time alone, lest we maim one another permanently.

Bikar sits in his comms chair to Slavic's right, his fingers flying over the controls on the console. Falon is standing to his left, his massive legs spread as the ship moves aggressively to and fro as Bikar flies us through the vast void around us. Murgul is leaning against the wall across the room with his arms crossed, looking bored, and Ruarc, as usual, is slightly behind Slavic and to his right. My second oldest brother takes his responsibilities as Slavic's second in command seriously, maybe even more

seriously than Slavic's dedication to being our captain...and oldest sibling.

Slavic glances over at me, his slate-gray eyes narrowed in irritation, and nods.

“ Nice of you to finally join us, Einar .”

The caustic tone of this small, censuring statement instantly rubs me the wrong way. Pointing toward the two most idiotic of our brothers, I bark back at him.

“ I would not have been late Slavic , had someone, I am not mentioning any names here, but I am assuming the culprits were Bikar and Falon , not completely demolished my med-bay. If I had not been wasting my time reorganizing things again, I would have been here when you first commed. For future reference, in an emergency situation Slavic , we cannot afford for me to not know where my things are, and you know this. They should know this! You need to keep them out of my med-bay, Slavic , or I swear I am going to start retaliating”

My booming words must contain all the menace I feel because the smirks on Bikar's and Falon's faces slowly fade. Slavic sighs heavily, while simultaneously smacking Bikar upside his head and then reaching over and punching Falon , knocking him sideways. His rage is palpable and almost makes the room shake with his fervor.

“ You fracking idiots, I am not your caregiver. STAY - OUT - OF - THE - MED BAY ! I will not discuss this with you two again. Einar is correct. If something happens to one of you stupid males, he needs to be able to find his things so that you do not die. How would any of you explain your death to our Life -giver in the afterlife? Do you really want to tell her the reason Einar could not save you was because you hid all of his shet again?! Wipe those damn smirks off your faces before I do it for you!”

I sneer as Slavic's words end on a roar, and my two most meddlesome brothers look

property chastised. He pauses for a moment before continuing in a more controlled tone.

“ Now as to why I needed you all here, Bikar , tell them what you found.”

We all watch as he adjusts a few dials before turning to face us. “ You all know the drill. I always have the Zenith’s instruments looking for our next haul. She notified me early this rising when a small ship came within our sensors with a full cargo hold. Unfortunately , it is a small to medium-sized Velgriddix ship. I cannot seem to get an exact head count on the nasty frackin bugs because of their exoskeleton, so we are going in blind. Now , because of the ship’s size, there should only be a handful of them onboard. However , I am picking up some odd readings in several other parts of the ship. It is possible they may have slaves on board, and you know what that means.”

“ More credits for us!”

My deep voice booms alongside my brothers until a low growl from across the room causes Bikar to pause. We all look over at Murgul’s scarred visage, checking to see if he is going to be able to retain his sanity. My brother was captured by the insectoid species many, many rotations ago, and the things they did to him ... no being could fully heal from.

Not that I didn’t try; I spent rotation after rotation caring for my brother. I had worked myself to the point of exhaustion trying to repair what that filth had done to Murgul . Much to my dismay, while I managed to heal much of his body, his mind was fractured, and we all knew it. Including him. When he sees us all staring at him, he snarls out,

“ I am fine. I will not lose it.”

His electric blue eyes glare at all of us in warning and his words are harsh, almost as if he must force them from his throat. Which is probably true, because his vocal cords had been almost irreparable. The only reason I was able to repair them enough for him to speak at all is due to the specialized medic training I was forced to take from the time I was a youngling until I became a young adult.

I always assumed his cords were damaged from the torture he suffered as well as his pain filled screams. I cannot imagine the amount of agony and torture it took to make a Rukuhk break. Youngling or not, we are a tough, brutish species...even before the genetic meddling we were all subjected to. Shooting a glance over at Slavic , I meet his eyes in understanding. He is the only one of our brothers that knows the true scope of what was done to Murgul .

Assured that our youngest brother was not about to lose his small grasp on sanity and destroy the bridge, we all refocus back on Slavic .

“ Brothers , what say you? Do we go give them a traditional Rukuhk , uninvited guest greeting?”

The grin that grows on his face is nothing short of evil, his eyes lit with vengeance. None of us will ever forgive that cursed species for what they did to our youngest brother.

“ Frack yeah!”

My answering cheer sounds off the same time as all my other brothers in response to Slavic's questions.

“ Einar , you have not been off the ship lately, so grab one of the smaller shuttles and I will take the other. Bikar , as usual, you have the comms. Falon , get to the engine room; I do not want any mechanical malfunctions on this run. Ruarc , you are in

command while I am off the ship, and Murgul , keep our weapons hot. You know better than anyone these bugs rarely travel alone. Once Einar and I have the ship secured, you all are to hard dock the Zenith near their back cargo hold.

After the ships are sealed securely together, you know the drill. Bikar , instead of helping load the cargo this time, I would prefer you stay here on the comm's at all times. Unless the Velgriddix detection system is down, you know they can probably see our ship as clearly as we can theirs. They might merely be trying to lure us closer in order to claim the bounty on each of our heads.”

Slavic turns and leaves after issuing his orders, the automatic doors opening for him as they detected his biosignature, and ignoring Bikar as he shouts with a grin, his lips pulling around his tusks.

“ Are you not glad I am one of the best comms specialists there is?!”

Falon , Ruarc , Murgul and I all groan in unison. It is not the first time we have heard Bikar boast about his skills, and it will not be the last. The annoying blight is exceptionally talented...not that I would ever tell him so. His head is already big enough as it is. No need to over-inflate his ego. Shooting a final glare at Bikar and Falon , and with a nod at Murgul , I turn and exit the room, ignoring the swoosh of the door as I pass through it. My mind is already focusing on the task before me.

Frack yes, looting.

It is a pirate's life for me.

I just acquired a new pair of axes that needed to be broken in. Cracking Velgriddix carapace would be the perfect thing to do it with.

### Chapter Eighteen

#### EINAR

Settling my bulk into the pilot's chair, I wiggle around trying to get comfortable. Things are almost too small for me, which is part of why I do not go on raids as often as the others. Me being the only medic we all have access to is another. I am always on standby to make sure my brothers have access to the best medical care we can procure.

My larger body makes fitting into shuttles and smaller spaces a pain in the backside. Thanks to the improvements the Aynar did while my Life - Giver was pregnant with me, my body is larger than all of my brothers. More often than not, my mass creates more trouble for me than it resolves. I am still not sure what those frackin' fairies were thinking to make their expert healer so large, but they did not ask me.

Grabbing the yoke in front of me, I ease the shuttle out of the bay and into the vastness of the Void . Once I have cleared the Zenith , I activate the cloaking mechanism and then double check that it is fully functional before leaving the safety of the Zenith's larger cloak. Reaching over, I flip a switch to initiate the navigation panel and look over the coordinates Bikar pre-programmed into the shuttle one more time. Assured that they are fully loaded and correct, I check the fuel cells and comm systems.

The sound of Slavic's rough voice on the comm confirms that he has left the Zenith as well, and he is checking our comm links, too.



“ Einar , are you with me, brother?”

“ Right behind you. I will take the bottom bay and you take the other.”

“ Sounds like a plan. Are we going to keep any prisoners alive for Murgul to play with?”

“ Depends on how much fun I am having, or if I have any restraint left once we secure the ship.”

I hear the soft snick of the communication line cutting off. Slavic is not one for idle chitchat. Maneuvering around the Velgriddix ship, we check for any sign of a trap. It would not be the first time Bikar found what appears to be an easy target only for it to be a ploy to lure unsuspecting beings in. These bugs have infiltrated every portion of this solar system, and have done so by being suspicious, vicious, and highly intelligent.

Falon should be working on disabling the thrusters on the Velgriddix ship. I have no doubt that he almost has it done and when he does...

The fun will begin.

A soft ping on the console is my signal from Slavic that I am free to proceed toward the lower cargo dock while he infiltrates the main one. Guiding my shuttle around, I find the hatch for the cargo deck on this rust bucket of a ship and extend the docking cable. Once I know the connection is solid, I ping Slavic to let him know I am attached and proceeding with the next step of the plan.

Launching a bit of malware into the ship next to me, I cut the power to the engines and the majority of their systems. A slight lurch is the only sign that their power is shut off. Then , I override their backup security protocols and open the hatch to their

lower dock as I move the shuttle over so I can just step from it into their cargo hold. Extending the docking sleeve, I make a pressurized hallway of sorts. My brothers would never let me live it down if I got sucked into the vacuum of space because I forgot to set the atmospheric shield to move from one ship to another.

Why thank you for making it so easy for me to get inside your piece of shet ship you nasty bastards.

Grinning to myself, I unwedge myself from the pilot's chair and move toward the shuttle door, grabbing my 'new to me' axes as I go. Just as the shuttle door opens, I hear alarms start going off all over the bug's ship.

Frack !

Slavic beat me on board by a tic, not that I have any intention of letting him know that. Just because we are grown does not mean there is no sibling rivalry still.

The slide of a door snags my attention, and I watch in anticipation as three bugs rush into the cargo bay. Stepping out of the shuttle, the door automatically closes behind me. My biosignature leaving the vessel initiates an automatic lockdown. Even if I should fall in battle, the bugs will not be able to scrap the shuttle. My brothers will be able to retrieve it or it will explode if the Velgriddix manage to get the door open and then step on board.

Murgul is a genius at warfare tactics.

Gripping the handle of an axe in each of my meaty fists, I lunge forward with a bellow, meeting the scourge before me with a vengeance. Dodging a pincher from the biggest one in front, I whirl, lashing out with both axes and chopping the tails off the smaller two in one motion.

Their shrieks of pain are music to my ears. Unfortunately , I do not have time to play with these three, so I cannot dawdle. I know not how many more are on board and Slavic might need my help. With that thought in mind, I hack, chop, and maim my way through the bugs with a deadly grace that seems otherworldly, considering my size.

Just because I am big, does not mean I am clumsy.

By the time I make it to the door leading to the interior of the ship, my body is covered in slime, and there is a trail of dismembered bodies behind me. To my surprise, the door opens when I get close, and I sneer in reaction.

The Velgriddix are cheap, so their doors are triggered by motion only. Fortunate for me, truly stupid of them. This means my brothers and I will have zero issues accessing the entire ship.

Exiting the lower cargo deck, I instantly hear the sounds of battle. My boots clang against the floor with each heavy stride as I run toward the commotion. Certain that when I reach the source of all the noise, I will find Slavic smack dab in the middle of the melee. Rounding a corner, I see several Velgriddix attacking my oldest brother and I launch myself into the fray with a booming bellow. Shooting a mischievous grin over at him, I see his answering smile and we hack away at the bugs until there's nothing left but steaming carcasses beneath our boots. I am almost disappointed that the fight is over so soon. It was just getting fun!

Rolling my head from side to side, I stretch the tension out of my thick neck before running my eyes over Slavic as I check him for damage. My eyes land on a small wound on one of his arms.

“ I have not enjoyed a rising quite this much, in well, some time! Are you injured, Slavic ?”

He sees me motion toward his arm and looks down to assess the wound.

“ One of the frackers tried to stab me with his tail, but he just nicked me. I got sidetracked playing with that last one who was teetering back and forth on the two legs I had not cut off yet. I just managed to get my arm up in time, or you might have had to finish them off by yourself.”

“ That is what you get for playing with your enemies, instead of focusing on the matter at hand. Their upper bodies, at least, have several weak points, but those fracking tails are deadly. Let’s go see if there is anything worth salvaging on this stinking heap. Then let us get out of here before their filth settles into our skin and we cannot scrub it off. I will comm Bikar and let him know it is safe to hard dock.”

“ Sounds like a plan. I will check the rest of this upper corridor while you head back toward the lower deck. Keep your eyes open, there could still be a few hiding.”

Shuddering in disgust at the second layer of grime clinging to me, I drop both axes into the frogs attached to my belt as I head back toward the lower deck, taking the hallway to the left that angles downward and lets you descend to the lower level without having to use a lift.

Stinking miserly Velgriddix ; did not even have a lift installed in this hunk of junk.

Once I reach the lower level, I pause at each door to check out the contents of said room before moving on to the next. The first three rooms appear to be lower-level crew quarters, and I do not linger in any of those rooms as the stench emanating from them makes my eyes water. It is hard to believe that this species is perfectly fine with living in squalor.

The last door lurches opens as I approach, and I realize this is the room they keep their breeders and food in. I can see blatant signs of captivity all over the room, and

the scent of bodily waste combined with ammonia is almost enough to make me gag. That is a hard thing to do since as a medic I am accustomed to all sorts of scent profiles. Peering around the room, I make sure there are not any unfortunate souls left down here before beating a hasty retreat.

Huffing in frustration, I ping Slavic on the comm.

“ Slavic , did you find anything interesting up there?”

“ Negative , Einar . There are only two more doors in this area, so once I clear both of them, I will be down to help with the cargo.”

Re -entering the lower cargo bay, I make my way over to the large pile of crates stacked against the far wall. Rubbing my hands together, I start to open one of them to see what treasures lie in wait when my comm sounds and Slavic’s gruff voice catches me by surprise.

“ Einar , I need some help up here.”

“ Be right there.”

The urgency in his voice prompts me to sprint back across the ship, my heavy tread shaking the ramp as I thunder up it toward my brother and whatever it is that he found. It has got to be something big or he would not have sounded like that.

Glancing down, I tap one of the buttons on the side of my comm, activating the tracking beacon so I can find Slavic sooner rather than later. From the sound of his voice, I have no time to lose. Sliding around the corner, I pass a startled Ruarc .

What is he doing here? He is supposed to be on the Zentih ...

Though I don't stop to speak, I note his curious gaze in passing as I continue toward the room Slavic is in.

Absently , I note the pounding rhythm of Ruarc's boots sounding behind me as he follows. I am running so fast I almost pass the room Slavic is in as I screech to a halt just as the door slides open. Grabbing the edge of the doorway, I propel myself into the room. The second I breach the threshold a delicate scent, entirely out of place in this hellhole, infiltrates my sensitive nose.

Looking around, I search for the source of the scent when a flash of red across the room catches my attention. Without thinking, I storm that way, the mouthwatering scent getting stronger the closer I get to the breeding nest where I saw the red originate from.

The sight that greets me when I reach the bowl robs me of breath. Lying there amongst the litter is an emaciated human female. At first glance I think she is dead and grief wells from deep within me at the thought that this delicate creature is no longer amongst the living. But then I hear a weak whisper of breath and one of her delicate fingers twitches. Reaching down, I start tearing the bowl apart, looking for the end of the chain that is wrapped around her too thin ankle.

I know I am not thinking logically but instead, panicking and I am not sure why. All I need to do is break the chain where it is connected to the wall, but that would mean moving away from the little female. That is not something I am capable of at this time. Finally , I locate the rusty chain amongst the filth covering the bottom of the nest she's in. Grabbing the chain, I grip the links in my hands and rip them apart as close to her ankle as I can get.

The edge of my pinky finger brushes her ankle as I jerk the links apart and the second our skin touches, my breath is sucked from my lungs as my mating mark burns its way across my body, and my soul lights up from deep within. It scorches a path from

my neck down across my chest and continues further down where it pools in my groin. The fact that my cock is on fire should be concerning, but I am too overwhelmed with the fact that I just found my Starshine . I can feel the spines on my back lifting from where they have lain hidden amongst the armor-plated scales that line my back. The tingling emanating from them tells me that they are changing colors to match the gamut of emotions filtering through my mind.

Leaning down, I lift my mate into my arms, being as gentle as I can with her fragile body. Once she's safely in my arms, the gravity of her condition becomes apparent. She has almost no body fat to speak of, her cheeks are sunken in, and I can see almost every bone because of her thinness. What concerns me the most is the blue hue to her lips and the rasping wheeze that is rattling within her chest as she gasps for every tiny breath. She is suffocating to death right in front of me.

Turning on my heel, I sprint toward the door.

“ I will meet you on the Zenith ,” I call out to Slavic as I pass him where he kneels next to a Rukuhk female that looks eerily like Kallen , but I do not stop to double check. Ruarc appears in the door just before I reach it, and he jumps out of the way to avoid being run over as I hurriedly exit this hellish place.

My mate is dying in my arms, and I refuse to let her go before I have even met her. Looking down into her battered face, I note the multitude of wounds, both old and new, before my eyes land on a tiny silver chain held together by the smallest lock I have ever seen, suspended there between her breasts, swaying with every step I take.

My poor Starshine ... what has happened to you?

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*Source Creation Date: August 3, 2025, 12:34 am*

### Chapter Nineteen

#### EINAR

Urgency fills me as I sprint back to the shuttle, my heavy footfalls nearly shaking the ship around me with the impact they make upon the filth ridden floors as I make my way down the ramp and into the lower cargo bay.

Suddenly , Bikar's voice booms across the speakers and icy dread fills me.

“ Get your frackin' hind ends back on the ship, NOW ! If we do not leave in the next tic, we will not get to leave! Slavic , I know not what has your attention on that deck but wrap it up.”

I am not known for my speed, considering my larger size, but I force myself to move faster as I race across the cargo bay to the waiting door of my shuttle. The alarm in Bikar's voice is very real ... which means something we cannot fight or win against is incoming. Glancing down at the precious bundle in my arms, I am alarmed to see that she's barely clinging to life.

“ We are almost there, little one. Please ... please do not leave me. Not when I have just found you!”

My impassioned plea falls on deaf ears as her head lolls to the side, her dirty, red hair falling across her face haphazardly as a soft huff of air escapes her cracked lips. Terrified I just watched my mate die in my arms, I stop just in front of the shuttle door, ignoring it as it reads my biosignature and soundlessly slides open to check her



pulse. She's small enough that all I need to do is curl her closer to my chest and the tips of my fingers easily find the pulse point in her neck.

Please , please, PLEASE !

There ! I finally find a weak, thready pulse. A tiny ray of relief fills me, and I dart into the shuttle. Quickly , I stomp over to the pilot's seat and sit down as I gently lower her onto my lap. Running my eyes over her, it does not take me long to assess her. Making a quick decision, I reach for the medical container that I keep stocked. I have never been more grateful that I harassed Slavic to have these installed than I am right now. Having medical supplies, no matter how limited, can be the difference between life and death.

Right now, is a specific example.

If my memory is correct, which it almost always is thanks to the frackin' fairies , there is a shot of adrenaline in here which is something I desperately need right now. If I cannot get her airways open, even minutely, she is going to die before I can get her to the Zenith , and my advanced med- bay. Reaching over, I gently pull my mate closer to me with my left arm as I dig around in the medical container until my fingers find the tube the adrenaline syringe is in. Grabbing it, I jerk it out of the container and flick the protective cap off, exposing the very large, sharp needle. The medic in me knows this will help, but the mate in me says I cannot cause her anymore pain and essentially stabbing her in the thigh, will hurt her .

Significantly .

Steeling myself, I grasp her firmly against the hard expanse of my chest and force myself to stab the needle deep into her thigh while simultaneously pressing down on the end of the syringe to deliver the chemical compound into her weakened body. Nano -tics pass and dread begins to pool in my belly, when suddenly, I watch her take

a slightly deeper breath as her body tenses and then relaxes into the effects of the shot I administered. Her breathing settles, if only slightly, into a more normal cadence.

The harsh creases of suffering on her face ease slightly and I know she's stable, at least for now. Focusing on the controls in front of me, I begin to initiate the launch sequence to return to the Zenith when I am caught off guard by the jerking of the shuttle beneath my feet. I watch as the yoke in front of me moves with a life of its own as I am detached from the Velgriddix ship and turned toward the Zenith at a speed this model of shuttle should not be capable of. Falon must have been tinkering with them in his spare time. It is a good thing I am sitting, or I would have been knocked on my rear.

My eyes glance down and over my mate, terrified that the jarring motion of the shuttle somehow dislodged her from my arms ... even though I logically know that is not possible. However, I am not necessarily functioning within the realms of logic at the moment. I am more instinct and emotion, than intelligent being.

Irritation fills me and just as I am about to comm Bikar to ask him what the frack is going on, I catch the chatter between him and Slavic as I am being pulled back to the Zenith in an increasingly erratic manner. My hold on my mate tightens to ensure she isn't thrown to the floor. My patience with whatever Bikar is doing is about to snap.

“Bikar, I have my hands full, get me the frack out of here.”

Concern fills me. I have never heard Slavic sound quite like that.

What does he mean he has his hands full?

I do not even realize that I unconsciously tightened my arms around my little Starshine until she emits a soft squeak at being squeezed too tight. Regret fills me. She is damaged enough; I need not make it worse by being an oaf.

“ Neither you nor Einar are making this easy on me. Do you have any idea how hard it is to fly both shuttles and the Zenith at once while we are on the run? I better not hear you complaining later about how rough the ride was.”

“ Bikar , I need to get back to the Zenith as quickly as possible. Where are you taking me?”

“ If you had been paying attention, you would be aware that several large, and I mean humongous swarm ships appeared out of thin air. I had to separate us in order to deflect their fighters. However , I am holding the Zenith back just a little bit trying to get them slightly closer to us before I blow the Velgriddix ship we just relieved of its cargo and crew.”

Less than a nano-tic after Bikar says that I see the cargo bay of the Zenith come into view as the shuttle slows significantly, landing safely in our ship. I must have been traveling even faster than I assumed. It was not that long ago that I left the Velgriddix ship and now I understand why the shuttle has been groaning in loud protest around me.

The instant I feel the shuttle touch down and the risk to my mate is minimal, I ease to my feet, prying my bulk out of the pilot’s chair before hurrying to the exit. It would not do to be too hasty in gaining my feet before landing. I would never forgive myself if I dropped her, especially considering how tenuous her hold on life is right now.

Hesitating only long enough for the door to open, I barrel past a wide eyed Murgul with a snarl.

“ I am taking my Starshine to the med-bay! NO ONE IS TO DISTURB ME !”

Murgul and Falon had arrived shortly before me, but I cannot stop and talk to either of them right now. I do not have a moment to lose. Rushing from the cargo hold, I

run to my med-bay as fast as I can. The adrenaline is wearing off and I can hear her breathing becoming labored again as well as the resurgence of the wheezing, death rattle deep in her chest. This is a sure sign her airways are closing right back up. The med-bay door has never been such a welcome sight. I bolt to the door, glad that it has a better biosignature sensor on it than most of the other doors, and it opens even though I am still several steps away.

Rushing deeper into the room, I begin to ease her down onto the nicest of the med-beds but stop when a long, dirty piece of her hair falls across my arm. The red of her tresses is a stark contrast to the mossy green of my hide, but it also calls attention to the deplorable state we are both in. Her entire body is covered in grime and filth and as I glance down at myself, I realize I am too. Bug guts, viscous fluids and debris from the breeding nest cover me. Cleanliness is key when treating sick and wounded beings, so it would be exceptionally counterproductive to do anything while both of us are covered in whatever germs the Velgriddix possessed on their ship.

Decision made, I take us to the back of the room where an extra-large, state-of-the-art sanitizer is located. There isn't a door on it, it's more of an alcove you step into rather than something like a closet or small room. Stepping into the sanitizer fully clothed with my axes still sheathed at my hips, I push the button to start the deep clean cycle. I need both of us completely sterilized and free of any bacteria or pathogens we may have inadvertently picked up. Holding her up high in my arms, I put a bit of space between her body and mine to ensure the cleansing solution the sprayer is expressing covers us fully. The heat from the sprayer creates steam that feels good on my aching muscles but elicits no response from my little mate.

Her wee face does not change expression throughout the entire process though I know the cleansing solution must burn on some of her open wounds. Sadness wells from deep within me. What must she have suffered that this kind of pain does not even register for her, even on a subconscious level. Looking over her body, I can see she is covered in scars in places that a female should not have scars. My eyes land on

the vile jewelry that connects her delicate nipples, navel, and cunny together. That piece of shet has to go as soon as possible.

The whoosh of the sanitizer shutting off followed by the warm pulse of the dryer all around me pulls my attention back to the matter at hand. As soon as the dryer shuts off, I exit the alcove and make my way back over to the medi-bed. Easing her down onto the soft surface, I am glad I did not lay her down on it beforehand or else I would have had to sterilize the entire surface before transferring her back to it.

Thankfully , I managed to get everything reorganized before I left to raid the Velgriddix ship. Had my shelving still been in a state of disarray where I could not find what I needed and my mate died as a result, I would have killed both Bikar and Falon . Yanking drawers open, I pull out the supplies to get an intravenous fluid drip going. She is deathly dehydrated, and the condition of her lungs cannot be left unattended much longer. Picking up one of her emaciated arms, I look for a vein to insert the needle in.

Nano -tics pass as my eyes scan her arm, the back of her hand, and then reach for the other arm. Finally , I find a vein that looks like it can handle a needle without blowing out. Grabbing a piece of elastic material, I tie it around her upper arm to get the vein to plump as much as possible before I stick her. Biting my lip in concentration, I ease the smallest needle I have into the crook of her left elbow and sigh in relief when it does not collapse. Applying small pieces of adhesive, I attach the port and hook it up to a bag of healing fluids.

Surely , water and salt will be fine to give to her. Most beings can accept the simple, yet effective mixture. Watching her closely, I do not see any signs of her body rejecting the solution. That small hurdle overcome; I refocus on her increasingly labored breathing. All of the adrenaline has been processed and is no longer effective. There is a cortico-steroid that I have used on myself and my brothers when we encounter materials that damage the lungs. At this point, it is the best I can do.

Moving over to the cabinet full of the controlled substances, I grab a vial along with a broad-spectrum sedative. I doubt she will regain consciousness as damaged as she is, but I cannot take any chances.

Guessing at her weight, I draw a dose from each of their respective containers into syringes before hurrying back to her bedside. Lifting her arm up, I insert the needle from the syringe containing the sedative into her fluid bag, and then repeat the same process with the cortico-steroid. Once I am sure the medicines have had time to hit her blood system, I watch her with anxiety ridden eyes, waiting for any sign that she is about to have an adverse reaction to what I just gave her.

The gods must be listening or finally showing some modicum of mercy on me because her breathing evens out and her color improves. No sign of an adverse reaction in sight. In fact, she appears almost comfortable. If one could overlook all the damage done to her tiny body.

Helplessness fills me. I have managed to get her stabilized, but there is so much more that she needs and I just do not know how to get started. My Starshine is human, and I know so very little about her species ... but the Zenith possesses something that very few have. We have Bikar . There is not a system he cannot hack or a piece of information he is not able to find.

“ BIKAR !”

Bellowing up at the ceiling is not the best method to use, but I know he is listening; my nosy little brother is always listening.

“ Yes ? You summoned me, Einar ?”

“ I need you to find anything and everything you can on humans as fast as you possibly can. I am basically flying blind here and I cannot lose her. She holds my

soul, brother.”

The desperation in my voice must carry through the comm systems because my irreverent sibling does not snap back with some sort of witty reply or a joke.

“ Understood , Einar . I will get you what you need as fast as I can ... but you know just as well as I do how dangerous it is to attempt what you are asking me to do. Everyone in the known universe and the Void believe that Commander DaR has put this species under his personal protection and his attention is not something that any of us can afford.”

A soft click follows Bikar’s ominous words and is the only sign that he has cut the comm to the med-bay to focus on the task I have asked of him. Therefore , he does not hear my softly whispered words.

“ Thank you, brother.”

### Chapter Twenty

#### EINAR

A loud bang at the door causes my pointed ear to twitch in irritation and my spines to rattle out a warning to whomever is at the door. I told my brothers to leave me be, that I was engaged in a life-or-death battle. How dare those frackers interrupt me!

“ Einar , what the frack? Open the drayt door now!”

“ Unless you are missing a limb Slavic , I do not have time for you right now.”

My snarl does not have the desired effect because his next words boom at me through the locked door.

“ If you do not let me in and tend to my mate immediately, you are no longer going to be needed. I will personally flush your worthless hide out the airlock. I have my very soul in my arms, and I need you brother.”

Mate ?

Slavic’s words strike a chord in me. If his mate was in there with mine, then she must be in deplorable condition. Moving my bulky body rapidly across the room, I unlock the door and glare down at my older brother. Normally I would crack a joke about my “little older brother” but neither of us are in a joking mood right now.

“ Your mate, Slavic ?”



Stepping aside, I motion for Slavic to follow me back into the medi-bay, immediately prepping the nearest bed. I do not want to be any farther from her than I have to be, so putting Slavic's mate in the closest bed to her makes the most sense. I absently note his surprised expression to see that I have another human female in the bed next to his.

“ Put her down here, quickly. I know not what games our Gods are playing with us right now, or if we are merely being tested, but I have never been so terrified in my life, Slavic . While of course I know what humans are, and where they originate from, I lack any real knowledge of their anatomy and treatment. I am at a complete loss. The rumors circulating about their species is that their planet of origin was destroyed by a world ending storm. Bikar is doing his best to track down any information he can on their species that's left, via the normal back channels, but he has already warned me that if he stretches his reach out too far, we may inadvertently bring some unwanted attention from the Commanders this way. It is believed that Commander DaR has put their race under his protection, but he would have to kill me before I would allow him to take her!”

As I relay what I know to Slavic , I am rapidly pulling supplies off shelves and out of drawers around the beds our mates lie in.

“ What are you talking about?”

I nod my head toward the bed that is now fully prepped for his mate and I see him shoot a glance over at my mate's battered form as he is in the process of laying the precious bundle in his arms down on the soft surface. Surprise fills his eyes. “ Do you think they are sisters, Einar ? She was distraught when she saw the nest next to her was empty.”

“ That is something I cannot verify right now, but I would bet a sizeable number of credits that they are. The resemblance is too uncanny for them not to be.”

“ I agree, Einar . What games are the gods playing here? This cannot be a simple coincidence.”

The confusion in his voice is not something I am accustomed to hearing in my steadfast older brother’s voice, but nothing we have faced before in our lives could have possibly prepared us for this.

“ I have no clue, brother, but I wish they would have watched over them a little better. My mate’s lungs were almost completely collapsed, and she has numerous other injuries, but I have managed to get her stabilized. I have a few minutes I think, so let us see what we can do for your mate while mine is resting. First thing we need to do is get these leaves off and out of her. Whoever did this knew that the leaves would slow down the blood flow, but unfortunately infection has set in. You can already see where her skin is turning red around the edges.”

Slavic moves back out of the way so I can assess his mate. I attempt to run my handheld scanner over her to ascertain what needs attention first, but it comes back inconclusive and frustration fills me as I look over at him. “ I need you to take her to the sanitizer unit. The mixture of bug guts and your blood combining with hers is corrupting the scan. I will not get an accurate read on her while she is covered in so many viscous fluids.”

“ Will it hurt her?”

“ I have no idea Slavic , but she is unresponsive right now, so hopefully the pain will be minimal. Do not get out until you are positive that she is clean. It does me no good to work on her only for her body to be exposed to foreign bacteria that will rapidly reinfect her wounds. And be careful with her leg.”

I watch as he picks her up with a gentleness I did not know he was capable of and takes her to the sanitizer at the back of the room. The clatter of metal hitting the floor

catches my attention and I see his swords lying on the ground in front of the alcove.

While Slavic is tending to his mate and ensuring she is clean enough for me to treat, I focus on the small silver chain that is defiling my mate's body. The mere sight of it fills me with rage, so I cannot fathom how she has dealt with having such a thing attached to her and within her. Opening the drawer full of surgical tools, I find what I am looking for and remove the cutters. They are sharp enough to cut through just about any metal in the known universe, so they should have no issues severing the links of this small chain as well as the hoops that piece her flesh.

Picking up the chain, I insert that part of it into the mouth of the cutters and then press the handles down, being extremely careful not to pull up or down as there is very little slack. The cutters make a soft 'snick' as they cut through the chain and I pull the length of it out of the hoops in her nipples, navel and cunny. Shame makes the tips of my ears burn. She has not invited me to look at her most private places and it galls me that I will have to spread her nether lips to use cutters to remove a metal hoop from her cunny!

I hear the dryer in the sanitizer turn on and know I do not have long before Slavic returns. No female would wish a male she does not know to see her in such a state, and if Slavic's female is her sister ... she need not be aware of this either.

Quickly , but with precision, I part her nether lips, cut the hoop from the top of her hood and gently remove it from her flesh before repeating the action at her navel and both nipples. Reaching for the hand scanner, I use it to seal the small holes left by the metal in her flesh. Nano -tics later, it is as if the hoops and chain never graced her flesh. I may not be able to remove all of her scars, but I can at least fix these small areas since they have more blood flow than other parts of her damaged form.

Shivers begin to wrack my mate's tiny body, so I pull a heated blanket out and adjust it over her as Slavic steps up next to me with his mate in his arms.

“ Do you want me to put her back on the bed?”

“ Yes , just let me get this heater set on my mate and I should be able to take a breath without fear she is going to die before I ever know her name.”

Fiddling with the heated blanket until I have it the way I want it takes a few moments and Slavic stands there, holding his mate while he waits on me. Turning to him, empathy fills me. I know how he is feeling right now and there is no judgement from me that he clings to his mate so. Eventually , Slavic lowers her to the bed next to my mate and stands there looking down at her abused form. Anger fills his face and a vicious growl rumbles in his chest. Grabbing his arm with my giant fist, I jostle him a bit to get his attention.

“ She does not need your rage; she needs your love and attention. Lock that shet down for later.”

Pushing him back out of my way, I use the scanner to assess her body. The information it relays to me is just as concerning as the reports it gave me on my mate. “ Frack , these two are a mess. Both are dangerously dehydrated and starved to the point that they are nutrient deficient. Their delicate skin has been exposed to the elements and ultimately, that will lead to permanent scarring. I will do my best to reduce it, but saving their lives is more important than a few scars. On top of that, it looks like your mate also has a nasty infection, and by the shape of the wound, it was a Velgriddix that did this to her. Her shoulder muscles are torn, and that was probably caused by fighting back. Not to mention, her wrist is angled wrong, which indicates a broken bone. I must give these little humans one thing, they are tough. Many times, I have seen lesser wounds bring a male to his knees.”

Slavic runs his meaty, gray hand over the top of his mate’s head of clean, yet tangled and matted hair. The motion gives me an idea. Slavic will be calmer if he has some sort of task, and I have just the one for him.

“ Here .”

I hand Slavic a hair brush and almost laugh at the perplexed look on his face. He has not had any hair in years, so he has had no use for such things.

“ Use that on her hair; start from the bottom and work your way up. Most females are vain about their hair, and as bright and long as hers is, I would think that is a safe observation to make.”

“ You are simply giving me something to do.”

I should have known I would not be able to pull anything over on him, but he needs a task, or he will be in my way while I am trying to fix his mate while mine also lies broken a short distance away. Rage is simmering deep inside me like a festering wound, but I do not have time for it right now.

“ Yes , you need to focus on something besides how this happened to her. Do not think for a moment that I am not fighting the same battle. Mine is so broken there is not a single piece of skin I can find, not covered in bruises or scars. I am forcing myself to help with your mate while mine is stable.”

He moves closer to the table and starts at the ends of her hair just as I said. The motions are slow and clumsy at first, but after a short time the repetitive motions become familiar and soon enough, he is fully invested in what he is doing.

Slavic is still brushing his female's hair, but I can tell he is watching me out of the corner of his eye. Such a worrier he is. Not that he can help it. Being observed does not bother me anymore; the Aynar took care of that long ago. So , I go between the beds holding our females, assessing their wounds and categorizing what I need to repair first on which mate. Our comms have gone off multiple times but neither of us answer, as the rest of our brothers are fully capable of running this ship without us, no

matter the fact that they act like younglings most of the time. Once I am sure of my next course of action, I turn and face Slavic to tell him what must be done.

“ Slavic , I am going to give her a sedative. She cannot awaken in the middle of the surgery I need to perform to save her leg.”

“ Einar , I thought you said you were not sure on how to treat them?”

“ We do not have a choice, but I understand your concern. I used it on my own mate, and she had no reactions, so it should be safe enough to use on yours.”

I offer up a brief prayer of thanks to any deity listening to for that particular blessing. It is a small miracle none of the medications I have used on them has caused more harm than good. Slavic’s eyes have gone unfocused, as if he is pondering something deeply, but as her mate, he must give me permission to begin repairing her.

“ Do you want me to proceed?”

My question brings him back to the here and now, pulling him from his musings. “ Brother , I trust you with not only mine, but all of our lives. If you believe it is safe, then do whatever it takes to heal her.”

I hold his gaze for a few tics before turning and gathering up the materials and tools I will need. His mate’s leg is in very bad shape, and I cannot afford to make any mistakes lest she be crippled for the rest of her life. As it is, the damaged shoulder will always be weaker than her other and will probably cause her pain when the weather is cold. Last but not least, one of her wrists was broken and has started to heal crookedly. Knowing I will have to re-break it and set the bone properly fills me with dread. They are so small...

Turning back toward Slavic and his female, I see that her eyes are open. She tenses

up as I approach and he reaches down, touching her arm in what is supposed to be a soothing manner. I know he means it as such, but she does not. His next words are ones of reassurance.

“ You are safe little one, and we are going to get you better.”

“ I hope those growls are not telling me how you’re preparing me as a delicacy for your next alien social. I can see the menu now, ‘specialty this evening, a redheaded human being served as the main course’.”

Slavic’s yellow-green gaze looks up at me with a small smile at his female’s feistiness, given her condition. Shaking my head, I smirk. Slavic is going to have his hands full with that one. Reaching out, I turn her over slightly so that I can administer the sedative, her dark eyes following my every movement with blatant suspicion lurking in their depths. I watch as her eyelids get heavier while she fights to keep them open. It takes longer than it should for her to fully succumb to the sedative’s effects, which proves she was doing her best to fight its influence. Her eyes move to watch me as I inject her with a numbing agent.

Finally , her eyes close and stay closed as her body relaxes and her breathing evens out. Assured she is fully anesthetized, I prep her for surgery by first giving her fluids of the same saline solution that I have my mate hooked up to. Pulling my tray of surgical tools closer, I lean over her tiny form and begin the arduous task of mending her broken body. Deciding to repair the minor damage first, I reach for her wrist and palpate the bones. They do not feel that much different from the bones that make up a Rukuhks , so with that in mind, I flick my fingers as gently as I can, and feel the bones re-break. Grabbing her little hand, I pull it and her wrist apart, making room for the broken ends of the bones to line up before I reach for a holding cast and slide it over the damaged area. Pressing down, I make sure the material is snug around the break before moving on to her shoulder.

Picking up a mild accelerator, I inject it into her shoulder. This particular infusion is designed to target torn muscles, tendons and ligaments to help them regain structural soundness as well as fluidity within the joint. I dare not give her more than a small dose, as her system cannot tolerate instigating a rapid healing cycle where the accelerators force the torn tissue back together perfectly. It is hard even on species as hardy as mine and the added stress on the body has been known to cause heart failure in some species. Not a risk I am willing to take with a fragile human. Those issues taken care of the best I can, I focus on the horrific wound in her thigh. Velgriddix are nasty creatures and always leave something behind when they cause a wound. Sure enough, once I open the wound back up, I find multiple spurs in the meat of her leg. The inflammation and dark streaks around them tell me she was slowly dying from infection as well as the toxin inherent to the fracking bugs. She would not have made it much longer without medical intervention. Pulling what I hope is the last of the spurs from her leg, I make quick work of closing the wound up. It will leave a scar, but at least she is out of immediate danger. Raising up, I stretch my back out after being hunched over.

“ I believe I got all the spurs out of her leg, but we will have to watch it closely for the next few risings, just in case. Her shoulder, I hate to say, will probably always bother her some, but I was able to fully reset her wrist. I put a holding cast on it temporarily until the bones set. I feel like a back-planet medic here, Slavic . Some of these wounds could have been healed instantly, but I am too scared of the side effects that could occur simply because I do not have the data to treat them accurately.”

“ But she will survive?”

“ Yes , I believe they will both pull out of this, just not quickly. Mine has some internal injuries that have me worried. The scans say that I have reversed her lung issues, and it keeps confirming that she is stable. But whereas your mate’s wounds are new, mine were old. From what the scans are telling me, she has been abused ... for a very long time.”



That thought fills me with a dark rage that comes out in a low, rumbling growl as my words hang in the air between us. A ding from the medi-bed computers tells me that the DNA analysis is done. Reaching up, I pull the screen down from where I angled it out of the way and pour over the results, scrolling through the information rapidly as I absorb it faster than most beings can think. “ Well , at least one question is answered. They are blood sisters.”

An abrupt banging on the wall causes Slavic to snarl and lean protectively over his mate. It does nothing but prod the rage bubbling in my belly. Pulling a cover out from under the bed, I hand it to Slavic . “ Here Slavic , put this on her and once she is covered, I will see what the frack they have been insistently pinging our comm units about.”

Stomping over to the door, I glance back to make sure Slavic has her covered up before I unlock the door to find Ruarc and Falon standing in the hallway. Nano -tics after the door slides open, Ruarc is in my face, snarling at me in outrage. “ What the frack is going on in here that is so important that neither one of you can take a moment to answer your comms? You are needed out here.”

“ We had pressing issues to deal with, Ruarc . What do you need?” I growl right back at him. Bikar , Murgul or Falon told him exactly what I was doing and why. I know they did, so why is he acting so fracking crazy?

“ I don’t know, maybe the fact that I have a sick Princess in my quarters and could use some help? Not to mention that Falon and Bikar have both given up their beds for the other three.”

“ Other three what?”

Slavic’s snarled question saves me from having to ask the same thing.

“ Well , if you would grace us with your charming presence big brother, you could see for yourself.”

Catching Slavic’s apprehensive look down at his mate, I rush to offer him what little assurance I can. “ They will be out for at least half a rotation. I have the monitors set to alert me if they so much as twitch.”

It is as much an assurance for myself, as it is for him. Rukuhks aren’t meant to be separated from their mates, let alone so soon after meeting them, but these are extreme circumstances. Waiting for Slavic to make a decision, I watch as he wrestles with himself over leaving his mate before following Ruarc and Falon out the door. Taking a deep breath, I force myself to follow them down the hall to the crew quarters where Falon hesitates before opening the door to his room.

“ Well ?”

At Slavic’s prompting, he presses his hand against the entry panel, and I see Slavic rub his hands across his face as we all see three frightened human females staring back at us from the far side of the main room. The more we speak amongst ourselves, the worse their fear gets. It is clear the humans cannot understand a word we are saying.

“ Get them cleaned up, clothed, and provide something to eat, Falon .”

“ I already suggested that, but they cannot understand a word we say.”

It is crushing to all of us that these defenseless females have been treated so poorly. We may not necessarily be good males, but we are not evil either. The poor little females are all emaciated to the point they are more bone than flesh. Slavic’s next words reiterate what my medical mind observed.

“ Gods , they are nothing but skin and bones. Einar , see to Kallen because in the midst of all this confusion, I completely forgot about her, and she was in very rough shape. To the point where she had given up, and she thought I was a ghost sent by the gods to take her into the afterlife. ... Bikar ?”

Kallen ? So , I was not imaging things during the chaos on the Velgriddix ship. That really was Kallen !

“ I am listening.”

Mentally I roll my eyeballs, of course Bikar is listening. The annoying little shet is always listening but whether he actually heeds you or not is the important part.

“ These females are terrified, so find something on this bucket of bolts that can be used to translate so that they know what we are saying.”

“ I am on it.”

Bikar spins on his heel and heads back toward the bridge where his main computer is. Turning , I start to make my way up the hall to Ruarc’s room when Slavic’s next words stop me.

“ Einar , before you leave, if Kallen feels up to it, try to figure out how she got on that bug ship. We need to know where they captured her, and she said she was also looking for ‘ Ruby ’. Figure out who or what that is.”

Nodding that I understand, I head off to Ruarc’s room and the Princess he is hiding.

### Chapter Twenty-One

#### EINAR

As quickly as he had revealed himself moments ago when I requested entry, Ruarc hid his snarling face behind the sliding door of his private quarters. Having a door metaphorically slammed in your face while being told to frack off isn't something that has happened to me in some time. I would have gone to check on Kallen regardless of what Slavic ordered me to do, but I was not expecting this sort of reaction from Ruarc at all.

There are questions that we need answers to and Kallen is the only one that can give them to us. Not to mention her physical condition is almost as bad as my mate's and the other humans we found on the Velgriddix ship. I can only surmise that she lasted far longer than various other species due to the sturdiness of being a Rukuhk . We are notoriously difficult to kill and that was before the Aynar and their ... improvements .

Shaking my head at his stupidity, I turn and make my way back to the med bay. If he is going to refuse my help, I can at least bring some basic care items and leave them outside the door. My brother is acting a fool, but he is not truly lacking in intelligence. He will use what I bring to help his mate. Fate will allow nothing less, regardless of his feelings on the matter.

Slavic is not going to be happy about this at all...

Two risings later.

“ Einar , how much longer do you think?”

I have to bite back a sigh when Slavic asks me the same question he has been asking me on repeat for the last two risings. My answer is borderline exasperated, but I cannot truly be annoyed with my oldest brother. He asks only because he cares so very much and does not have the medical training that I do. So , he only sees his mate convalescing with little to no change in her outward condition.

“ Slavic , she is healing, and that takes time. You should enjoy the peace and quiet while you can because I have no doubt that when she awakens, things are going to get complicated quickly. Especially since Bikar can't seem to replicate the translators. We are lucky that Kallen can understand them and has talked to the others...otherwise, this would have been a real shet show.”

“ Has she revealed anything yet?”

Frustration wells within me at his question. Ruarc has still not let me assess Kallen's condition, and it is beginning to vex me deeply. She needs medical care, and the fracker is being exceptionally narrowminded about everything when it comes to “ Princess Kallen .” The dumbard is constantly spouting drivel that we are not worthy of being in her presence, let alone touching her. Not even as a medic. Seems like cutting one's tusk off to spite their face if you ask me.

“ No , and Ruarc won't let anyone get close enough to her to ask any more questions. He is fighting his bond with her and no matter what I say, he refuses to change his mind on the subject. I could hear them arguing about her talking to the humans all the way in the dining chamber.”

“ Who would have thought Einar , that our brother's mate was our Princess and the female we all watched grow up? It is sad all the time they have missed together.”

Nodding my head, I agree with Slavic .

“ At least now they have a chance at fulfilling that bond. That is, if Ruarc can get his head out of his backside before he ruins it. If we had remained on Viri 9, they would never have interacted with each other. Our status was ...”

Slavic’s head snaps up to look at me when my voice trails off. I must stop speaking as the words feel like broken shards of metal in my throat. Taking a deep breath, I force myself to continue. “ They would not have ever crossed paths, and I think that is even sadder. I think that is why Ruarc is fighting the bond. He feels like he is not good enough for her, which breaks my hearts. So many pray and hunt for their mates, never realizing they may have walked right past them at some point in their lives. Personally , I am glad this is his fate and burden to bear and not mine. I cannot say I would be behaving any differently in his situation.”

“ Ruarc should not doubt the gods. A bond cannot be forced or mimicked. He is not only hurting Kallen but angering the gods that gave her to him. Complete foolishness.”

I meant what I said... if my mate were to be one that was in a station far above mine, I would be of a somewhat similar mindset to Ruarc . The caste system we were raised in is something very difficult to overcome. We haven’t been part of our society for many cycles, but the lessons of our youth are still present in our minds. The ding of my med bay computer pulls my attention to the results on the screen. Skimming through them, I analyze the data and relief fills me when I reach the end of the report. Looking over at Slavic , I happily relay the news.

“ Good news, Slavic . It appears your mate no longer needs the hydration meds. I will start unhooking her, which means she should wake up in the next half a rising.”

“ You are just trying to get rid of us.”

His teasing words make me smile, but my humor does not last long as reality begins to set in.

“ Possibly , but I have a feeling my mate will not be as receptive as yours.”

“ Einar , at least yours is no longer multiple colors, and you even managed to get that torture device off her. I can hardly imagine the purpose of something like that unless it was humiliation or a show of ownership. All our lives, we prayed for our world’s females to be protected, while others openly abused theirs.”

“ Your words are true Slavic . However , the one thing I have learned as a medic is that the body normally heals quicker than the mind. A good example is Murgul . If you simply glanced at him as you walked by, you would see a male in his prime. No one truly knows the power of our minds until they are crushed from within. Have you decided what you are going to do about the translators?”

That is a question that has been at the forefront of my mind. My mate has obviously been abused for many cycles. Ending up in the hands of the Velgriddix was just the culmination of what she appears to have suffered in her young life. It would be a far smoother introduction if she could understand what I am saying when I speak to her. The thought of causing her any undue stress at all fills me with dismay.

“ After much thought, I told Bikar to head to Navale . We should be able to pick up something there. My biggest worry is when the vendor asks why we need them, what do I say? The fact that we have females on board cannot be known. The Zenith has substantial fire power, and she can hold her own easily against most others. But if word gets out once we are on Navale , she would not survive a direct shot from a destroyer, or a swarm ship. I am going to send Falon out to obtain them while the Zenith refuels. He informed me that he knows of a dealer on the lower level of Navale that won’t ask questions if the credits are enough. We really have no credits to spare, but I gave him what remained, anyway. Bikar and Murgul are going to

supervise the sale of the cargo while I oversee the refueling. That leaves you and Ruarc to watch over the females.

There were some feminine products and garments in one of the crates we procured from the Velgriddix . I told Murgul to take the entire thing to the females, but depending on his mood, who knows if he did or not? Once we dock, I have decided to engage the locks on Falon and Murgul's rooms so that they must remain inside. The last thing we need is for them to suddenly get brave and exit the ship. We would have to fight every pirate in this sector to get them back. I hate that the females are scared when there is no reason for them to be. Bikar has been delivering their meals to the rooms, leaving them at the door, then retrieving them later. The others have tried everything to interact with them, but they simply huddle together every time the door is opened. It would help if Kallen could speak to them more.

However , Ruarc won't let Kallen out of his room, stating that she is too weak, and I blame him not. Frack , I would react the same way, if not possibly worse. Shet , I already am. Even now I am changing things to protect our mates at all costs. This whole experience is new to me and now I am doubting every decision, something I have never done in the past. One of the things rolling through my mind is the fact that the Zenith is not big enough for all of us. If we remain on the same path, we will be forced to start making some serious modifications or possibly need to trade her for something larger. Then the next issue is, how are we going to continue to fund this little adventure if we are all too scared to put our mates at risk?"

Frowning , I realize that we are in a predicament. I've been so busy with trying to save our mates that I have not had time to think ahead like Slavic obviously has. This is a specific example of why he is our captain. It is not just because he is the oldest, it is because he looks at a problem from many different angles before making a decision on how to proceed. If we knew where Kallen was taken from, several of the issues we are facing would be solved.



“ Has Kallen told Ruarc where she was taken?”

“ No , and he has been such an ass she has withdrawn and is now refusing to speak to him. Even though that is frustrating, it does not really matter in the scheme of things. I am not going to take her back to a planet that has been invaded, just to have her recaptured. Going back to see if we can find any survivors is agreeable, but Kallen will not be returning permanently. We either need to find a home planet to call our own or obtain another ship. Although right now, both of those options seem unattainable.”

“ This is a path new to both of us Slavic . Leave it to the gods and all will be answered in time. Let us go find some sustenance because my innards are rumbling.”

“ You go on Einar I will stay and watch over them.”

We’ve been in the med-bay long enough and both of us need a break. Our mates are not going anywhere, and we cannot afford to let our bodies weaken, so I immediately reject Slavic’s offer.

“ No , you are going to come with me. The moment either of them awaken the problems you think you have now are going to be laughable in comparison. Take a tic to quiet your mind, because you are going to need your wits about you sooner rather than later, my brother.”

“ This would be much easier with translators.”

“ Possibly Slavic , but then maybe not. Either way, they will wake terrified and confused. Words alone will simply not make those emotions disappear, only our actions will.”

“ What has made you so wise all of a sudden, brother?”

“ Dealing with Murgul has taught me to look inside a problem. It has given me insight into things I never wanted to know.”

Slavic nods and glances away from me. I can tell he is fighting with his anger and self-loathing over what was done to our younger brother. He reluctantly follows me out the door, his smaller frame trailing behind me. My inability to heal Murgul is a burden that weighs just as heavily on me now as it did when we first found him as a broken mound of flesh. Even with all the knowledge the Aynar shoved into my brain, I am not a deity. There are things that I cannot repair, mend or correct. Flesh can only take so much abuse before it is beyond the help a medic can provide.

As Slavic and I turn the corner, we meet Bikar just as he is about to enter the dining hall. His large arms are full of trays empty of food. A slight smile creases Slavic's face as he calls out to Bikar . “ I see the females are eating. That is a good sign.”

“ They were more receptive this rising, and I even managed to get a few words from the one with twirly hair. We will be docking this rotation with the Navale , and I wanted to make sure that they were fed before we lock the ship down.”

Slavic nods at Bikar as we both walk into the dining hall. Moving over to the replicator, I wait for Slavic to make his selection and move away before entering the code for my favorite comfort meal. The smell of roasted meat makes my mouth water a bit as I pull a chair out at the table across from Slavic and Bikar . Slavic is absently shoveling an unappetizing-looking gruel into his mouth in giant bites, as if he does not taste what he is eating.

Shuddering at what he is cramming into his mouth, I cut into my meal and begin eating. The flavorful food is satisfying at least one of my needs. Reaching down, I adjust my semi-hard pivy. I have been erect or partially erect since I caught my mate's scent, and it is not the most comfortable state to be in. Grabbing my privates, I have to bite back a groan as I finally find a comfortable position before focusing back

on my food.

Motion across the table catches my attention and I see Slavic is rubbing at the mating collar around his neck as if it itches. That's odd. Mine burned like a plasma bolt the second my skin first met my mate's more delicate skin, but I have not had any other sensations in the darkened flesh since. Bikar tries to engage us in conversation a few times, but when he cannot get a rise out of either one of us, he finally falls quiet.

Suddenly , Slavic bolts out of the dining hall without warning. Knowing there is only one thing that could inspire that sort of reaction, I rush to my feet and follow him out the door and back down the hall to the med bay. My longer legs allow me to catch up to him just as he slides to a stop in front of the door and slams his hand down on the security control panel. Following him into the room, I almost crash into his back when he abruptly stops, his body frozen as he stares at the sight before us.

### Chapter Twenty-Two

#### EINAR

Averting my eyes, I stare at the ceiling, so Slavic is not tempted to rip my eyeballs from my skull for looking at his mate. Repairing her body was the one and only exception to viewing her without coverings since she's crouched over the top of my mate, brandishing one of my sharper medical knives as she snarls at us in a desperate attempt to protect her sister from a non-existent threat. Only ... she does not know that.

“Stay the fuck back.”

Her snarled words do not cause the response she wants because Slavic is just standing there, staring at her with his heart in his eyes.

“I wondered if you were real, but damn, seeing is believing that's for sure. You can put those eyes of yours back in your head Big and Ugly . I've never been one who enjoyed being gawked at.”

Slavic grumbles out a response, even though we all know the humans cannot understand us. “Little Starshine , get down from there. You are safe. No being in this room will hurt you.”

“Look , I think we've already had this discussion. I have no idea what the hell you're rambling on about. With so many different species out here, ... wherever the hell here is, you'd think some smart ass would have found a way to fix this damn language

barrier.”

Concern fills me so I ease around Slavic , and I stalk over to the bed where my unconscious mate is still lying. I must startle Slavic’s mate because she had slightly lowered her weapon, but my appearance at her sister’s side must come across as an act of aggression. Her hand holding the knife darts out and slices a gash down the length of my forearm.

Gnashing my teeth against the hot pain emanating from the cut, I bare my teeth at her, both tusks fully exposed, in aggravation as my dark red blood drips down my arm onto the floor and bed.

I just cleaned this whole room and now I’m bleeding all over the place.

Slavic’s female moves away from me, pulling my mate with her as she goes.

“ We can do this all day, Green Giant , but you are not touching my sister.”

Snarling , I start toward her and watch as she recoils. I am so determined to get to my mate that I do not notice that Slavic took extreme offense to me growling at his mate. His protective instincts are going wild, just like mine. His rough hands grab me and launch me across the room toward the door. I land with a boom as my massive body collides with the unforgiving wall and pain radiates through my entire body.

“ What the frack, Slavic ?!”

Raising my head, I see Slavic standing over the top of me. His chest is heaving up and down as he fights an internal battle. I unintentionally provoked him even though his mate denied me access to my mate. Bracing myself, I wait to see if he is going to lose his shet on me or if he will regain control of himself.

A few nano-tics go by and when he doesn't continue kicking my rear, I slowly rise to my feet, keeping a leery eye on him. Just because I am bigger does not automatically mean that I will win a fight with my older brother. We are evenly matched on that point.

Deep , wracking coughs snap my attention back across the room, and I watch as my mate sits up. The spines along my back begin to shift and rattle as my mate attains consciousness. Joy spreads through me and I start to go to her, but the second I move in that direction Slavic loses his shet. He grabs my long black hair in one hand and my throat in the other and uses his hold on me to throw me backward and out the door into the hallway.

Normally I am the calm one, but enough is enough. The leash I normally keep on my temper disappears as if it never was as Slavic and I start brawling like ill-mannered youths just outside the med bay as the females watch us, fear etched into their faces. Bikar appears out of nowhere and slams into Slavic and I , forcing us apart. Slavic is standing there, chest puffing with each breath and glaring at me. Bikar is talking but neither of us can hear him over the roaring of our blood in our ears. The gratuitous violence must be too much for my fragile mate because a faint whimper freezes me in place, my fist frozen in mid-motion as my head jerks around, peering at her through the open door.

A single moment of inattention is the opening Slavic has been waiting for because he lunges past Bikar and lands a solid punch on my jaw, hitting me so hard, his knuckles slide along my jawline and catch on one of my tusks, splitting the skin open as blood flies through the air.

Slavic's bold mate whispers to mine, but I am too far away to hear what is said. When my mate offers no verbal reply but starts having a coughing fit...

FRACK . THIS . SHET .

Without warning, I dart past Slavic and back into the med-bay. My mate needs medical attention, and I am the gods' frackin' MEDIC . No one, not her sister or my brother, is going to stop me from taking care of her. Storming across the room, I stop in front of Slavic's mate and snatch the knife from her before she can bleed me with it again. Tossing it aside, I pick her up and fling her at a fast approaching, enraged Slavic . His arms snap around her securely as I point at the med-bay door.

“ Get the frack out of my med-bay, Slavic . My mate is in distress and yours is causing nothing but problems. I cannot help my mate with her here, so get gone!”

The female in Slavic's arms is not stupid. She immediately figures out that we are separating her from her sister, and she goes wild. I wince in sympathy before my mate's weak cry breaks my hearts. Her voice is filled with so much fear and despair, it is painful to hear.

Lord , why? Why did I wake up?

If we're being really honest, waking up was the last thing I wanted to do. I shouldn't be surprised to wake up in yet another unfamiliar place, but I can't help but look around in leery astonishment. I'm lying on a rather comfortable bed, in what appears to be some sort of medical facility. Forcing my eyes open, they immediately land on an IV line connected to a tube that runs into the wall at my side, dripping some sort of clear liquid into it. I guess some things really are universal. Someone , or something, saved my life.

Pity .

A commotion of some sort catches my attention. Painstakingly , I roll my head in the direction the noise is coming from, only to realize Ruby is crouched over the top of me ... and she's buck ass naked. I really didn't need to see a closeup of her snatch, but here we are anyway. If I had any humor left in me, it would be almost comical the

position I'm in. However , relief fills me that my sister is alive and seemingly well, or at least okay enough to crawl on top of me to protect me from whatever is making that awful racket.

Lifting my head, I peek around her bare ass and what I see fills me with terror. There are massive ... things fighting outside the door of the room Ruby and I are in. They're almost as big as the sneaky snakes that stole us from Earth . One is a dark gray color that reminds me of a stone gargoyle, but the other ... He's even bigger than the gray one and is a mossy green color with brown undertones. It reminds me of peat moss and it's almost pretty. If it weren't attached to a being almost twice my size with a mouth twisted by a huge pair of tusks, two massive horns that would put Hellboy to shame sticking out of his forehead, and spikey looking things sticking out of his back. A being that is currently trying to maim another of its own species from the looks of it.

Preparing myself for pain, I force myself upwards. To my surprise, my body isn't in any discomfort, but I feel the tickle in the back of my throat and know what's coming before it starts.

Great . Yet another coughing fit. What I wouldn't do for a hit of albuterol right now.

A whimper escapes me, and it causes the green giant to freeze in place, his head snapping around to peer across the room at me where I'm peeking from behind Ruby's body, watching them fight. The gray one must see big green's inattention as an opportunity, because he sucker punches Big Green in the face, cutting his knuckles open on Moss Man's tusk in the process as I watch the blood arc through the air.

Grabbing onto Ruby's arm, I notice the little knife she's holding as I use her to help pull myself up all the way up. Once I'm in a sitting position, I focus on a few deep breathing exercises as Ruby whispers a question at me.



“ Are you ok?”

No , Ruby . I am not okay.

The words are lodged in my throat, and I can feel tremors wracking my body as panic begins to take over my mind and I stare back at the colossal green creature looking at me. I know better than to let myself get upset when I’m already having issues breathing, but my mind is at its limit. My panic blooms and I feel my airways closing up, which causes me to start coughing again.

To preoccupied with suffocating, I miss Moss Man approaching until Ruby’s comforting weight is gone. Snapping my eyes open, I watch as she flies through the air, presumably thrown by the snarling mass of green in front of me, and lands in the gray gargoyle’s arms. Moss Man’s gigantic arm is lifted, and I follow the length to a lethal, clawed finger pointed at the door.

It doesn’t take a genius to figure out he wants everyone else to leave. Including my sister! I watch as Ruby loses her shit.

“ Ruby ...”

My weak call only makes it worse because Ruby doubles down as she desperately tries to get out of the gargoyle’s arms and back to me. The last thing I see as the door slides shut behind them is her flailing in a monster’s arms.

Focusing on the menacing mass of green in front of me, I feel myself retreating into the comforting, quiet place in my mind. I’m not sure what he wants from me, but the possession blazing in his creepy, dead yellow eyes promises nothing but pain. The last conscious visual I have is of him reaching for me as I blissfully slip into my happy place.

### Chapter Twenty-Three

#### EINAR

Looking down at her, I see that my mate, my precious Starshine , is awake, but her mind is far, far away. What horrors has she dealt with that she developed the ability to disassociate in such a manner? I have seen this before in beings that were no longer able to tolerate what life had done to them, so I can only imagine why she has this ability.

And none of the scenarios that my mind comes up with are good.

After Slavic took his fiery mate with him and left the med bay, I saw her beautiful, multicolored eyes lose their light as she realized her sister had been taken from the room. It is blatantly apparent that my little one is dependent upon her sister for stability, and without her sister's comforting presence, she does not have the fortitude to remain in the here and now.

Her breathing is labored but nothing near what it was when I rescued her from the Velgriddix . Leaving her where she is for the moment, I lumber over to the cabinet full of vials and select one of the remaining containers of the corticosteroid I've been treating her lungs with. Considering how advanced the medicine I have access to is, this should be the last dose I have to give her before she is cured of the disease attacking her airways.

Moving back to her, I am glad to see that none of the events from earlier disturbed her fluid line. Picking up a syringe with a needle attached, I draw the solution from

the vial and inject it into the port, waiting and watching as her breathing gradually slows and eases. Finally , the slight wheeze in her chest ceases, and I sigh in relief. One problem solved at least.

Stinging in my arm brings my attention to the wound inflicted by Slavic's mate. It is still seeping blood, and I do not want to soil my mate's cleanliness. Checking her once more, I see that there is no change and deem it safe enough to tend to myself. Reaching for my medical tray, I slide it closer to me as I lean against the bed parallel to my Starshine . Thankfully , my tray is still fully stocked since I worked to save both little humans lives.

Biting back a hiss, I clean the wound with a burning antiseptic. It is good the other female cut me with one of my medical knives. The edges of the wound are clean and will be easy to suture. Once I'm sure the cut is thoroughly clean, not that my medical tools aren't always sterilized after each use, I grab the stitcher, and press it to the flayed edges, clicking the handle as I move down the gash until it is completely closed. Once finished, I give myself an injection of antibiotics and call it good.

Sliding the tray out of the way, I stand and step closer to my mate. She hasn't moved the entire time I saw to her and myself. If not for the slow, steady breathing and blinking eyelids, I would think she was dead. The thought of her ceasing to live fills me with so much dread I cannot stop myself from scooping her up into my arms. Turning , I ease my considerable bulk onto the soft surface of the med bed. The joy of holding her cannot be described, even if she has not given me her permission to touch or embrace her. I never thought I would be blessed with a Starshine , and yet ... here I sit with her safely ensconced in my arms.

Would it be better if she was cognizant and talking to me?

Yes , but I will not be ungrateful for what I was gifted.

I am a healer, am I not?

Perhaps the gods had a reason for what the Aynar did to me ... The knowledge they ruthlessly forced into my brain, cycle after cycle. It was all for her. So that when she came to me, I would have what I needed to save not only her life, but the life of her beloved sibling.

Thinking back on all the pain and torture ... it is worth it now. That is not something I ever thought I would feel about the time I endured with the cursed fairies, but here we are. Time slides by and I am not sure how long I sit, just basking in the company of my mate, the feeling of her tiny body pressed against mine. I begin speaking to her, my deep voice low and gentle as I comb my thick fingers through her dark red tresses.

“ I do not know if you can hear me wherever it is that you have hidden yourself, little Starshine . Just know that I would sooner slit my own throat than cause you any harm. I have waited for you my entire life. Please , give me a chance. That is all I ask for.”

My broken words elicit no response from her, as expected. She does not twitch, sigh, or even blink in acknowledgment to the sound of my voice. Sighing heavily, I stand, turn and gently lay her back down on the bed, situating her body in a comfortable position, her limbs as malleable as a toy figurine.

“ I still do not even know your name, little mate. Considering your sister’s apparent and extreme antipathy for me, I sincerely doubt that she will be willing to assist me in learning it.”

Another soft ping from my comm grabs my attention. Glancing at it, I see that Bikar has sent me yet another message. Ignoring it, just like the others he has sent recently, I begin checking my mate’s vital signs yet again. I cannot help it. I came so close to

losing her that ensuring she still lives is almost a compulsion at this point in time.

Suddenly , I feel the Zenith jerk beneath my feet and all around me, signaling that the ship has either come to a complete halt ... or we have docked at Navale . As far as I was aware, that was the plan, and I have no reason to think Slavic changed his mind.

Are we really at Navale so soon?

I no sooner have that thought when Bikar overrides the lock on the med bay door and strolls in.

“ Brother , I bring news and orders from our esteemed leader and oldest sibling!”

Bikar’s overly cheerful voice is grating in the peace and quiet of my med bay. I pray whatever female fate pairs him with has boundless limits of patience because I am the most easy going of all of us and I still want to beat him to a pulp more often than not.

“ You can tell Slavic that I am not going aboard Navale . I am staying here with my Starshine . She needs me.”

I am not sure what my face looks like, but Bikar’s normally exuberant face falls a bit at my words. “ I cannot imagine what you are feeling right now, Einar . But she is not the only one who needs you. Her needs are great, yes, but there are other females on this ship that require your medical expertise and our lifegiver would be disappointed in all of us if we did not do our utmost to help them the best we can. That being said, you are the best we can offer. You are the finest medic in the entire Void , bar none. However , Slavic’s exact words were, ‘ Let him know I will put his ass in a holding cell if he does not do his part. There will be no mercy given to anyone who will not protect ALL the females. He is not the only one being forced away from their Starshine .’”

Guilt fills me. He is correct.

I have been selfish, which is unlike me.

What do I do with you while I am gone, little one?

Nodding at Bikar , I go to the cabinet and snag a vial of sedative.

“ Einar , what is it that you do?”

“ My mate ... she is not right.”

I catch his look of confusion before he asks.

“ I do not know what you mean...”

“ You have seen Slavic’s mate, yes? She is full of fire and spunk with a sharp tongue. Mine is nothing like that, no matter that they are full-blooded sisters. I cannot chance her waking up here alone without me, or more importantly, her sister.”

He observes me as I inject the sedative into her saline line, and we both watch as her eyes close as the drugs go to work.

“ I will tend to the other human females as soon as we complete our task at Navale . Since none of them have expired as of yet, I know none of their wounds are life threatening. Will that suffice?”

Bikar starts walking toward the door at my question. “ I do not see why not. Your words make sense. Slavic wants you to guard the ramp in case someone breaks through the outer hull locks. I am headed back to the control center; I need to keep track of everyone.”

Nodding my understanding, I head to my room and grab my axes. Buckling my belt around my thickness, I drop both my axes into the weapon frogs on either side of my waist. Walking through my room into the connecting med bay, I check on my mate once more, trailing my fingers through her beautiful red hair, before exiting the room and heading toward the ramp.

### Chapter Twenty-Four

#### EINAR

Standing at the top of the ramp, my massive feet braced shoulder width apart, I glare at the closed cargo bay door before me. Slavic , Ruarc , Murgul , and Falon are off the Zenith , leaving Bikar on board to monitor everyone's location and me here to guard the main entrance on and off the ship. Our comms are all tuned to the shared channel, and I have been listening with increasing alarm as Ruarc and Slavic relay information.

“ We must get the frack out of here now. The Velgriddix have issued a bounty for any information concerning a certain flesh cargo and the pirates that stole them. Apparently , the main swarm ships are under the assumption that there was a breeding princess on board. They even sent out a detailed description of the ship, and guess who it resembles?”

The bottom drops out of my stomach at Ruarc's words, and it takes everything in me to remain where Slavic ordered me to stay, guarding the ramp. My instincts are clamoring at me to return to my Starshine's side and protect her at all costs.

“ Shet , get back on board, but we will need to stall as long as possible. They just started refueling and Falon's comm signal is flashing. I am going to head down to the lower levels to see if I can find him, but you leave us if it becomes necessary.”

Frack .



That . Is . Not . Good .

We cannot afford for Falon to become lost on the lower levels. Not with a drayt bounty on our heads now. To my relief, Falon's voice sounds off shortly after I hear Slavic get on the lift. Thank the gods of Ruk , Slavic found Falon .

“ Calm yourself brother, your anxiousness is bringing unwanted attention our way.”

“ They can smell the females on us, and the Velgriddix have issued a bounty. We need to leave now!”

WHAT DOES HE MEAN THEY CAN SMELL OUR FEMALES ? WHO IS “ THEY ”?

I cannot believe that I did not think that with all the other species on Navale that some of them have superior senses ... such as smell. I am pulled from my inner reverie by Falon's next words. “ I am well aware, as my informant met me the moment I stepped off the lift. We are known to attack first and ask questions later, so for now, just keep that snarl on your face and walk with me.”

“ Did you get what we needed?”

“ I did, and then some. The females should be happy, if we make it back to the ship that is. Don't look now, but we are being trailed by a Jynrel .”

Falon was assigned to get translators, so at least one thing went well this rising, but the fact that the two of them are being trailed by a stinking Jynrel does not bode well. Slavic's snarled question sounds off next.

“ How did this news get out so rapidly?”

Nodding my head, I silently agree. I would very much like to know the answer to that question as well. The whine of the door snaps my attention to the main cargo bay door. Ah , that must be Murgul or Ruarc , quite possibly both of them. Bikar wouldn't have lowered the main door if there was a risk of anyone other than one of our brothers entering the Zenith .

“ No clue, big brother. Comm Bikar and tell him to get the Zenith ready to launch as quickly as possible.”

Snickering , I shake my head as I watch Murgul and Ruarc rush inside. Bikar does not allow the main door to open any more than absolutely necessary for both of them to enter the ship, and Murgul almost gets his tail caught when Bikar then rapidly closes the door. He wordlessly snarls at me as he takes up the position on my right as Ruarc slides into position on my left.

Bikar's next words make all three of us tense.

“ Got a slight problem with that Slavic . I just happened to look down at our fuel status, only to realize instead of it increasing, they were siphoning it out. I managed to shut off the main fuel valve, but now we have less than we did when we got here. We need that fuel Slavic , but I do not want to open the ramp to go out and confront them. Especially now that there have been several Korgons spotted at the entrance gate. I think they're waiting on us to lower the ramps.”

Frack . That is not good at all.

The Korgons must have showed up right after Ruarc and Murgul got back on board. Talk about timing ... had they been a nano-tic later... we would be battling Korgons and Jynrels , trying to keep them off the ship.

Pulling my axes from my side, I twirl them, loosening my wrists and arms up. Out of

the corner of my eye, I see Ruarc and Murgul draw their weapons and warm their muscles up in preparation for a fight. Korgons are every bit as big as I am, and extremely difficult to beat in a fight. Fair or foul. Those blue, four armed pieces of filth never travel alone, but I refuse to let one of them get passed me. They will defile our Starshines , killing them in the process. There is a reason the Commanders have that entire species on their metaphorical kill list. Not that those esteemed males would ever openly admit they have such a list.

If the Korgons are going to invade the Zenith , it will be through the door in front of me. There is no way they will fit the bulk of their bodies through any of the other openings ... well, not easily anyway. And that does not even count the fracking Jynrels , that run in packs. A rough growl proceeds Slavic's next words.

“ Looks like we are going to have to improvise then, Bikar . Look on the scanners and tell me what other ships similar in size are docked.”

“ On the North side is a Jynrel ship that is being loaded now, so the ramps are open. Oh wait. Well , would you look at that? Seems like the gods are looking out for us this rising. An Emperor Pyrkyne cruiser just docked two bays down from us. However , the fuel tanks are a match, as are the remote connections. Its cargo hold is cloaked, so I cannot see what they are hauling. The Navale's log is showing this is a drop and pick up, so they will not be here long.”

I feel my lip curl as Bikar mentions that filthy race of beings before Slavic barks out his next rapid-fire question.

“ Firepower ?”

“ Nothing the Zenith can't handle. Their crew is small, but you know how overly confident those pigs are.”

“ Can you disconnect the fuel hose without exiting the ship?”

“ Already did, then set the hull to shock any who touch her.”

“ Excellent , we are at the lift headed your way. Keep me updated.”

Taking a deep breath, I force myself to relax as I listen to Bikar and Slavic snap back and forth at each other. My brothers are returning to the Zenith , and we have a plan. Slavic’s plans have never failed us before, and I have full confidence in him as my brother and our captain. The faint sound of the lift tells me that Slavic and Falon are on their way back up from the lower levels.

“ If we encounter any resistance, you get to the ship. The females need those translators. Worst case, leave me and I will catch the next ride out of here.”

“ No can-do big brother, where you go, I go. So , pull those big boy breeches up, and let us get to the ship.”

Relief fills me at Falon’s words. None of us will permit Slavic to stay behind, that is unacceptable.

“ Bikar , open the cargo bay door wide enough for Falon and I to slide in and then take off. We will make our way up to the main areas once the ship is out of the Navale’s orbit.”

“ Frack , brother, that is going to be a rough few tics. It gets mighty cold in the cargo bay.”

That is an extreme understatement. But ... what other choice do we have?

“ You have any other ideas? Falon and I can hold our own easily against the Jynrel ,

but not if they are joined by the three Korgons that just walked onto the dock. We cannot risk lowering the main ramp.”

Vibration beneath my feet tells me that Bikar is lowering the cargo bay door, and they are going to proceed with that plan. There is no way that the Korgons , or the Jynrel can gain access to the Zenith through the main door, not with Bikar in control of all the systems onboard.

“ Slavic , get that door closed or both of you can say your goodbyes.”

Bikar’s shout comes just after the Zenith jerks all around us, signaling our departure from Navale .

“ Shock the hull, the fracker won’t let go.”

Fracking Korgons are not the brightest species, but even they know that one zap from a ship the size of the Zenith will kill them, so it doesn’t surprise me when the clang of the cargo bay door rattles through the floor.

“ That was too close.” Falon huffs out.

“ I agree little brother. Let us grab a few of these crates and head up. I would prefer to escape this cold as quickly as possible.”

At least it sounds like Ruarc and Falon were successful in more than just translators. The human females need coverings desperately, and I agree with Ruarc . I do not want my precious Starshine to touch anything the fracking bugs did.

“ Bikar , get everyone to the helm and keep track of that Pyrkyne cruiser.”

“ Already ahead of you.”

Turning , I motion for Murgul and Ruarc to join me. We need fuel, and the filthy pigs are going to give it to us.

### Chapter Twenty-Five

#### EINAR

Pacing back and forth on the bridge, I impatiently wait for Slavic and Falon to get here. Ruarc and Bikar are bickering back and forth while Murgul , in typical fashion, is leaning silently against the far wall, watching the rest of us with a calm facade. The whooshing sound of the door opening announces Slavic's arrival, and I whirl on him with a snarl the second he steps into the room.

“ How the frack did they figure out we were the ones who took the females?” I feel foolish the moment the words leave my mouth, and the derision in Slavic's voice only makes it worse when he snaps back at me.

“ Well apparently, they could smell them on us, Einar . It did not help that the Velgriddix put a huge reward out for their return and half the frackin galaxy is out looking for any sign of them. Like untried youths, we put ourselves right in their sights rather easily, as I am sure they contacted any and all spaceports within their ship's last known location.

Ruarc , you and Falon go through those crates and separate the items acquired for the females. Einar , before you sneak off, you will tend to the other females hiding in Falcon and Bikar's room. I do not care how you do it, but get it done. All females are precious, and we will not neglect them. Falon , I need you to verify that those translators are working. Do you know if they are the temporary or permanent ones?”

Nodding my understanding to Slavic , I glance over at Falon to gauge his response.

All the females need the translators, but it is imperative that mine and Slavic's Starshines get them. Our lives depend on it and all my other brothers know that. "From my understanding Slavic, they are permanent. But my informant told me that implanting them could be painful."

"Einar, do we have anything that would assist with this?"

Slavic's question makes me wince a bit. He is not going to like hearing the answer any more than I like giving it to him. "Not really, and I fear they will only be more distressed when we subject them to the procedure."

"Frack, these females have been hurt enough, the very thought of us harming them once again has me torn." Slavic's words are full of dismay, but to my surprise, Murgul inserts himself into the conversation.

"Fear is caused from lack of knowledge, brother. They will be temporarily upset but will calm quickly once it is finished and they can understand us."

We all fall silent at his words, and I take a nanotic to let them sink in. Murgul, more than most, understands the importance of knowledge. To be honest, those two short sentences are the most any of us have heard our youngest brother speak in many, many rotations. His voice is hoarse with disuse as well as jagged due to the damage he suffered at the hand of the Velgriddix.

"Bikar, where is that Pyrkyne ship?"

"They left right after we did. I kept us cloaked once we departed Navale, and now we are following behind them just out of their scanner's range. At this speed, we will overtake them in a few tics."

Slavic shoots a hard look over at Murgul before he says. "Murgul, looks like we are



going to have to do this alone. Suit up. I will be down momentarily. Bikar , hold back until I return to the helm.”

Murgul nods his understanding and straightens from his nonchalant slouch against the wall as we all watch Slavic turn on his heel and stalk out of the helm room before any of us can say anything else. Glancing across the room, I begin implementing Slavic’s orders. “Falon , meet me at your rooms with the translators for the females. I need to stop by the med bay for some supplies. Bikar and Slavic both reminded me that the other humans are in rough shape with wounds that are in need of medical attention.”

Without waiting for his reply, I stomp out of the room, my mind occupied with all the things I need to retrieve to assist the other humans. Making my way down the hall, I am at the med bay before I know it. To my surprise, Slavic’s mate is here, and she is softly singing to my mate as she strokes her hair. My abrupt arrival makes the other female jump before she glares at me.

Putting both hands out, I show her I mean no harm. I do not have the time to engage in any sort of altercation with her right now and if I know my oldest brother, he has reached his quarters and discovered his female missing. Slavic will be here shortly, and both our females will have supervision while I am attending the rest of the humans. Peering around her, I see that my mate is still in the same position I left her in, but her sister seemed to figure out how the heated cover works because my mate’s frail form is obscured from sight.

Grabbing my travel bag, I hurriedly shove a variety of tools, medicines, and items in it before glancing back at my female one last time as I walk out the door.

These three cowering human females really know how to make a male feel like a pile of excrement. I have not even entered the room, and all three of them are huddled on the far side of the room, trying to stay as far away from me and Falon as possible. I cannot imagine what the two of us look like to them.

“ We are going to have to do this slow and steady. They are already terrified and do not understand what we are trying to do. Remember what Murgul said. Better for them to be scared and in pain for a short time than for them to remain ignorant.”

“ I understand, Einar .”

Easing into the room, we move toward the females with deliberate exaggerated motions, stopping at the table in the middle of the room. When they see what we are doing, and that we halted midway across the room from them, their body language changes from outright terror to apprehension. Taking the travel med bag off my shoulder, I place it on the flat surface next to me, and start taking things out one by one, ensuring that all three of them can see what I am doing.

The shortest of the three has curly hair the color of rich soil and must recognize at least one of my medical devices because she pushes herself up from the floor, using the wall as leverage before inching her way toward me, holding one of her arms close to her body with each tentative step. Her soft voice ends with an upward lilt, indicating a question.

“ Little female, I do not know what you said, but I am here to help you if you will allow it.”

I keep my deep voice as gentle as I am capable of, motioning at the chair and medical supplies I have assembled on the table before her. She glances back at the other two before she climbs up in the chair. It is then that I realize just how small these females are in comparison to us. She looks like a youngling perched on the edge of the chair as her eyes dart back and forth between Falon and I .

When the remaining two humans see that no harm has come to their friend, they both ease forward; one taking the other chair, and the final one sits on the floor next to the curly haired female. Running my eyes over the three of them, I assess their condition,

and what a sorry sight they make. The one with spiraled, soil-colored hair has what appears to be a dislocated wrist, is missing several of her tiny claws, and one of her eyes is swollen completely shut. Examining the female in the other chair, I note that she has hair the color of the sun and is thinner than the others. Even though they are all emaciated, this one is nothing but skin draped over bone. I have never seen a being so thin that still took a breath and functioned.

Golden hair, aside from being dangerously underweight, has minor scrapes, bruises, and a few cuts that will require sutures. The last female sitting on the floor has a dazed look in her eyes and a dark purple swelling on the side of her head, indicating some sort of head trauma. Continuing my observation of her, I note that one of her miniscule hands has several digits pointed in irregular directions, and that one of her knees is twice the size of the other one.

Keeping my voice low to keep from alarming the females, I tell Falon my plan.

“I am going to treat all of their wounds first. That way they will not suspect anything when we go to apply the translators. The insertion is going to be extremely painful; you will have to hold them and hold them firmly. Do you understand?”

Out of the corner of my eye, I see him nod in agreement.

One by one, I treat the females and their varying maladies. Once they all figured out I was trying to help them, they relaxed considerably, even though some of the things I had to do were quite painful. That included setting broken fingers and a dislocated wrist. By the time I got to the smaller wounds that needed the stitching unit or just some antiseptic along with bandages, they were all chatting quietly amongst themselves.

Flicking my spines, I get Falon's attention and signal to him that I am ready to implant the translators. Reaching into my bag, I pull out all three of the delicate

pieces of equipment, being very careful not to contaminate them. Falon eases up behind the curly-haired one and gently grasps her by the shoulders, holding her in the chair. Using tweezers, I get the first translator, sweep her hair behind her ear, and in the blink of an eye, insert it into her ear. Less than a nano-tic later, her piercing screams rend the air in the room.

Curly passes out in the chair and before the one on the floor can get up, Falon snatches her up while I snag the second translator with my surgical tweezers and insert the translator in her ear only to be met with the same pain filled, tortured screams. Golden hair, seeing that Falon is tenderly laying the second female down on the bed, jumps down from her chair and darts toward the door that Falon and I stupidly left wide open.

She gets as far as the hallway when she runs into Murgul's scowling countenance as he exits the armory, her pale form a stark contrast to his hulking, dark bulk. Big hands snap up, wrapping around her withered arms. The second their skin makes contact, her head snaps up and I watch his face go slack in astonishment for a split second before she passes out in his arms. Murgul's face resumes its normal scowl as he tenderly scoops the golden-haired female up and brings her back into the room before laying her down on the bed next to where Falon deposited the other two females. Falon shoots a glance at me from where he is hovering next to the bed, uncertain what our youngest brother is doing, and unwilling to provoke him.

Murgul stands there for a nano-tic, almost glaring down at her before he steps back away from the bed and stalks across the room, taking up his normal slouch against the wall. Shrugging off his abnormal behavior, I get the final translator and insert it into Goldie's ear. To my relief, her only response is a faint whimper. What does shock me is the fact that Murgul snarls at me in response.

“ Well , that is done. Falon , I will leave you and Murgul here. I see that you brought at least one of the crates for the females. They are in desperate need of additional

attire. It is on my schedule to come by periodically to check on their wounds and to see how they are healing. I am off to the med bay to install translators for mine and Slavic's mate. Falon , please make sure that you deliver one of those crates to Slavic's room for his mate and one of them to my quarters for mine."

" I will make sure the crates are delivered to both of your quarters, Einar ."

Grinning at him in thanks, I glance over at Murgul , whose eyes are locked on the frail figure laying upon the bed, in speculation before exiting the room.

And the plot thickens...

### Chapter Twenty-Six

#### EINAR

Dread fills me and builds with each step that brings me closer to my med bay. Walking through the sliding door, I see that not only is Slavic's mate still here, but so is Slavic . Raising my hand, I show him the remaining two translators. “ Slavic , you may have to hold her. I will forever hear the screams of the others while I inserted theirs. Falon had to physically hold each of them, and the last one ran when she heard the screams of the others. Of course, she ran right into Murgul as he was coming out of the armory, then passed out the second his large hands grabbed hold of her. He promptly handed her over to Falon , but I was shocked that he stayed while I inserted the translator. He even snarled at me when she whimpered slightly from the pain before waking back up. Falon was distributing the clothing and a few other items he found on the Navale when I left. I had a crate delivered to your quarters as well.”

“ She is going to fight me, Einar .”

Nodding , I agree with him. “ I would expect nothing less from any female mated to you Slavic . She must be tough for the gods to have given her to you. The quicker we do this, the better.”

“ I do not see you running right over to yours with the intent to cause her more harm.”

Taking a deep breath to contain my vexation with my oldest sibling, I hasten to explain. “ Mine is still sedated and will not recall the procedure at all, but in her

condition, I believe she deserves some kindness. Try to explain what we are doing and hopefully yours will not fight us too badly.”

Slavic strides over to me and abruptly takes the delicate translators out of my hands. There are not enough deep breaths for his current idiocy.

“ Do not touch that with your skin Slavic , or it won’t work.”

“ I know Einar . I may not be a medic, but I am not stupid.”

No , he is not stupid, but he is not exactly being careful either. I watch as he moves over to his mate, making sure he stops out of her reach so she cannot accidentally contaminate the fragile tech while she looks up at him and then his hand. The visual he makes of pantomiming what we intend to do is more than a little amusing, and I have to smother a snicker. Stopping just out of her reach, she looks up at him and then toward his hand. Slavic repeats the same motions at least three times, but the little female still looks at him like he has lost what little bit of sanity he has. After another failed attempt with hand gestures, the female finally speaks.

“ I think I’ve covered the fact that I suck at guessing games.”

Suddenly , Bikar’s voice sounds over the speakers. “ Slavic , we are in range, Murgul is waiting for you.”

Well , I have had enough of this nonsense.

Taking the remaining translator, I walk past Slavic to the bed where my mate lays. Ignoring the other female when she stiffens at my approach, I move around the bed where I have room to work. “ We do not have all rising Slavic ; hold on a tic. She might be more receptive if she watches me give this to her sister.”

Glancing up at Slavic's mate, I try to gauge whether or not she is going to attack me again for touching her beloved sister. When she does nothing but steadily look at me, I reach out and brush my mate's dark red hair away from her ear and out of the way. Carefully , I use my surgical tweezers and take the translator out of its protective packaging. I can feel my mates' sister staring at me, but she has made no move toward me, nor has she attempted to stop me.

Implanting the translator into my female's ear, I make sure it is firmly inserted before leaning back to peer down at my mate. Thankfully , she shows no external sign of distress. Pausing for a nano-tic, I contemplate giving her another dose of sedative but decide against it. She needs to wake up and face her new reality, and with the help of the translator, that transition will be vastly different than what she has endured thus far.

Slavic has silently moved in behind his mate while I was focused on mine. Straightening up, I note when his mate shoots a glance at me before looking back at Slavic . Gesturing to the translator in Slavic's hand, I flick my fingers at his mate in return. Thankfully , she does not seem to be slow of wit.

“ Let me get this straight. You want to put that in my ear?”

Thank the gods.

Slavic and I nod in unison.

“ I had a feeling you were going to say that, and even though you are being patient, you're really not going to let me say no, are you?”

Her words are heavy with resignation, and Slavic shakes his head in response, but his words are full of sympathy.



“ I am sorry, little one.”

The female sighs heavily before acquiescing. “ Ok , let’s do this then. Rowan seems to be alright, so do it before I change my mind.”

Before she can rescind her permission, Slavic grabs her and pulls her tight against him. Grabbing the translator from the package, I do not waste a nanotic. My massive hands move with a finesse they should not be capable of. Reaching out with my free hand, I grab her head. The width of my hand almost envelops her entire skull as I carefully tilt her face where she leans against Slavic’s chest. I see the instant her body tenses as the pain overwhelms her, and I am prepared for the scream when it comes. Unfortunately , Slavic is not, and the agonized look on his face tells me how deeply he feels his mate’s distress. To my surprise, it takes both of us holding her to keep her safely within the confines of his arms as she struggles and flails about.

Eventually she settles some and I turn her head, so her eyes are locked with mine. Looking deep into her eyes, I assess the dilation and reaction time of her pupils, ensuring the translator did not attack her optic nerves and render her blind. Nodding , I release her from my grasp and look over at Slavic .

“ She will be fine. The translator did not attack her optical nerves, which means it merged with the Cochlear nerve successfully. Half a rising or so, she will recover fully. You can leave her here with her sister, while you and Murgul take care of our fuel issue. I will suit up just in case you need me.”

Reaching over to the second bed, I switch on the warming cover before Slavic lays her down as he brushes her long hair out of her face. His next words are haunted. “ Did the others react the same?”

“ They all responded differently, but at least this unfavorable business is over. You should go before Murgul heads out without you.”

“ Easy for you to say, you can remain with your mate.”

This is not the first time he has made such a statement, but it will be the last. Fury fills my voice as I snap back at his ill-advised, ignorant comment. “ If you only realized the trauma mine has dealt with, you would not speak with such flippancy and would look at the spunkiness of yours in a different light. The body always heals quicker than the mind, and unfortunately, mine is dealing with both. I am hoping the translators help. They need some peace in their lives after all that has been done to them. I will guard her with my life Slavic , you know this. Now , go get that fuel, so that we might find a safe haven in which we can become more than what we are. Someplace we can reach our true potential.”

“ Dreams like that brother, are dangerous.”

And yet, the barest hint of hope sounds in his voice... even though we all know how perilous that particular concept is. Hope is often a double-edged sword.

“ True , but now I have a reason to want more.”

And the reason for my want lies sleeping peacefully in my med bay, unaware of how important she is and how very badly I want to worship her, love her, and be loved in return. I can feel Slavic’s eyes on me, but he says nothing more before turning and walking out the door to meet up with Murgul .

Checking on the frail beings before me once more, I ensure their vitals are good before I leave the med bay and enter into my private quarters through the connecting door. I need to get suited up in case my brothers need me. Moving around my room, I gather my matching throwing knives and shove them in the sheaths that line the interior of my well-worn boots before opening the door to my weapons case. Reaching in, I grab my massive, double-bladed war axe and strap it to my back.

Running my thumb over the blades attached to my smaller axes, I check the bevels to make sure they're razor sharp and battle ready. The small bead of blood on my thumb assures me that they are. Satisfied with my armament, I head to the helm, my mind focused on the task at hand as I leave my heart and soul behind in my med bay.

### Chapter Twenty-Seven

#### ROWAN

Fighting my way through the layers of oppressive darkness, the realization that I was sedated floats across my conscious mind. I've been drugged so many times in the past, I know the difference between emerging from the safe place in my mind versus waking from a drug induced stupor. The last conscious thing I remember was the giant green... thing reaching toward me before I checked completely out.

I woke up again. Yay me...not.

Wincing internally, I silently chastise myself for my selfish thoughts. I can't leave Ruby alone, not now. Not after everything we've endured and all that's happened to us.

Not after all she's sacrificed for me.

"... Back to Slavic , are you saying bad things could and will happen to him if this bond thing doesn't happen?"

Ruby's boisterous, incredulous voice sounds from close by and her words catch me by surprise.

Who or what is Slavic , and why do we care if something happens to him?

" Absolutely . It will start gradually after several rotations, but if his collar fades

completely and he is not strong enough to survive one of his hearts stopping, he will perish.”

That voice... it sounds so familiar. Then it hits me. It’s the voice from the bug ship! She’s here with us too?! I don’t know whether to be glad or sad for her, since I’m not sure if here, wherever here is, is safe.

“ Hold your horses, did you say two hearts?”

“ Yes , most of the dominant males of our species have two hearts. It is one of the things that makes them so powerful but can also be their biggest weakness. Normally if one of us loses a mate, the other is not far behind, as our lives are linked through our mate bond.”

Our species? Mate bond? If one dies, so does the other?! What is this? A romance novel or something?

That means the voice isn’t human... but Ruby is talking to her like an old friend, so that must mean she’s safe. Right ?

“ You act like this is common knowledge and something I should already know.”

“ There are no secrets in the Void , but it can be a place of joy or heartache.”

If this “ Void ” is anything like Earth , or my experiences on Earth , then it’s mostly heartache. I’ve lived through a lot, and none of it was remotely joyous.

“ Isn’t that the truth of any world?”

Peeking through my lashes I see Ruby look over at me in concern. I should feel bad about laying here, pretending to be asleep and eavesdropping on their conversation,

but I don't. I need the information, but don't have the energy to deal with any sort of interaction with another person. Not even Ruby . Because the pretty, soothing voice from the ship belongs to an extremely large, very green woman. It's glaringly obvious she's the same species that the angry giants belong to.

“ Before Ruarc notices my absence, I should probably return. I am glad that you nor any of the others had any adverse reactions to the translators. I have been talking to you in common tongue with no issues. Hopefully , this will help you and Slavic .”

Her casual statement catches me by surprise when I realize neither of them are speaking English . She mentioned translators so I can only surmise I was given one while I was asleep. A sense of violation creeps over me. Just because what they did to me was helpful doesn't mean that I wanted it or gave my consent to have something permanent done to my body.

“ Kallen , just to make sure I understand exactly what you're telling me...this collar thing around your neck marks you as a mate?”

The green lady's name must be Kallen but after a second, I realize what Ruby just said. What the hell does she mean collar? The second the word “collar” registers to me, I feel nauseated. I've been collared many, many times and it never boded well for me. That poor woman... but my welling sympathy is cut short by her next words.

“ No , it tells the world that you are mated to another. I have no idea if once your bond is consummated that you will have a matching one or not. But if you take nothing else out of this conversation know this; he will weaken the longer the bond is not tethered together, and our world needs Slavic .”

I do not want to belong to anyone... ever again.

“ No pressure on a girl at all, huh? Don't I have a say so in any of this? I mean, I've

already lost everything, so am I just supposed to say, ‘ OK universe, here I am, do with me as you will?’ Just because some big ass guy decides he wants to get it on with a human chick half his size. I mean have you seen the size of these guys? If big noses, feet, and hands add up the way they’re supposed to, I’m literally fucked.”

The corners of my mouth twitch with as much amusement as I’m capable of. Leave it to Ruby to home in on how big these guys dicks are instead of the fact that we’ve been abducted by a completely different species of aliens that, allegedly, don’t want to harm us. Kallen must find Ruby’s words just as entertaining as I do because she bursts out in melodious laughter while replying to my sister’s snark. “ Little Ruby , I have no idea what those references mean, but I do believe if you remain open-minded, the horrors you have been put through may turn into an adventure and love you never dreamed of. The fact that two sisters were fated to be mates to two brothers is a wonder in and of itself.”

“ You mean my sister is also going to have this mate problem?”

No ... nonononononono! NO !

“ Yes , Einar was the one who saved her, not only from that breeding nest, but from the lung disease plaguing her small form.”

Kallen’s revelations fill me with terror, and I have to fight to keep my breathing under control. Years of practice feigning sleep to escape Richards ’ attentions are coming in handy right now.

“ You mean the green giant and my little sister?”

“ Yes .”

I do not like the certainty in her voice. If what she’s saying it to be believed, Moss

Man , Big Green , the Jolly Green Giant , now Einar , thinks I'm his mate.

“ Your gods must have one hell of a sense of humor.”

Ain't that the fucking truth.

A soft whooshing sound is shortly followed by a voice so deep there is no way it could ever belong to a human man. “ Slavic is returning from plundering the other ship. The lot was substantial and now the fuel tanks are filled. Say goodbye to your new friend Kallen , you need your rest.”

“ I feel better than I have in forever Ruarc .” Kallen's response to the deep voiced speaker is full of frustration, but he doesn't say anything further. I hear the rustle of clothing before the soft swooshy sound again and then blessed silence.

Cracking my eyelids open, I peer through my lashes to see who or what is in the room with me.

To my surprise, I'm utterly alone for the first time since Ruby and I were taken by the sneaky snakes. Opening my eyes fully, I look around the room I'm in, paying close attention to where everything is. Especially , the doors, or what I think are the doors. My time spent with Robert has left a lasting impression, and the first rule of survival is to always have an exit plan. Even if it's just being able to leave the room you're in.

Easing myself into a sitting position, the warm, comfy blanket that was pulled up to my neck falls down, exposing my naked body. The cold air on my boobs makes my nipples bead but it feels... different. Looking down, I freeze.

The piercings!

They're ...they're gone. Lifting the edge of the blanket, I check my navel and



between my legs to see if all the horrible things are gone. When I find no trace of metal anywhere, the tears begin welling in my eyes and running down my face. I've hated looking at my body for years since Robert forced me to have my bits pierced and then put that awful lock and chain on them.

A sudden crash snaps my head up and in the direction of the commotion. To my dismay, Moss Man stands there. Truth be told, the room I'm in is not very big, so he's only a couple of feet from me, standing in a doorway that connects to this medical center. This is the first time I've been calm and rational enough to really take in his physical appearance in detail. My first look at him was accurate and not a figment of my imagination or the drugs. He really does have two horns that emerge from his forehead and sweep back like the character Hellboy .

The horns add to his stature, making him look even bigger than he really is, and there's no way he's any shorter than seven or seven and a half feet tall. A pitch-black mark on his thick neck catches my attention, and I follow it down across his broad shoulders and shirtless torso to the waistline of his pants, where it disappears from sight. From a purely artistic point of view, it's breathtaking. It's not just a plain black mark that runs across his body, it's a work of art. The swirling, whimsical lines remind me of some of the elvish artwork from J.R.R . Tolkien's Lord of the Rings series, and it's an extreme contrast to the brutish being wearing it.

That must be the collar thingie Kallen and Ruby were talking about.

The thing that shows the world he's... mated. To me. And if my sister and her friend are to be believed, Moss Man will die if I don't seal the mate bond with him. Ruby's right. That is a lot of freaking pressure. I just escaped from my abusive husband and the sexual torture he forced me to endure for years. I have no desire, whatsoever, to have sex ever again.

But ... can I really sentence an innocent man to death due to something out of his

control?

Forcing myself to move on from that bit of information, I continue to catalogue this ... person. His hair is an interesting combination of black and green that shines in the light. If I wasn't freaking out, I would find it almost pretty to look at; similar to the sheen a raven feather has when the sunlight hits it just right, and in addition to that, I can see the tips of pointed green ears peeking out from under his lustrous hair. Between the large, arcing horns, crocodile looking yellow eyes that have a vertical pupil instead of a rounded one like my eyes have, and his overall massive stature, he makes an extremely intimidating figure of a male.

And there's no doubt he's male. I can see the terrifyingly massive bulge in the front of his pants to prove it. Skimming my eyes back up his body, I realize that his eyes are bouncing back and forth between my breasts and my face. Probably why he's rocking a hard on. Realizing I'm just sitting there with my tits out in front of a being twice my size, that may or may not want things from me, I jerk the blanket back over my naked body and pull my knees up, curling my arms around them over the soft material of my covers. Staring at my lap, I remain quiet.

What am I supposed to say to him?

The nano-tic I know Slavic , Falon , and Murgul are safely back on board the Zenith , I leave Bikar and his sphere of chaos in the helm room to head back to my quarters. Entering my room, I sigh heavily. Life has been a bit of a whirlwind of activity recently and I cannot say that I am ungrateful for it. Not when it brought me her , but I cannot deny the fact that I would enjoy a little less excitement for a few risings.

Closing the door behind me, I go about taking my weapons off and safely storing them in the cabinet attached to the far wall. I step into my private lavatory to wash the stress from my body. Hot water full of cleanser rains down on me, easing my tired muscles, and inflaming my semi-hard pivy. The sensation of water sluicing across my

sensitive member makes me groan in response to the light stimulation. Resting my horns against the wall, I look down at myself and try to see what my human mate might see when she looks at me.

To say that I am bigger than she is, is a vast understatement. I am much larger than all of my brothers and one of the biggest Rukuhks , if not the biggest one still in existence. The fracking Aynar delved deep into our ancestral genetics to augment me to be more primitive in appearance yet grafted my mind with a biotech to make me far more intelligent than most beings. For some reason, they seemed to enjoy the dichotomy that I have the manifestation of a brute but the superior intellect of a higher being.

But .

That's not all they did.

Growling under my breath when my eyes land on the frackin scales that run the length of my forearms, I reflect on just how different I am. Fracking faeries also dabbled in gene splicing in their attempt to create the perfect warrior to serve them. I , and several of my brothers, were spliced with a now extinct reptilian species. These genetics presented in a variety of ways with all of us, but over the years, we have all somewhat, come to terms with what was done to us.

My scales run along the entire length of my body along my backside. Essentially , my back is protected by armor-plated scales that are extremely difficult to penetrate. The spines that cover my back and shoulders are longer with serrated edges on them, which makes them far more deadly than some of my other brothers. Flexing my fingers, I watch as talons sprout from their tips and click against the cleansing stall wall.

How is she ever going to see me past all of this...?

The gods of Ruk offer me no answer to my unspoken question.

Then there is my pivy, cock, prick, whatever one wants to call my member. I know what a human male sexual organ looks like... and mine is nothing like what she has seen before. My mating collar extends from my throat all the way down to the back of my pivy, where it spirals up the length of my hard flesh. Blatantly showcasing that my entire body belongs to my mate, but it also accentuates the fact that I am not only considerably larger in girth and length than a human male, my scales are also present along the length of my cock, making it textured. Unfortunately, the differences do not end there. I have never performed an in-depth medical examination on my brothers at the genetic level, but I did one on myself. The reptilian DNA that was forced into my body also modified my reproductive genes to a drastic degree.

I not only ejaculate seed, but I also possess an ovipositor that will lock with my mate's womb to ensure she cannot escape implantation of my eggs. This means she will always carry multiple offspring, should we ever choose to have them. My body will force an egg upon her that will absorb her DNA to create our child, but my seed will not only fertilize her existing eggs to create another life, but will ensure my egg is also viable. This is a closely guarded secret; one I have never revealed to anyone... nor have I ever lain with a female. I could not risk the chance of leaving an egg in a station worker, even though I created a hormonal implant to null my fertility.

99.9% certainty was not enough when a possible youngling was at risk.

Reaching down, I grab hold of my turgid length with my calloused hand, groaning as I begin vigorously stroking myself up and down. It does not take long for me to bring myself to completion as I paint the wall with my spend and I watch the tip of my ovipositor emerges from my pivy as it tries to latch onto a mate that is not there. The orgasm is shallow and only offers a modicum amount of relief. My body knows that it is mated, and my rough fist will no longer suffice.

Forcing myself to focus, I finish washing myself and turn the water off before stepping under the dryer. The warm air feels good on my bare hide as it evaporates the water droplets clinging to me. Ignoring my reflection in the looking glass, I leave the cleansing room and snag a pair of my sleep pants, pulling them on as I grab my medical tablet. I have not checked my mate's vitals in some time and the need to do so is an itch under my scales.

Eyes locked on the screen in front of me, I walk into the med bay and consequently drop my tablet at the sight that greets me.

My mate is sitting up in bed, fully awake, and her glorious breasts are out on display. Delicious looking peaks that make my mouth water to taste them tip both globes. They are even more alluring without metal ruining the perfection of her body. The sight before me engorges my pivy in nano-tics, as if I had not just pleased myself to completion moments ago. Freezing in place, my eyes feast on her body before trailing up to her precious, little face. I allow her to look her fill as I belong to her just as much as she belongs to me. No matter that she will most assuredly not want to be my mate. The damage done to her body is indicative of many years' worth of torture.

Eventually , she realizes her partial nudity because she pulls the warming sheet up while drawing her knees to her torso before wrapping her tiny arms around herself in a protective fashion. I must tread very, very carefully.

One wrong word and I will lose her. Gently clearing my throat, I take a small step toward her, only to stop when she tenses.

“Greetings , little one. My name is Einar . May I ask what you are called?”

### Chapter Twenty-Eight

ROWAN

If I thought that other thing had a deep voice, I was grossly mistaken. This creature, this alien's voice, is so deep that it almost rattles the room around me.

“Greetings , little one. My name is Einar . May I ask what you are called?”

He takes a step closer to me and I tense in alarm. When he notices my reaction, he freezes in place and waits. Okay , introductions. I've done enough of those being ponied around on Roberts ' arm. I can at least handle surface conversation. Touching my tongue to my lips, I wet them and clear my throat before replying.

“ Uhm ... hello. My ... my name is Rowan .”

The look of sublime pleasure that spreads across his face at learning something as simple as my name is almost painful to watch. Ruby and Kallen's conversation comes back to me, and I know I've got to say something to him about that.

Explain .

Maybe even apologize.

I can't be what he needs.

I don't want to be what he needs.

“ My sister, Ruby , and a female that looks similar to you by the name of Kallen were here earlier. They said some things while they thought I was still asleep...”

At my hesitation, he circles around the bed I’m sitting on, grabs some sort of rolling stool, and positions it where he can sit far enough away to make me comfortable with his presence but close enough, we can talk comfortably. He must be smarter than he looks because the spot he picked leaves a direct avenue of escape open to both of the exits. Once Einar is settled, he prompts me to continue.

“ It is good to finally know the name of my mate and her fierce sister. Thank you for gifting them to me. You mentioned that Kallen and your Ruby were here discussing something that appears to have troubled you deeply? What is it that concerns you, and how can I assist you in being comfortable here... with me?”

“ That’s just it! Your gods must be playing some sort of cosmic joke on you. I can’t possibly be your mate. I’m still married! For whatever it’s worth.”

His big body tightens at my last statement.

“ Married ? That is the human version of binding beings together spiritually as well as legally, yes?”

At my hesitant nod, he continues.

“ I do not know all that you suffered, but it stands to reason that whomever you were married to did not care for you as he should have. I realize you have been through much, but you should know that the Earth is no more... From what we have surmised, there was a world ending super storm that caused the entire planet to implode. You are married no longer and are free from that male.”

His disgusted, snarled words shock me so deeply I can’t move.

“ What do you mean Earth is gone? How can it be gone?! We were just abducted a few weeks ago and everything was fine when we left.”

I can't say I'm sad to hear Robert is dead ... but the entire planet is gone?! My hysterical words cause sympathy to fill his eyes as he regards me with steady determination.

“ I have no reason to lie to you, little Starshine . Your Earth is no more, but regardless whether you believe me or not, these are the facts and I will not hide them from you. Nor will I insult your intelligence by belittling you or withholding information that you must have in order to make informed decisions. You are currently on the Zenith , the ship that my brothers and I live on, in the Void . It is far, far, from where your Earth was. There is no way you were abducted a short time ago. The delayed response of your cells when you first arrived tells me that you were in some sort of suspended animation or cryosleep for a very long time.”

Forcing myself to process the information, I replay his words in my mind. If what he's saying is true, there's no home to go back to. All I have is Ruby . Peering over at him from beneath my lashes, I ask the question that's been lingering on the tip of my tongue.

“ What are you going to do to me?”

Einar winces and rubs at his chest as if he's in pain.

“ I am not going to do anything to you. The collar around my throat and across my body marks me as yours, to do with as you so choose. You are under no obligation to return my affections or seal the bond with me. To me, you are a blessing and the culmination of every dream I never dared to speak aloud.”

His heartfelt words make me frown in confusion. That ... isn't what I was expecting



him to say. The other aliens are acting super possessive and hovering over their women, but this one isn't? It's a question I need to know the answer to.

“ Why ? The guy that came and got Kallen was acting all possessive and controlling, and even Ruby hinted that her gargoyle dude refused to leave her alone. So , what gives with you?”

He hesitates before replying while maintaining eye contact with me.

“ You have suffered. Greatly . I am a medic and far more observant than most. I do not know exactly what horrors you have been subjected to, but the damage I healed on your body... some of it happened long ago. The fact that the majority of your bodily trauma was centered around your sexual organs is telling. I was not able to erase all of the scars, but I did manage to fade most of them as well as cure you of the affliction attacking your lungs.”

Shame fills me and my eyes leave his to stare at my lap.

“ I do not tell you these things to cause you discomfort, but to be as honest as I know how to be. There are a few things I did to save your life that you were not in the right state of mind to give me the consent to do. For that, I do apologize and you have my word that you will not be forced to do anything you are not comfortable with, nor in full consent of.”

Then it dawns on me that he's the one who took the piercings out and healed the holes up.

“ You're the one who took them off and out of me... aren't you?”

He understands what I mean instantly. I'm not sure how, but his voice gentles even more at my tortured whisper.

“ Yes , little Starshine . I removed those vile things from your body.”

When my eyes dart to the pitch-black marks on his body, his perceptive gaze catches it.

“ If you chose to fulfill the mate bond, I am unsure if you would have a mark or not. My species has never mated with a human before but considering what was done to you, I can understand how you would be extremely hesitant to have another permanent mark of possession stamped across your body.”

A shudder of revulsion crawls through me at the thought of having something else on me like that. Robert insisted that I have permanent make-up done, so my lips, eyes and brows are all tattooed to perfection. I didn't want any of that, preferring a more natural look, but I wasn't given a choice in the matter. This ... mark, would be even more noticeable than my cosmetic tattoos.

Not that it matters. I never want to have sex again. Just the thought of it fills me with revulsion after the years of sexual abuse I've suffered.

Einar lifts one of his hand and rubs at the same spot on his chest and the words slip out before I realize what I've said.

“ Why do you keep doing that? Rubbing your chest in the middle like it hurts?”

A rueful smile pulls at his mouth, revealing the length of his tusk as well as sharp incisors and canines.

“ I can smell the distress rolling off of you in waves, and it is pulling at my mate bond. We call it the heartbond and it allows me to feel some of your emotions as well. It is telling me to soothe you and fix whatever it is that is causing your upset, but since I am the one causing you emotional distress, there is nothing I can do. The

sensation is not an overly pleasant one.”

Guilt fills me. This is a specific example of why his gods have done him dirty. I’m not fit to be anyone’s mate.

“ Einar , I’m so sorry. I know that you think I’m your mate and a dream come true, but I’m just a broken human woman with nothing left to give anyone. Would you still want me if I told you more men, and some women, than I can count have violated every orifice of my body? That my blood has been used as lube more often than not. That the man who promised to love, honor, and cherish me allowed his friends to pass me around like a party favor night after night. That sometimes he forced me to take substances to make my body respond pleasurably to being raped by multiple men. My husband was a monster. He broke me and then remade me into the perfect toy with which to play with. I’m nothing more than a high-class whore because that’s what I was forced to become in order to survive. I’m filth, and no matter how much I try to wash it off, it never leaves me. You don’t want that for a mate.”

Raising my tear-filled eyes, I look him dead in the eye to watch his reaction to my revelations.

His mossy green skin pales as the blood drains from his face and tears well in his yellow dragon eyes. Slowly , he stands and moves toward me with deliberate steps, making sure he doesn’t make any sudden movements that might scare me. Even with all his caution, I feel the first flick of fear curl through my belly when he stops next to my bed and reaches out with one of his massive hands, curling it around my neck and jaw as his thumb whispers across my freckled skin.

Carefully , yet firmly, he pulls my face up so that I’m forced to look at him, held captive by the emotion emanating from his inhuman gaze.

“ Rowan , little Starshine , my hearts break for you. No female should have to endure

what you have. Not . Ever . Deep inside, you are still Rowan , and nothing done to your physical person will ever change that. What was done to you does not make you less worthy of being my mate. In fact, it makes you perfect for me. I was trained to heal what could not be healed, to see what others cannot, and to understand the misunderstood. The gods knew what they were doing when they gifted your soul to mine, and mine to yours. You need not ever worry about me wanting you because I see more than just your beautiful body. I can see your soul, my mate, and it is breathtaking.”

By the time he finishes speaking, I’m sobbing, the weight of my head held within his calloused palm as I cry out my emotions. I don’t know how long I cry but he stands patiently next to my bed, holding me together with one giant hand. When my crying fit is winding down, he smoothly removes his hand with one last caress along my jaw before he removes my IV from my arm and places some sort of patch where the needle slid from arm. Einar then methodically steps back from the bed, giving me the space he knows I need.

A yawn catches me by surprise.

“ It is getting late, and I am sure you are tired. Tomorrow is a new rising and we can face it when it comes.

Pulling the warm blanket up to my chin, I scoot back down on the bed, rolling to face away from him as I do so. Just because he says pretty things, doesn’t mean anything. Robert started out with pretty words, heartfelt gestures, and extravagant gifts. Look where that got me.

Einar makes no response to my silent snub and I hear his heavy tread move away from me, back toward the door on the other side of the room only to return after a few minutes. A soft, swishing behind me catches my attention and I wait until I hear him leave before turning over.

What I see makes tears fill my eyes again.

He brought me a dress and not just any dress. It's a beautiful, dark green gown that has sleeves! Scrambling out of the bed, I grab it and pull it on over my head, sighing at the sensation of being clothed for the first time in a very long time. The dress is a little big on me, but it has a modest neckline that comes up to my collar bones and sleeves that extend all the way down to my wrists. Not only is my entire upper body covered, but the hem reaches my ankles so I'm completely covered.

Twirling around, I giggle a little at the flutter the hem makes as the material swings with my movements.

Out of the corner of my eye I see movement and my head jerks up in response. Einar is standing in the doorway watching me with a soft smile on his brutish face as he watches me.

Ducking my head, I rub the sleeve of my dress with the tips of my fingers, the decadent material making me smile again.

“ Thank you.”

His hearing must be much better than a humans because he hears me as if we're standing next to one another.

“ You are most welcome, Rowan .”

His quiet words wash over me before he turns and leaves.

Climbing back into bed, I situate my pretty new dress around me as I settle in and finally relax as sleep claims me.

### Chapter Twenty-Nine

#### EINAR

Rowan's distress pulls me from a sound sleep, and I know that what I am about to walk into is going to be bad... very bad. Pulling on the sleep pants I discarded at the side of my bed last night, I hurriedly pull them on and stride into the med bay. My eyes land on the bed where I last saw her and my stomach hits my feet when I see it is empty.

“ Rowan ?”

My soft call is met with a whimper from across the room. My mate has tucked herself into the farthest corner, huddling there between a cabinet and the wall to make herself look as small as possible as she rocks back and forth. Just as I start toward her my comm goes off. Glancing down, I hesitate before answering it.

“ Yes ?”

“ Einar , there is much that Kallen says she needs to tell us, but she is insistent that we all be together when she does. You need to meet us in the dining chamber as soon as possible.”

A snarl escapes before I can stop it in response to Bikar and his irritating summons.

“ I do not have the time, or the inclination to leave med bay. My Starshine is clinging to her sanity by a thread, and I dare not leave her. You can just fill me in after Kallen

tells you whatever it is that she has to say.”

Several tics go by without a response, so I glance down at my wrist comm and see that the light is off. Bikar cut the line without replying to my statement.

Good ! I do not have time for his idiocy right now.

I no sooner have that thought when my comm chimes a second time. When I ignore it and the second chime, Bikar overrides the privacy controls I implemented last night and his annoyingly perky voice floats through the air from the speakers imbedded in the ceiling, forcing me to listen to him over the Zenith’s main comm system whether I like it or not.

“ Good news, Einar . You do not have to leave the med bay at all! Everyone is going to gather there for Kallen’s big chat, and before you snarl at me, Slavic is the one who told me to tell you to ‘make room for us.’”

Before I can reply, I hear the soft click of the comm cutting off. Frustration rolls through me. Rowan barely tolerates my company. How is she going to react to a room full of males twice her size? The answer is not well. Especially if things get loud. She will retreat even further into herself than she already has.

Deciding against pressuring her with my presence getting any closer to her, I move around the med bay organizing and putting items in their place. The hectic nature of the last several risings have taken a toll on my orderly space. I do not need Bikar or Falon touching things, so everything must be put right.

Thankfully , my chore does not take me long. Rowan has not moved from her corner, so I jog back into my room to hit the refreshing chamber before my brothers show up. I sigh in relief as I void my screaming bladder and hit the button to flush the waste away before moving over to the basin to cleanse my teeth. I may not have the same

type of hardware in my mouth that Rowan is used to, but I can at least make sure they are clean as well as making sure my breath is fresh.

Rinsing the tooth powder out of the basin, I put my oral groomer away and leave. Picking up the garments from yesterday, I grimace at the scent emanating from them before tossing them in the receptacle for dirty linens. Those definitely did not pass the smell test. Shedding my sleeping attire, I toss it in the receptacle and enter my wardrobe to pick out a fresh set of attire for the waking cycle.

Donning clean trousers and foot coverings, I rush back out into my room to put my boots on. Just as I am securing the last clasp on my second boot, a booming knock from the primary door to the med bay announces the arrival of my brothers.

Huffing in frustration, I stomp back through the room, shoot a glance over at my mate (she still has not moved from her corner), and pause before placing my hand on the lock to release it. Maybe if I refuse to let them in, they will take a frackin hint and leave me be.

“ Einar , open the frackin door.” Slavic’s loud, rough voice reaches me through the closed door and I snicker a bit when I see the lock turn red, denying his palm print access to enter the room.

“ Not right now Slavic , whatever is so important can be relayed to me at a later date.”

I know it is futile, but I had to try once more. Rowan needs the quiet.

“ Ruby wants to see her sister. You can either open the door and allow that, or I will break it down and demand it.”

Growling to myself, I release the lock and open the door a crack to peer out at Slavic .



“ Rowan is not handling this well right now, and I am scared you will only set her back further.”

I am unsure what my face looks like, but the sympathetic wince Ruby gives me is telling and prompts her to help me.

“ Get out of the way, Green Giant , and let me talk to her.”

I hesitate briefly before stepping back out of the way and fully opening the door for them to enter. Ruby’s face creases in concern when her eyes land on an empty bed.

“ Ok , where is she?”

Wordlessly , I point toward the corner Rowan is hiding in. Once Ruby’s eyes land on her sister, her demeanor relaxes a little before she grabs a blanket off Rowan’s bed, talking over her shoulder as she moves toward her sister. “ Shit , she used to do this when we were kids. You two just hang out, this might take a minute.”

I wake up in a full-blown night terror induced panic attack. Robert’s found me and he’s going to get me. Launching myself out of bed in this odd-looking room, I look around frantically for a place to hide.

There !

A cabinet is pushed against the wall, and sticks out a bit, making the perfect place to hide from Robert . Running over to my new hidey-hole, I slide down the wall until my butt hits the ground. Drawing my knees up, I wrap my arms around myself as I rock back and forth, trying to calm myself down.

“ Rowan ?”

Robert's voice calls to me from across the room, but it sounds a bit off. Whimpering , I shrink further into myself as I try to find the quiet place in my mind. I don't want to live through what he's about to do to me.

“ Run , run, hide away... the monster holds no sway... I'll live another day. ”

Several times I feel a presence in the room, but it doesn't speak. Why is he waiting? What is Robert up to now?

“ Run , run, hide away... the monster holds no sway... I'll live another day. ”

Suddenly , there's a comforting darkness all around me and I feel my sister's warmth seeping into my freezing cold body.

“ Run , run, hide away... the monster holds no sway... I'll live another day. ”

Gradually , I relax, and my breathing slows down as I realize I've been quietly chanting my little ditty out loud. I feel my face get hot in embarrassment and can only hope I was quiet enough that Ruby can't figure out what I was saying over and over. It also dawns on me that I didn't have an asthma attack on top of the panic attack. Einar really did cure me...

Time passes and eventually Ruby's voice penetrates the fog my mind is in.

“ I know you can hear me sis, so I want you to listen. We are safe right now. Has life changed? Yeah . Am I scared? Some , just not as bad as I was when I woke up.”

My head nods in response.

“ We have to hide Ruby , he'll find us.”

Cringing a little at the manic anguish in my voice, I wait for her to respond.

“ Sis , no one is going to find us. Robert and all his thugs are dead. Well , for that matter, everyone is dead, but we’re not going to get into that right now because none of them count at this moment. Me and you, that’s all that matters right here and now. Do you trust me?”

“ Yes , always.”

That was never in question whether or not I trust my sister.

“ Are you feeling better?”

Rubbing the supple material of my dress with reverence, I contemplate her question as I take stock of how I actually feel.

“ Oddly enough, nothing hurts.”

“ That’s because of the ‘ Not so Jolly Green Giant ’ out there. He has spent day and night hovering over you, trying his best to heal all your new and old wounds.”

“ He’s a monster and the monsters want to do bad things to us. They’re just like Robert .”

A twinge of guilt hits me after I blurt that out. Einar hasn’t acted like Robert ... not so far, anyway. He’s treated me with more care in the last day or so than I’ve ever experienced at the hands of a man.

“ Stop that, no they’re not. Not everything out there wants to hurt us. Yes , I agree most things do, and I think in this world that number just multiplied, but do you know what we have now that we didn’t before?”

Shaking my head 'no' in response to her question, a lock of my hair falls across my face and Ruby sweeps it back in a loving fashion, soothing me with the familiarity of the motion. I hear her take a deep breath before she continues setting me straight. And that's exactly what this is. She's dropping the truth on me whether I like it or not.

Typical Ruby .

“ We have them. The big guy who scared you just now, he's your safe place. When the world becomes too much, you grab on to the green giant and don't let go. If things get too loud, he's the quiet you seek. If you allow it, he's the one that can make all the pain go away, physically, and mentally. Big green can and will replace all that hurt with laughter and new dreams, but you've got to let him in. Take my word for it, nothing's going to get through him to hurt you and even though he's snarly and scary at first glance, he's a big marshmallow inside and cares more for you than any other being ever will, before or after this moment.

We've been given a second chance, Rowan . We had to lose everything in order to be reborn into something else. I don't understand half of what's happened, where we're going, or even what's going to occur next. We've got a couple of options though. One , we can sit under this blanket fort and hope that the world leaves us alone. Two , we can be brave and decide to live this new life to its fullest. Three , well there really isn't a three that I can think of right now.”

“ I'm not you Ruby .”

My voice cracks as I say her name and I watch as her face falls a bit before she drops her last truth bomb on me.

“ No , you're not, you're more. You just let the world scare you for a while, but that world is gone now. So , look at it like this. All those mornings you woke up wishing

your life was different, well your wish has come true. And even though he's a bit on the rough side, you might've been sent your knight in shining, but a little beat-up, armor. So , what's it gonna to be? Life or misery? You don't have to figure it all out right this moment, but you do have to make a decision about moving forward. Sis , you already know what's behind you, what do you have to lose? Let's look at the stars with hope in our hearts and minds. Allow the big grouches to hover and let's live what little life we have left to the fullest."

Well , when she puts it like that...

Taking a deep breath, I smile over at my sister. She's right. For years I dreamed that someone, anyone would save me from the misery of my existence. In a sense, I've been rescued, there were just some detours along the way. Really fucking shitty detours, but the end result is the same, nonetheless. Ruby grabs my hand, and pulls me up with her as she stands, the blanket still over us and I have to bite back a snicker at the sight we must make. She looks at me, love shining out of her eyes and asks, "You ready?"

Nodding decisively, she lowers the blanket and the first thing my eyes land on is Einar standing a few feet away. Ruby's grip on my hand is firm as she holds me close to her while we stand there, waiting for the guys to say or do something. Einar has a heavy scowl on his face, but his body language isn't aggressive or threatening.

He takes a step toward me, almost hesitantly, and I grip Ruby's hand, using it as a comforting lifeline. His eyes flick to where my hand is clasped with Ruby's before jumping back up to my face. I've never seen a being this large move with such tentative care, as if he is terrified of making the smallest of mistakes lest he scare me away from him.

Einar opens his mouth to say something when the door across the room slides open and a handful of people walk in. Almost all of them are male. Shrinking away from

the sudden intrusion of strangers, I press back against the wall and Ruby moves with me so that we are standing side by side. Einar turns to face everyone but positions himself in front of me, angling his body so I can see who and what is going on while leaving me a gap to escape if need be.

I watch as Kallen shoves her way through all the massive bodies so she can address everyone at once.

“ Finally , all of you in one place.”

Ruby’s gargoyle, Slavic , snarls out a question. “ Kallen what is so important that it could not wait until a later time?”

“ Oh , I do not know? ... The fact that your Mam is alive, and you have a youngling sister?”

### Chapter Thirty

#### ROWAN

Kallen's flippant response causes absolute chaos to break out. All of the guys start shouting at the same time and I can feel myself starting to freak the fuck out. I just can't handle this many large men acting with aggression so close to me. Ruby must see that I'm about to lose my shit because she raises her fingers to her lips and lets out a piercing whistle. There are a few winces, but all of their attention is now fixed on where she and I are standing. "Ok , now that I have your attention, all the snarling in the world isn't going to answer your questions. So , pick one and go with it; like you guys actually have some sense."

Kallen smiles over at Ruby in appreciation before saying, "Thank you, Ruby . I need to learn that trick. I do not believe I have ever witnessed instant obedience from these or any males before."

"Kallen , I hate to interrupt your little speech, but I watched that Aynar mage slit my Mam's throat with my own eyes. There is no way she survived such a wound."

Slavic's words are tortured and what he says makes me gasp. Ruby shoots me a quick look and shakes her head, warning me not to say anything right now.

"You are right, most would have died and if the medics had not been on scene quickly afterwards, she probably would not have made it. You must realize, we also thought you all were dead as well. Slavic , your absence has spanned numerous orbital rotations. I have no idea how you have kept your identities hidden all this

time. Your Mam even put feelers out to see if any of you had been seen or heard of, but nothing came of it.”

I can tell that Kallen’s words have not landed on deaf ears. All the males, including Einar , deflate after hearing that. The male hovering around Kallen is the one that speaks next. “ I think you need to start from the time we escaped Kallen . Or this conversation is just going to keep going in circles. Later , you and I are going to discuss why you are just now bringing this up.”

Even I can hear the censure in his words, and it doesn’t go unanswered because Kallen fires right back at him. “ I was not going to retell this story multiple times Ruarc , and it is not like you have spent enough time with me to talk! I am not sure if you all were aware of this, but your Sire was one of the males leading the resistance against the Aynar .

The others who were planning the attack had been trying to recruit him for several orbital rotations, but until they publicly whipped you Slavic , he would not take the chance. After that, he was determined to free you and your brothers, at any cost. The Aynar thought they were in complete control and that was what finally defeated them. They spent rotations building the perfect male, with unlimited strengths and stamina. When the confrontation happened, even with their mental strengths they were unprepared for the mass that attacked them all at once. When the main mages were killed, the rest of them fled in the few remaining space worthy ships still planetside.

According to your Mam , the plan was for her to meet your Sire and all of you at the dock a tic after the second sun rise. She was on her way there when the primary mage who had taken a personal liking to her, spotted her. She told me that she had no clue he was trailing behind her because the accelerating mate sickness had fogged her thoughts, and she was just determined to get to her mate one step at a time.

Your Sire was the one who planned the mine collapse and the landing of the Vespira ,



now the Zenith , to coincide with each other. His primary plan was to get his family on that shuttle while the workers in the mines were being rescued from an alternate entrance that he and a few others had been working on.

Once he got into orbit, he was supposed to bomb the main headquarters. However , we know this is not what happened, and that is how several of the Aynar were able to escape. Your Mam was found when another ship landed close by. While the males in the mines fought the remaining Aynar , all the females were rounded up and put on that ship. Once loaded, that vessel was programmed to head to the outer quadrants to an unpopulated moon called, Deapra .

It took several lunar rotations for any of the males to join us there, so in the meantime, we had to rebuild on our own. Your Mam , even though weak from the attack, only several rotations away from birth, and suffering the loss of her heartbond mate, is who took charge. Without her guidance, we would not have the trade routes or the society we have now. She will be overjoyed to find out that you all are alive and well, as she never believed any of you were dead.”

After Kallen stops speaking, there is silence in the room. Looking around the room I see that the big guys are having varied reactions to her words. The darkest one of the bunch looks viciously angry, but the others look more sad than mad. Peering up at Einar , I see that he has tears running unchecked down his face as his massive shoulders hitch with sobs.

“ I watched her die, Kallen !”

Slavic’s anguished outburst causes sympathy to well deep within me. These beings... they’re not monsters, far from it actually. From the sound of it, they have not had an easy life either. Compassion fills Kallen’s voice as she offers once last piece of information.

“ Her voice was damaged, and she has a terrible scar on her neck that she shows off proudly. Whether you believe me or not Slavic , she is alive and well, along with your sister Atasha , who is the spitting image of her.”

Slavic turns toward us and his tormented eyes land on my sister. Ruby releases my hand and hurries over to him. He opens his arms, almost hesitantly, and Ruby walks right into them. I watch as she hugs him back before he lowers his head and lays it atop hers. Seconds later, an alarm blares through the ship, making me jump in reaction.

Slavic let's go of Ruby instantly before he bellows. “ Everyone to your stations now!”

Before I can blink, everyone rushes out the door behind him, including Ruby . Just as she reaches the portal, she pauses and looks back at me. “ Stay with Einar . Do not leave his side, you hear me?”

Nodding at her, I just stand here unsure of what to do as I watch Einar stalk to the other side of the room where a large screen hangs suspended from the ceiling. He reaches out and hits a series of buttons, turning the screen on and it divides into four smaller screens. Stepping closer, I see that it looks like... the outside of the ship, as well as various rooms within the ship? I can see a room with several of the guys in it where Slavic is gesturing aggressively this way and that. Something is definitely going on.

Einar wipes the tears from his face with the back of one of his hands before studying me, an almost contemplative expression on his face.

“ You have questions, yes?”

“ I , erhm, yes. I have questions, but considering what all Kallen just said... I don't

want to pry when you're already obviously upset.”

A small, rueful smile pulls at his mouth before he replies.

“ You are my mate, anything you wish or need to know about me is yours to have. Some of it may be uncomfortable for me to relay, yes, but knowledge is power. I do you no favors by keeping you in the dark so to speak. You must learn much about your new world so you can make informed decisions moving forward. What is it you would like to know first?”

Wow , that is certainly different than I'm accustomed to.

Flicking a glance up at the screens, I see that nothing has changed so I refocus on the male in front me, grabbing the rolling stool as I walk over to where he is standing. Sitting down, I take a deep breath.

“ Well , I guess the first thing I want to know is what the heck is going on right now?”

Einar lets out a low chuckle before he reaches out and presses a button on the side of the screen. The sudden cacophony of voices emanating from the speakers overhead makes me jump.

“ Bikar , what's going on?”

Slavic barks out the questions and Bikar answers just as fast.

“ The hyperdrive Falon just installed is not getting enough fuel. There must be a vacuum leak somewhere due to the fuel hatch being open. Every time I try to engage, it shuts itself off. Falon is on his way toward the engine compartment now.”

“ Have the swarm ships spotted us yet?”

“ No , the asteroid belt has us hidden at the moment. But if they get a lock on us, we will not escape them without that hyperdrive. Their ships are too big, and the Void does not have enough space for them to operate that feature safely within its borders. Whereas we can duck in behind places they cannot.”

My eyes bounce back and forth between the two of them as I watch their exchange on the screen before me when Ruby’s voice catches me off guard. Slavic moves, and I realize she’s in one of the massive chairs in that room but was blocked from sight by the bulk of Slavic’s body.

“ Slavic , are we being pursued by the bugs?”

I freeze. For the love of all that is good and holy, I pray that we are not. If I never see another one of those things, it will be too soon.

“ Not necessarily, but they are in radar range so the Zenith alerted us once they were detected, giving us plenty of time to get away from them. You have nothing to worry about, little mate.”

Sighing in relief, I relax. At least we don’t have to worry about that.

The door to the room where everyone is opens and I think it’s the one named Falon that enters, talking as he goes. “ The hyperdrive is starving for fuel. The batteries can provide long-term power; however, it requires both fuels for startup. Each time Bikar tries to activate it, the fuel line collapses.”

“ Frack ! Falon , do you have any suggestions?”

“ One of us is going to have to go out and seal that hatch.”

Slavic runs his hand over his hairless head in obvious frustration. “ Find a place to set us down, I’ll go suit up.”

“ Slavic , it would make more sense for me to go. I am the engineer on this ship and if something else needs to be fixed while I am out there, I would have a better grasp on how to do it.”

“ No Falon , I need your eyes up here. I will wear a viewer so if you see something while I am out there, you can advise me on how to proceed further.”

“ Frack Slavic , you have a mate now. She is your first priority, let one of us go instead.”

“ She is the reason I am going, little brother. I will do anything in my power to make sure she is never in danger again. If something should happen to me, I know the five of you would protect her with your lives. Now , quit stalling and let us get this done quickly.”

Warmth fills me at his words. I may be completely fucked up... but my sister deserves whatever gods gave her to a guy like that, and it makes me so happy that she finally has someone in her corner. If Ruby is to be believed, I have that in Einar too... if I can ever be brave enough to risk my body and heart again.

Slavic spins on his heels and is almost out the door before Bikar’s next words stop him in his tracks.

“ We have a problem, Slavic .”

I see that Einar is frowning heavily as he leans toward the screen, watching the exchange just as closely, if not more so than me.

“ What the frack now?”

“ The asteroid’s surface is uneven and after I touched down and anchored us, I noticed the open hatch of the fuel cells is extremely close to the asteroid’s surface. I am not sure you can fit under the ship to do repairs.”

“ Can you readjust the ship?”

“ Not without the unattached material giving our location away.”

“ Murgul is the only one slightly slimmer and you know there is no getting him in a suit.”

Without warning I hear Ruby chime in, “ I’ll do it.”

My shouted NO is simultaneous with Slavic’s emphatic NO !

“ Why ? I fit the size requirement and I’m pretty handy to have around when it comes to tools. Just show me what I need to do and help me do it.”

Of course, my sister would volunteer for this. Once she’s made a decision, Ruby is all in. Whether you like it or not sometimes.

“ No , we will fight them if need be.”

“ Slavic , you’re just being dumb right now. Can you give me a good reason as to why I can’t be the one to do this?”

“ I said no.”

Oof . That is not the response you should have gone with...

“ Ok buddy, you’re going to learn really fast that shit like that doesn’t work with me, so we’re going to nip that in the bud right now. Do you guys have any other options or objections?”

Slavic roars in fury at Ruby’s sassy response. Before I can stop him, Einar reaches up and switches the sound off.

“ Hey ! Turn that back on, I need to know what’s going on!”

Instead of frowning at me for my sharp tone, Einar smiles instead. “ Listening any further will just upset you. We both know that your sister has made her mind up and will not be swayed. I will make sure you can see her the entire time she is helping Slavic , but I am sure you have more questions for me?”

### Chapter Thirty-One

#### EINAR

Rowan's frowning face is adorable. Not that I am stupid enough to make such a comment aloud. That she feels safe enough to express any sort of negative emotion is telling. She may not trust me consciously but the heartbond is working on her at a subconscious level, letting her know that I truly mean her no harm.

She huffs and folds her arms across her chest as she glares at the screen in front of us. Stifling my laughter, I check the screens just in time to see Slavic pull a flush faced Ruby from the helm room toward the maintenance air lock. When he starts pulling suits from the nook where they are kept, I know what is going to happen next so I avert my eyes.

“ Unless you wish to get a full visual of my oldest brother in the nude, I suggest you avert your eyes for some time.”

Rowan squeals, spins on my medical stool, and covers her eyes all at the same time.

“ Eww , gross! He's basically my brother now, I do not wish to see his dick!”

Her words catch me off guard with how formal they are compared to how Ruby speaks, which in turn, sparks my insatiable curiosity. “ Little Rowan , I have a question, if you would permit me?”

“ Uhm ...alright.”



“ Why is it that you speak so differently from Ruby ? I know you are sisters and normally siblings raised in the same dwelling have the same syntax when they speak.”

My question makes her face fall, and the brief moment of levity disappears as if it never happened. Concern fills me that so simple a question could cause such a reaction.

“ Robert ... the man I married on Earth , was a high-ranking politician where we lived. I’ve never been sure why he picked me out of all the women he had to choose from, but unfortunately for me, he did. When I met him, I sounded just like Ruby . However , after we were formally engaged, he started in on how I would embarrass him at his functions because I sounded like a ‘backwoods hillbilly,’ so he forced me to take formal etiquette lessons until I sounded as polished as any upper-class lady. Anytime I slipped up the repercussions were... unpleasant, so now it’s habit to speak the way I do. I’m not sure I could revert back to speaking the way Ruby does even if I wanted to.”

Her explanation makes her so forlorn that it sends a pang through our heartbond, but I refuse to rub my chest. She is far too perceptive, and it would only cause her more misplaced guilt, but it does provide me with an opening to tell her a little about myself.

“ I was not abused by a mate, but I do understand being forced to do things against ones will. If you wish to listen, I will tell you why I am different from my brothers.”

Relief fills me when she nods her agreement, and drops her hands from her face, looking up at me expectantly. Glancing back at the screen, I get a glimpse of pale flesh before I jerk away with a shudder. Rowan must have seen what I did because she snickers at my expense.

“ Did you see something you can’t unsee?”

“ Almost , little one. It was very close.”

Leaning back against the console, Rowan and I both face away from the screen as I start my story from the beginning.

“ I am the middle offspring born of my life givers. Slavic is the oldest, then Ruarc , myself, Falon , Bikar , and finally Murgul . With the exception of Slavic who was born on our home world of Uzrul , we were all born on a planet called Viri 9. An insidious race called the Aynar came to Uzrul under the guise of saviors. They would help my life giver’s generation provide a better life for their younglings, in exchange for my people working for them. From what I was told, and later educated about, Uzrul was a harsh environment, and every day was a struggle to survive. That is why the Aynar’s offer was so tempting, but everything those fracking fairies said was a lie.”

“ Fairies ?”

“ Yes , some call them that because to most they appear as such. Delicate , fragile, ethereally beautiful, but it is all a facade. What lies beneath is far more insidious. Their true forms are born from nightmares, with solid black eyes, leathery wings, and layers of razor-sharp teeth.”

Memories bombard me, taking my breath away. It has taken me many orbital rotations to lock these recollections behind a steel wall in my mind. A tentative touch on my hand pulls me back into the here and now.

Rowan has reached out with one of her tiny hands and is holding as much of my hand as she can grasp. That my mate, who has been abused by everyone except her sister, offers to comfort me? Well , it melts my hearts. Her pale skin contrasts with my green

hide, and I see her face furrow in confusion when she feels the scales that blend perfectly with my skin.

“ What you are feeling is part of the story as well. As I said, Slavic was the only one of my brothers born on Uzrul , and as such, he is the only pure bred Rukuhk among us. The rest of us have been... augmented in one way or another. Mam was pregnant with Ruarc when they left for Viri 9, and all was well in the beginning. However , slowly but surely the Aynar began pushing our sire and his workdays became longer, and his time spent in the dwelling less frequent. They were testing the heartbonds to see how long it took for a mated pair to start experiencing separation sickness.

Mam collapsed and a young Slavic rushed her to the infirmary. That is where it began. The Aynar were experimenting on all the younglings while they were still within their mam's wombs by splicing our DNA with that of other species. Some extinct, some not. In mine, Bikar's and Murgul's case, the DNA they spliced us with is from a long dead, reptilian species. The Aynar's goal was to create the perfect worker and warrior; one that did not tire easily and was difficult to harm. And since my species is hardy, strong, and experiences high birth rates, we were the perfect species to test their experiments out on. Sire was allowed to come home long enough to impregnate mam before his workload would miraculously double. By the time Murgul was born, it was blatantly apparent that the Aynar had been meddling in things they ought not.

Slavic was thrown into the mines when he refused to take a less experienced warrior's life. That was the last time I saw him for orbital rotations. Slavic's refusal to kill an innocent, and his consequential punishment was the day the Aynar revealed themselves for the evil frackers they are. Ruarc , being the second oldest, was left in the dwelling with mam, Bikar and Murgul while they were still younglings. Later , Ruarc was sent to the mines to join sire and Slavic . Falon and I were forcibly removed from our home to begin our specialty training. I was sent to medical and Falon engineering. When Bikar and Murgul were old enough, they too were sent off,

but Bikar went into communications and when Murgul showed promise for weapons design that is where he was assigned. Later I found out that our sire pulled in every single favor he had left to make sure we were all selected for different training assignments. He was planning long term.”

Rowan interjects with a gentle question.

“ You and your brothers are so big. How did a race that looks like an evil fairy control you?”

“ Ah , yes. You see, all the younglings they altered could be controlled by the Aynar’s mages. A simple thought in our direction dropped us to the ground in mind numbing pain. They engineered us to serve, regardless whether we agreed with what we were being forced to do or not. That is how they controlled us, and if that did not provide the desired result, they would threaten our mams or siblings to encourage cooperation. Orbital rotations went by before I saw one of my brothers again, and I almost did not recognize him for who he was when I did.

Slavic had been caught in a cave-in deep in the mine, but our sire was able to get him to my infirmary for care. You would not know it now, but Slavic had hair similar to my own, and dark green skin versus his current bald, gray skinned appearance. The environment in the mine was extremely hostile. While I worked on him, we exchanged as much information as possible. I told him where the rest of our brothers were, how Sire maneuvered us into varying training programs, how mam was taken to their main laboratory, and that none of us knew where she was.”

“ How ... how did you escape?”

Rowan’s broken question pulls me from my memories; her hand is clinging to mine, and I brush my thumb across hers in reassurance.

“ The simple answer is our sire. Remember I mentioned he was planning for the long term? Well , he spearheaded a revolt against the Aynar . A secret rebellion to save our people, his family, and most importantly his mate from the evil frackers. He manipulated it so a ship would be waiting in the loading bay at the mine. Normally the workers just hauled the onyx up to the bay and put it in containers that would later be loaded onto ships via auto bots. This was so there was never a ship in the loading bay at the same time as a Rukuhk . Sire sent Murgul , Falon , and myself a message through a few Ruks he trusted, that when we heard the explosion to be ready to move, and head to the loading bay.

The explosion, when it came, was significant and could not be missed. Sire blew up the entire fracking mine and it rattled the Aynar enough that there was pandemonium. I was able to make it to the ship without resistance as did Falon and Murgul . We were standing in the cargo bay, waiting for our life givers, Ruarc and Slavic to join us when we heard something hit the ramp just before Slavic appeared with a wounded Ruarc . Slavic laid Ruarc on the floor, turned and bolted right back down the ramp. The three of us followed him only to be hit with wave upon wave of unrelenting pain. Through the pain, I watched sire fight with several Pyrkyne guards before Slavic was able to him to help.

Somehow , one of the Aynar mages figured out what sire was up to, and he brought mam with him to the loading bay to dangle her in front of us. Sire and Slavic froze. Sire bellowed, “ Slavic , save your brothers, get to the ship now, and do not make our sacrifice be in vain, Son .’

Everything that happened after that was a blur. Slavic barreled up the ramp, dragging myself, Murgul , and Falon back into the ship. Once we were out of the mage’s line of sight, his hold on us broke, but we were all weak due to the torture. Slavic watched that evil fracker slit our mam’s throat and when sire stumbled, the death of his mate such a shock he could not move, Pyrkyne guards overwhelmed him and murdered him on the spot. Somehow , I managed to hit the control to close the ramp before

Slavic could leave the safety of the ship. It took all of us to hold him down in his grief and I ended up having to sedate him for many risings before he was able to control himself.

He is the one who figured out a way to survive. We may be brigands, but we have never harmed the innocent because we know how it feels to be the guiltless. We all know what it is like to be controlled, manipulated and violated.”

I watch as Rowan’s eyes flared at the comparison. Her eyes are glassy with unshed tears. She sniffles before getting up from the stool and moving around in front of me. This is the closest she has allowed me to be to her since she awoke and just her company is a balm to my tortured soul.

To my dismay, she lets go of my hand before shocking me completely with a hug. The top of her head only reaches my sternum, and our size differences hit me anew. Her slight form is trembling, and I do not know if it is due to my story, her fear of males or a combination therein. Cautiously , I lower my arms, giving her plenty of time to back away before I lightly wrap my arms around her, hugging her in return. Her voice is muffled where it is buried in my chest.

“ I am so, so sorry, Einar . I don’t have the words to tell you how sorry I am for all that you’ve suffered.”

“ Thank you, little Starshine . I would endure it all again.”

My heartfelt words cause her to jerk her face away from where it’s pressed against my chest to shoot an incredulous look up at me, and I see that her tears fell as she embraced me.

“ Do not look at me so. I would do it all again, and I will tell you why. It is because all those events led me to you.”

Shock makes her jaw drop in astonishment before her brows crease. Ignoring her ire, I carefully pull her back to me.

“Come now, let me hold you for a moment longer before we are needed elsewhere.”

She grumbles a bit, but I take it as a resounding win when she settles back against my chest and lets me hold her.

### Chapter Thirty-Two

ROWAN

Stepping back from Einar , I drop my arms from around him and lean around his body to look at the screen only to see that Ruby and Slavic are back inside the ship taking off those space suit looking things. The door leading outside is closing behind them and they appear to be talking to one another.

“ Einar ! We missed the whole thing!”

He peers over his shoulder before snapping forward again and letting out a rusty, rumbling chuckle.

“ Rowan , they are going to disrobe once more. It seems as though we caught them at the most inopportune time again”

His chuckle turns into a full-on belly laugh as he watches me spin around so fast, I wobble a bit. Large hands lift to steady me, if need be, but I regain my balance without needing any assistance. Unsure what to do with myself, I stand there awkwardly, looking anywhere but the hulking form beside me.

A low chime from the watch like thing on Einar’s wrist catches us both by surprise. He presses a button on it and then speaks. “ Yes , Bikar . What is it that you need now?”

“ You wound me with that beleaguered tone, brother! For your information, I do not



need anything. I am merely following our oldest brother's instructions by letting you know we are headed to Deapra , and he is not to be disturbed for the next several risings. From what I saw on the viewers, he is on his way to his quarters to defile his mate."

I have to stifle a snicker at the pained look on Einar's face as he listens to his overly cheerful brother relay Slavic's orders. Ruby and I have never been shy about the 'kiss and tell' during a cuss and discuss session, but it doesn't look like these boys share much about their love lives.

" According to the star chart, it will take us at least several risings to get there, even using the hyperdrive. We are on the complete opposite side of the Void from Deapra ."

" Thank you for the information, Bikar . It is appreciated. Now , go away and do not bother me again unless it is important." Einar growls.

" Shet , you mated males are no fun!"

Bikar cuts the comm after his last quip, so he doesn't hear the snarl Einar lets loose in reply. Rubbing a hand across the base of his horns, he sends a tentative smile my way.

" It appears as though Slavic and Ruby are... retiring for the rest of the rising. Is there anything you need or would like to do for the rest of the time?"

He sounds so painfully hopeful that I might want to spend some free time with him that I can't brush him off like I was planning to. Before I can think of a reply, my stomach gurgles. Clutching my midsection, I try to think back to the last time I ate something, and for the life of me can't remember when that was. I'm sure the IV Einar had me hooked up to had some sort of nutrients in it, but it can't replace real

food.

“ Would you like to accompany me to the dining chamber? I will be happy to show you the way and assist you with the replicator.”

Einar looks almost bashful as he essentially asks me out on a date.

“ I don’t remember the last time I ate something, so I would very much appreciate that.”

A beaming smile shapes his homely face into something almost endearing.

Joy floods me as Rowan tentatively agrees to let me escort her to the dining hall. An idea forms and I smile eagerly at her. Eating will not take very long, and I desperately want to spend more time with her.

“ Give me a tic to fetch something from my room. I will return shortly.”

Rowan shoots me a perplexed look but nods her head as I jog to my room and grab my pop-up chair. She eyes it with a questioning expression, but I just smile at her, gesturing her to proceed me out the door.

“ Shall we?”

She gives me a hesitant smile and walks toward the door, pausing for me to exit the med bay and turn down the hallway, leading her to the dining chamber. Out of the corner of my eye, I watch as Rowan’s head cranes left and right as she examines her new surroundings. Surprisingly enough, I do not see any of my brothers out and about.

Entering the dining chamber, I am pleased to see that none of them are in here either.

It is not that I do not love them or want to spend time with them, I just wish to pass some uninterrupted time with my mate. We have not had any of that since she woke. Either her sister, one of my brothers, or some sort of calamity has kept me from actively wooing her. Not to mention she has not been fully conscious, let alone in possession of all her mental faculties.

“Falon acquired what he assures me are the proper nutrients for humans and loaded it into our replicator after we left Navale . I am unsure if the taste or texture will be what you are accustomed to, but I am hopeful. No one has told me if the other females have objected to the food we have given them.”

Rowan’s head snaps around, her face full of surprise.

“Other females? You mean there are other human women on this ship besides Ruby and I?”

Unsure if this has upset her or not, my response is uncertain.

“Yes , Falon and Murgul rescued three more human females while Slavic , Ruarc , and I were saving you, Ruby , and Kallen . They have been in Falon’s room for the most part even though Bikar also gave up his bed to accommodate them. The three of them have not wanted to be separated from one another, so they have stayed where we initially put them, even though they have the option of a second chamber. I healed them the best I could before installing their translators. In fact, I need to stop back by and follow up with them to ensure their wounds are healing properly. Since it is late in the rotation, I plan on doing that shortly after the fast-breaking meal on the next rising. You are more than welcome to go with me if you are interested in meeting them.”

Indecision flits across her face as she contemplates what I relayed to her.

“ You do not have to answer me now, and you are more than welcome to think about it. I know you may not be quite ready to socialize, and that is nothing to worry about.”

“ I’ll think about it. Thank you for letting me know and giving me the option. Right now, what I’m most interested in is food.”

Rumbling out a low laugh, I pull a chair out for her to sit down while noting that there will have to be some adjustments made now that there are humans on board. All of our furniture is Ruk sized, and not ideal for a species so much smaller.

“ What would you like to have for your meal?”

“ Honestly , I have no idea. The last several years all of my meals were picked out for me. Robert had me on a strict diet so I kept the figure he preferred me to have.”

Her quiet reply fills me with rage. However , I cannot let her see that. She is not yet to the point where she would believe I am angry for her, not at her. Fighting to keep my tone level, I wait for her to scramble up into the chair before moving over to the replicator.

“ Come now, there must be something you enjoyed...?”

She scrunches her precious little face up in contemplation.

“ Hmmm . Can you see if it has something similar to steak with potatoes and some sort of green vegetable? Steak is meat from a species of animal on earth called a cow, and potatoes are a tuber vegetable.”

Scrolling through the replicator under the human nutrients, I am surprised to find that this steak is listed, but the potatoes are not. Thinking about her explanation, I enter

the sequence for the steak as well as two vegetables from my home planet. One is a tuber that grows under the soil, while the other is a leafy plant found in most dwelling gardens. A few nano-tics later, the replicator dings, announcing it has finished creating our meal. Hitting another button, I select a sweet, fizzy drink that is popular on many stations, and is favored by most females of multiple species.

Grabbing both plates, I amble back to the table, setting her plate of food down in front of her along with her beverage, before moving around the table across from her. It is unlikely she will want me to sit next to her, let alone put her in my lap where she belongs so that I may feed her, as is customary for some Rukuhk pairs. Her delighted cry makes satisfaction permeate me, as my chest swells with pride.

Finally , I have done something right that pleases her instead of causing her distress.

“ Einar , this is delicious! The texture is a bit off, but the flavor is perfect, even if the not-potatoes are blue, and the leafy green veggie is actually orange.”

“ I am glad what I selected is to your liking.”

Both of us fall silent as we eat. Watching my mate relish each bite, sometimes emitting a small moan, becomes tortuous because my mind contemplates if she would make similar sounds were I to pleasure her. Discreetly , I adjust myself, trying to ease my pivy into a more comfortable position within my trousers. Just because I am patient and understanding, does not mean I am not a male with base desires.

Her slim arm reaches for the cup next to her plate and I wait in anticipation. After a tentative sip, her exclamation of delight over the beverage makes me grin.

“ I don’t know what this fizzy pink stuff is, but it’s wonderful!”

Beaming over at her, I take it as yet another win when my ugly countenance does not

make her wince or shrink back in fear, but what truly gives me hope is the fact that she offers me a tiny grin in return.

### Chapter Thirty-Three

#### ROWAN

I'm so full I'm about to pop ... but the last piece of steak on my plate is taunting me with its flavorful deliciousness. Stabbing it with what I assume is a fork, I shove it into my mouth with a groan of appreciation, only to smirk when I see Einar adjust himself again. He's been trying to be sneaky about it so he doesn't make me uncomfortable, but I've learned to be extra observant over the years.

So ...

I've been teasing him without mercy.

It's a test and there is not one single part of me that feels bad about it. I have to know if I am safe with him. Oh , I realize what Ruby and Kallen told me, and intellectually I understand it.

But .

Neither of them can fathom what I've been through, so they can't truly understand why I need to be sure that he won't hurt me. Fated mate bond or not.

Which brings me to the here and now. Sexually teasing the green giant in front of me that "fixed" me supper. He's the first guy that's ever prepared a meal for me. Sure , he didn't cook it from scratch, but the second he realized I was hungry, he set about fixing it. From what I've observed so far, that is a big part of his personality.

Einar is a fixer.

If he sees a problem, he does his best to remedy it for the ones he cares for and since I'm supposed to be his one true love, I need to know if this is all just an act to get me naked.

Pushing my now empty plate away, I lean back in my freakishly large chair as I take in the male sitting across from me. Einar is not handsome in any sense of the word. Thinking back on what I've observed thus far, I don't think he is even considered good looking for his species. Several of his brothers have more symmetrical faces with better cosmetic features than Einar has. The differences between Einar and Robert couldn't be more glaringly blatant, and I have to wonder if the universe did that on purpose. Robert, may he forever rot in hell, was classically handsome with silver dusted hair, dark brown eyes, and patrician features. Whereas Einar's nose is flatter, with a crook in it to suggest it's been broken at least once, and his heavy, horned brow protrudes over his eyes, creating a shadowy overhang. Then there are the horns that hold his green tinted black hair off of his face like a built-in headband.

It makes me a bit jealous, since I have to constantly push my long hair back out of my face.

Broad cheekbones, a massive square scaled jaw and a big mouth round out his face, creating a homely, brutish package. Yet, his yellow dragon eyes are caring every time they land on me, and his mouth is somewhat appealing if you can get past the two tusks that poke out past his full lower lip.

He must feel my gaze boring into him because he lifts his head to regard me curiously as he finishes chewing his last bite of food. "Is there something you need, little Rowan?"

"No, not particularly. I'm curious to know what you brought in that little bag with



you, though.”

“ Ah , yes. It is a pop-up chair. The Zenith boasts a hologram simulation room. It is not very big, but the function it performs for us is necessary, so we make do with the size. My species was born and raised on a planet with life all around us. Being on a ship for lunar rotations at a time, well, it started affecting us negatively, so we turned a small room we did not use into a simulation deck. There is only one chair within the room, so I brought a second in the event you wanted to experience the room with me.”

“ So ? This is like dinner and a movie?”

I haven't seen a movie in longer than I care to admit and even knowing it won't be exactly the same doesn't matter. It'll still be some form of visual entertainment and I'm excited, nonetheless. Einar doesn't realize what he's giving me by essentially taking me on a first date.

“ I am not sure what a ‘movie’ is, but you will be able to watch a variety of things in the simulation room,” he says with a bashful smile.

Hopping to my feet, I grab our plates and take them over to the counter. “ Show me how to wash our dishes and let's go watch an alien movie!”

He stares at me for a second, obviously confused at my abrupt change in demeanor, before pushing his chair back and walking over to where I'm standing. Picking up our plates, he places them back in the replicator and hits a black button, then a red button as he explains.

“ The replicator stores all the ingredients for our meals as well as the cutlery and utensils. It breaks the non-consumable items down to the molecule, that way we do not waste space with cupboards full of dishes. The replicator creates the same set of

dishes over and over.”

“ Well , that is a handy piece of equipment, right there.”

I can't say that I'm all that disappointed to find out that outer space doesn't have dishes. I really despise doing dishes. Worst chore ever. “ Okay , lead on to the movie room.”

I can feel Rowan's excitement and happiness flowing across our bond. That she has been so obviously deprived of simple pleasures is apparent when something so simple as a hologram simulation invigorates her so. This is the first time since she gained consciousness that I have felt any semblance of a positive emotional response from her.

Leading her out of the dining chamber, I turn and take her to the room for her 'movie,' wracking my brain for something that she might find appealing as well as entertaining to watch. Inspiration strikes just as we reach the simulation chamber, and I place my palm on the scanner to unlock the door. Stepping back, I allow her to enter the room first. My mam would beat me if I did not offer my Starshine that courtesy. Rowan seems to deflate a bit when she sees bare walls and a plain chair situated in the middle of the room.

Closing the door behind us makes her jump a little and the scent of her apprehension makes the spines across my back rattle. Which in turn makes her more nervous, as she takes a step away from me. Turning so that my back is toward her, I enter the commands for the simulation I picked out.

Forcing myself to calm, I pull my pop-up chair out and situate it next to the existing chair, smiling over at her as I take my seat.

“ Come now, I have something in mind that I think you will like.”

Patiently , I wait for her to make the decision to sit next to me and sigh in relief when she settles herself into the cushioned chair at my side. Right now, I am most thankful that we all decided that the simulation chair needed to be as comfortable as possible because my mate should be able to relax into something plush. Shortly after she settles herself, the walls light up with images and I can tell Rowan is captivated immediately.

“ Einar ! Those are dragons!”

Her breathless words drag my eyes from the images playing in front of us.

“ I do not know what a dragon is, but this species lived long ago on a planet called Atraxia . It was an exceptionally unique world where the males were all of a reptilian nature and the females of equine, I believe, is the correct word. The Aynar invaded it at one point but were met with hostility instead of being welcomed. Legend says that the land itself rose up against the intruders and expelled them from the world. Unfortunately , the Aynar managed to abduct several beings from the planet to harvest DNA from before the planet disappeared. No one knows what happened to the world, and it is thought that the planet imploded, much like your Earth did. Atraxia has not been seen on any star chart in centuries, nor has a single member of the species been seen since the Aynar’s failed invasion. These images are a few of the only ones in existence.”

I observe my mate watching this simulator module as I have seen this one many times over the orbital rotations on the Zenith . The massive, red reptilian beast and his delicate, pale equid mate make a striking pair as they play in the water. A waterfall on the far side of the pool creates the perfect backdrop. I know the tic the pair shift to their bipedal forms because Rowan’s eyes shoot over to me ... and the distinctive horns on my head.

My mate is not slow of wit and her next words prove it.

“ You and that dragon man have the same horns. How ?”

“ Clever little human. Remember how I mentioned the Aynar abducted several of their people? Well , they used the DNA from those beings to splice my DNA with.”

Her jaw drops.

“ You’re part dragon?? No way!!”

“ Yes , I am part dragon, as you say, and so are several of my brothers.”

“ You told me Slavic is the only pure-blooded Rukuhk out of the six of you. Obviously , the horns are front and center, but what else makes you different from Slavic ? Do you have anything else that looks different from what it’s supposed to?”

“ You have noticed that we do not wear tunics as we have spines covering our shoulders and backs. Mine are longer with serrated edges to them, where as Slavic’s are smooth but have wickedly sharp points at the end. There are also some ... additional differences, but I will have to remove my trousers to fully show you.”

Trepidation blooms from her in waves, the scent almost as acrid as her fear. She thinks this is a ruse, an effort for me to remove my clothes so that I may take advantage of her. Smiling ruefully, I scoot my chair away from her, giving her more distance from me.

“ Ah , perhaps another time. Let us finish watching this module.”

Her next words shock me to my core.

“ No , I want to see.”

### Chapter Thirty-Four

ROWAN

What the fuck am I doing?

Oh , yes. Testing him. That's right.

I can't believe I just gave him permission to take his pants off, which, aside from boots, is the only clothing I've seen any of them wear. The spikes on their backs must make shirts a definitive no-no for one's wardrobe.

Although , there is a part of me that wants to know what he's packing in those pants of his. It's all for research purposes only, of course.

I'm not sure if he knows that I'm testing him or not, and I don't really care. We are in this tiny room, all alone, and the door is shut. He's literally twice my size. If he wants to hurt me or take me against my will, there is nothing I can do to stop him, and I would also be willing to bet that this room is soundproof. The dress I have on is no barrier to a being this strong, and being naked means there is one less barrier between his body and mine.

“ If you are sure?” His gruff voice trails off, the question clear. Einar is making sure this is what I want before he proceeds, and he waits until I realize he's waiting for me to say it out loud.

“ Yes , I'm sure. I want to see what makes you, well, you.”

He heaves a deep sigh before standing up, turning so that his back faces me and drops his pants to his ankles.

Oh wow.

The entire back of him is covered in scales, from his neck, down his shoulders, along both arms, and both legs and his beefy looking ass. His spine looks like it's armor plated. The scales are so thick that his spikes stick up out of them and across his shoulders, down his back before ending around his waist. I'm not sure how long I sit there staring before I realize he is shifting his weight from left to right.

Oh shit, I've made him uncomfortable.

That startling realization is driven home when he rumbles out another question, with an edge to his tone.

“ If your curiosity is satisfied, may I put my trousers back on now?”

“ I'm sorry, Einar . My intention was not to make you feel self-conscious. I've just never seen someone like you before. Can you turn around so I can see what the ... erm ... front looks like?”

“ I do not think that would be wise, little Starshine .”

Huffing a bit, I fold my arms across my chest. “ Well , why not?”

“ My current condition is not one you will favor at this time.”

I'm a dumbass.

I'm supposed to be his one true love. Of course, he is going to have a physical

reaction to me.

Perfect .

“ If I am what you say I am to you, I’m in no danger because you won’t take what isn’t offered.”

“ Ah , so that is what you are about. This is a test to see if I am a brute or if I can control myself.”

He turns as he talks, his hands down at his sides and I watch as he flexes his fingers, causing long black claws to emerge from his fingertips. Once he turns fully, I get my first glimpse of a completely naked Einar .

And what a sight it is.

This close, I can see the heavy slabs of muscle in his chest and abdomen that lead down to a legitimate hip ‘ V ’ that highlights a monstrous, fully erect dick. There is no way, on God’s green Earth (pun intended) that thing is going to fit inside me, and it doesn’t stop there. Scales cover the entire length of his member, texturing it from root to tip. At my wide eyed, possibly horrified look at his junk, he hastens to assure me.

“ If you were ever to be agreeable, it will fit. There are components in my saliva that will relax the flesh enough to permit my pivy entrance to your center.”

“ So , you have a gigantic, scaled cock and magic spit. Got it. Is there anything else?”

Scrutinizing him further, I see that his mating collar spirals up the length of his dick, too. Snapping my gaze up, I see humor in his eyes as he watches me realize his entire body is marked. Showing one and all that even his dick belongs to me.

“ Yes , little Starshine . The gods decided that your claim should cover all of me. I do not mind in the slightest. I am happy to be marked so thoroughly,” he sniggers before continuing. “ What you cannot see is the last thing that sets me apart from my brothers. The Aynar grafted a piece of biotech into my brain that forces me to process vast quantities of information rapidly. I have a photographic memory and can perfectly recall everything I was required to learn. Part of my education was female gratification. At the end of the day, we were all breeders to the Aynar , and it is scientifically proven that the female orgasm makes procreation a much easier process.”

I can feel my eyebrows inching up the more he speaks. So , I have a male that thinks I’m the center of his universe, is literally a genius, and he’s been taught how to pleasure a woman. Is this really my life now?

“ I would be happy to provide you with a demonstration of my skills, if permissible?”

Refocusing on the man meat in front of me, I see that his gaze has fallen to my lap.

“ You would not even have to remove your dress, little one.”

His tone turns cajoling. Is he for real? He’s practically begging my permission to eat me out. Should I embrace my new life? I can’t remember the last time I had an orgasm. I have to start somewhere, right? I’m not sure what he sees in my face, but he prompts me again.

“ I must have the words, little one. Consent is sexy, and very much required.”

Nerves fill me. I can’t believe I’m about to agree to this, but I’m so very tired of being scared. Tired of my body being used as a tool against me for someone else’s pleasure. I deserve some pleasure and who better to give it to me than the guy who says he’s destined for me.



“ You ... you can't touch me with your hands or anything else. Just your mouth, okay?”

Einar sinks to his knees in front of me, clasping his hands behind his back. Acquiescing to my demand that he not touch me in any way other than what I've agreed to. He pointedly glances at the hem of my dress before looking back at my face. Even on his knees, he's so tall that his face is level with mine in the chair I'm currently occupying.

Taking a deep breath, I reach for the hem of my dress and slowly pull it up, hesitating right before my center is revealed. Compassion fills Einar's face before it falls ever so slightly. He starts to stand up to move away from me, but before he can, my hand darts out to grab him by one of his horns. The second my hand makes contact with the rough textured surface of his horn, he lets out a lurid moan and the skyscraper between his legs jerks.

I file that piece of information away for a later date.

“ No , don't leave. Just give me a second. I haven't changed my mind.”

Grabbing every scrap of courage I have, I raise my dress and voluntarily expose my vulnerable flesh to someone for the first time in a very, very long time. I guess that final act is the last bit of permission Einar needs because he literally dives face first into my pussy with a groan.

The first swipe of his tongue on my clit gets my instant attention because his tongue is textured, but it doesn't hurt. Quite the opposite, it feels good. His spit has a slippery feel to it, and I remember he said that it's supposed to help me ... stretch. The concept is oddly titillating. True to his word, Einar keeps his hands tightly clasped behind his back as he begins to seduce me with his mouth. He starts out with languorous licks, spreading his spit all around, and before long I realize that

everywhere he licks tingles a bit, heightening the sensation of everything he's doing.

Scooting closer, he wedges his shoulders between my legs, forcing them to spread wide to accommodate the bulk of his body. It jostles me enough that my other hand grabs his remaining horn to steady myself in the chair, and Einar's entire body shudders at the contact. It takes a few seconds, but he seems to get ahold of himself and focuses on the task at hand.

Teasing little licks land all around my clit, the tantalizing sensations a whisper compared what he did at first, and I can feel the first trickle of arousal low in my pelvis. After a few minutes, I can feel frustration welling up inside me. Clutching his horns in my hands, I drag his mouth to my clit and pull him to me, showing him without words where I need his attentions.

With a muffled chuckle, he focuses his attention on my pleasure button and ravages it. He licks, sucks and tongues my clit until I'm panting and writhing on his face, desperate to cum. Einar must sense how close I am, because his lips close around my clit and he sucks hard while flicking the tip of his talented tongue across the bundle of nerves. It's the push I needed because I fall over the precipice as pleasure overwhelms me. My body bucks with the force of my orgasm, only to be held in place by the weight of Einar's face in my lap.

Mercilessly , he keeps licking me until I orgasm a second time, my entrance pulsating around nothing as I see stars all around me, the pleasure a stark contrast to the pain I'm accustomed to feeling where sex is concerned. After my second peak, Einar soothes my overstimulated flesh, bringing me down gently before leaning back. His face is wet where my fluids leaked down his mouth and I watch as he licks his lips, a wicked gleam in his eyes.

“ Thank you, little Starshine . My dessert was delicious. Let us wrap it up in here and return to my quarters for the night. It is getting rather late.”

He drops that little bomb, and I watch as he gains his feet to put his pants back on, groaning a bit as he shoves his painful looking erection back within the confines of the fabric. Extending one of his enormous hands to me, he waits with infinite patience for me to take it before helping me down from the chair. The hem of my dress falls once I stand, hiding my nakedness from him, and he releases the hold on my hand once he knows I'm steady on my feet.

Disappointment blooms as his hand leaves mine. Maybe I wanted to hold his damn hand after he just ate me like a starving man at a feast.

He packs up his little chair and I wordlessly move to follow him out the door, but not before I tangle my fingers with his, ignoring his huff of laughter at my fit of pique.

Well , that escalated quickly.

### Chapter Thirty-Five

#### EINAR

Rolling to my side on the divan and trying to find a more comfortable position, I relish the taste of my mate on my tongue. It is the sweetest flavor I have ever experienced, and I cannot wait to pleasure her again. Our time spent in the hologram simulator could not have gone any better.

Rowan trusted me enough to let me give her pleasure, and then she held my hand all the way back to our quarters.

Surely , if I continue to triumph in little ways, my mate will come to care for me, just a little. Her diminutive form barely makes a lump in the vastness of my sleeping platform. Satisfaction runs rampant through me that my mate is safely ensconced in my quarters, away from prying eyes. She was deep in thought as we departed the holo room, so I did my best to distract her from her worries with idle conversation as we returned to our room.

Thankfully , the crate full of garments sitting in the middle of the floor provided a neutral topic of conversation, and her delight over having things to call her own was blatant. I talked her through how to use all the amenities the refreshing chamber has to offer before she politely, but firmly, kicked me out. The sounds of her enjoyment trickled through the door, and it made me wonder how long it has been since she had the opportunity to properly cleanse herself.

Noticing the height discrepancy when she stood next to the basin, I went to the supply

room to rummage for some sort of stool for her. I returned just in time to hear the blower turn on and off as I placed one of the small stepping stools next to the door before putting a second beside the sleeping platform. Rowan emerged tics later and noticed my gift right away. Her face softened in delight at the thoughtfulness of what I left for her. Shooting me a look of gratitude, she put it in the cleansing room for later use.

When she saw that I had snagged one of my pillows and was stretched out on the divan, her body sagged in relief before she wordlessly climbed beneath the covers. My hearts wilted a bit at the thought that she expected me to pressure her to share a sleeping space but is not unexpected.

Trust is earned. It is a gift, and not something to arbitrarily expect. Especially from one's mate.

Which brings us to now, as I lie here and watch my mate doze. Not that she found rest easily or quickly. It took longer than I wished for her body to relax into sleep, but she finally lost the battle with slumber. My eyes feast on the sight she makes. Her beautiful red hair cascades over my pillow, her pale skin is luminescent in the low light, and her face is relaxed in an expression of peacefulness.

Even if she never chooses to seal our bond, and I must meet the gods of Ruk with the breaking of my hearts, I will always cherish this moment.

Is that bacon?

The delicious aroma of my favorite breakfast food pulls me from one of the best nights of sleep I've had in longer than I can remember. I feel glorious, and the cause of my current good mood is the first thing that greets me when I open my eyes. Einar is sitting at the table situated in the center of the room. Two plates with covers over them are waiting in front of him.

Noticing that I am awake, he grins at me in greeting, his tusk gleaming in the light, and I blush in response.

The things he did to me with that mouth.

“ Good rising, Rowan . I have acquired our fast-breaking meal. According to Bikar , this is what several of the other females suggested for the first meal of the day. Hopefully , it is to your liking.”

Rubbing the sleep out of my eyes, I take a second to wake up. It appears as though Einar is a morning person and I'm more akin to a goblin first thing when I get out of bed, even if he did eat me out until I was a limp noodle the night before. Grumbling , I flip the covers off and slide down the side of the bed until my feet hit the little stool he put there last night. I had to bite back tears when I came out of the bathroom last night to find the second stepstool waiting for me.

His thoughtfulness is getting to me with every small act of selfless kindness.

I offer him a halfhearted wave as I trudge to the bathroom. Bacon , or the alien version of bacon, is going to have to wait a second. I need to use the toilet, and I can feel the fuzz on my teeth. Einar doesn't say anything else as he regards me and just before I close the bathroom door, I hear his low laughter.

Stepping up to the sink, I take a long look at myself in the mirror for the first time since arriving on the Zenith . Turning my head side to side, I'm amazed at what I see. Ruby's words about this being a second chance at a happily ever after float through my mind while I examine myself. My face is flushed with health, my scars are mostly all gone, (if not faded to the point they're almost imperceptible) and my eyes are sparkling with life. I haven't looked this good in years. Not since before I met Robert . Looking around the bathroom, my eyes land on all the things Einar has provided for me.

The pile of ribbons is new, and my heart melts. He noticed I needed something to tie my hair back with. Bottles of shampoo and conditioner are on cubbies in the shower stall. A toothbrush, and the alien version of toothpaste, line the side of the sink. He even found me a stool so I can reach the sink faucet with ease, and it hits me. None of this is necessary. I don't have to have any of it to survive, but Einar wants me to be happy here. Picking up my toothbrush, I scrub the funk off my teeth and wash my face, clearing away the sleepies. It's amazing what access to indoor plumbing, a good night's sleep, and a few orgasms will do for a girl. After refreshing myself, I feel like a whole new person, and that's when it really sinks in.

I am a new person, and I can be anything I want to be. I don't have to be a victim anymore.

Opening the door reveals that Einar is still in the same place he was before my bathroom break, apparently content to wait on me as long as it takes me to wander over to the table to eat. The second I start toward him, he stands and moves around the table, pulling my chair out for me and removing the cover on my plate.

“Thank you, Einar.”

Momma didn't raise an ungrateful heathen, and his solicitousness makes my insides all fluttery.

Oh my gosh, I have butterflies in my belly!

“You are most welcome.”

He waits until I'm settled in my seat before stepping back around the table to sit and start in on his breakfast. The silence between us isn't heavy or laden with stress as we eat. It's actually, well, almost comfortable. As if there aren't any expectations at all. Just two people having a relaxing morning meal before starting their day.

Isn't this what I've always wanted?

To have someone to enjoy the little things with?

Einar is checking off boxes I didn't realize I still had on my imaginary list for a life partner.

Polishing off the last bite of the kinda bacon and eggs, I sigh in satisfaction. Having regular meals is wonderful. Einar hasn't finished his food yet, but that's to be expected as his portion was about triple mine. As I observe him eating, a flicker of heat coils between my legs as I remember what else that mouth of his is capable of doing. Just as he is about to take his last bite, his nostrils flare, and his eyes snap up to mine, interest heavy in his gaze.

“Do you still hunger, little one?”

His tone is full of suggestion, and my face turns beet red in mortification.

He can smell that I'm turned on!

“Erm ...”

“I will be happy to provide you relief should you wish it. You need only tell me,” He rumbles.

Indecision wars within me, but the desire to experience the same type of pleasure as last night is too great a temptation, so I nod in agreement.

“Little Rowan, I must have the words.”

“Yes, I want you to do what you did to me last night. But ... but the same rules as



before. You can't touch me anywhere else. Okay ?”

“ Of course, I will not do anything you do not consent to.”

The verbal affirmation calms me more than it should. Standing , he comes around the table, spinning my chair so that the back faces said table, and kneels in front of me, waiting for me to pull my cute little blue nightgown up. A low rumble catches me by surprise, and it takes me a bit to figure out where it's coming from.

Placing my hand against his broad chest, I feel the vibrations against my palm. Einar is basically purring at the thought of eating me out. Repeating my actions from last night, I pull the hem up, exposing myself to him. Unlike last night, he doesn't hesitate before he wedges himself between my legs. Checking to make sure his spikes are flat, I boldly drape my legs over his shoulders so that my thighs cradle his face on either side while I grab two handfuls of his long, green-black hair right behind his horns. His hot mouth lands on my clit and starts sucking instantly, a startling contrast to his gentleness the first time.

He brings me to the edge before he stops, making me cry in frustration before he uses his tusk to part my nether lips and shoves his textured tongue deep inside me. It's far longer than a human man's because I feel it rub against my g-spot over and over. Just as my I'm about to explode, he removes his tongue altogether and sucks my clit hard. It's exactly what I need and stars burst behind my eyes as I climax and soak his face with my release. Gently , he soothes my tender flesh as tremors wrack my body. Easing back, he stares up at me with emotion blazing in his eyes as he licks my slick from his lips.

Ignoring what his eyes are telling me, I limply collapse back into the chair.

Gaining his feet, there is no missing the massive hard on he is rocking that tents the front of his pants. Seeing it makes me tense in apprehension, and his perceptive gaze

catches my unease immediately.

“ Shsh , all is well, little Starshine . You need not worry, you are safe with me. Always .”

The conviction he says that with rattles me to my core, and to my surprise, I believe him.

### Chapter Thirty-Six

#### ROWAN

After Einar emerges from the bathroom, it's apparent that he's taken care of himself because the front of his pants no longer look like there's a jackhammer in there trying to escape. I don't know if that makes me feel relieved or irritated. I'm not sure if I'm ready to have sex with him yet, but I don't like that he feels like he has to hide himself from me in that manner.

He grabs our plates, beating me to it as he explains his morning tasks.

“I must go check on the other three human females. It has been several risings since I initially treated their wounds and installed the translators. Slavic, and my duty, require me to follow up with them. Do you wish to go with me, or would you prefer to stay here? If you want to stay, you are welcome to my personal viewer to research anything you wish.”

Taking a second, I think about it. I want to see how the other women are being treated since none of them are mates that I am aware of. Einar also said he healed them before inserting the translators. That means they can tell me about their treatment before they could speak with our captors.

Wait .

That doesn't sit right. These guys aren't holding us against our will. Einar's told me several times that I'm free to come and go as I please.

So no, they're not our captors.

They saved us from the bugs. These males may not be human, but they are not evil either. Not that being a human means you can't be evil. Robert and his cronies are a specific example of that.

“ I want to go with you. I'd like to meet the other women.”

Nodding , he motions me to follow him to a door across the room. To my surprise, it opens and we walk into the med bay.

That's how he came and went so fast when I was in here!

Narrowing my eyes at him, he smiles innocently and grabs his proverbial black doctor's bag. Exiting the med bay, we stop in the dining chamber to return our plates, and then we leave to head toward Falon's room. To my surprise, Slavic emerges from what I think is the hologram room with a laughing Ruby tossed over his shoulder. I avert my eyes as soon as I realize Slavic has his dick out, but I have to make sure she's okay.

“ Sis ?”

My hesitant question causes Ruby to push up off Slavic's back so she can see Einar and me standing a few feet from them. “ Oh , Hi ! Don't mind us, just a little fornicating in the hallways. I love ya, sis! You're looking much better.”

Snickering at Ruby's cheeky words, I shake my head. My sister is a handful and a half. She pinches Slavic's butt, and he smacks hers in return. Their interaction is hilarious, and I can't help but smile at her and their shenanigans. Ruby's grinning face is quickly hidden behind their bedroom door as they disappear from the hallway. It doesn't take a genius to figure out what they're doing in there.

I want to be that happy.

A whisper of a touch on my arm catches me by surprise, causing me to flinch a little, and I wince as Einar jerks away from me like I've burned him. Opening my mouth to apologize, he cuts me off with a warm smile.

“ All is well, little one. Shall we proceed? Falon's room is the next door down.”

“ I'm ready when you are.”

Knocking on the door, he takes two steps back and waits. A few seconds later, the door slides open and one of the most beautiful, yet painfully thin, women I've ever seen stands there. She has to be pushing six feet tall with platinum blonde hair, bright green eyes, and exquisite features. Then recognition hits me like a sledgehammer.

“ You're Gwendolyn Palmer !”

Her smile falls a bit at my exclamation, and without saying anything she steps back from the door, motioning for us to follow her inside. As I enter the room, I notice two more women sitting at a table with some sort of small screen between them. Their heads jerk around and stare at me in shock. Getting to their feet, the curvy one with black hair, blue eyes, and girl next door vibes starts talking.

“ Oh my gosh, the guys mentioned there were two redheads on board, but since we haven't seen either of y'all, I was beginning to doubt them! Hi , I'm Heather , and this is Bambi .”

Heather motions to the woman at her side as she reaches out and shakes my hand. Bambi extends hers as well, and I shake it too. Bambi is homely compared to former supermodel, blonde bombshell Gwendolyn , and the striking Heather , but her twinkling brown eyes, massive head of curly brown hair and athletic build are

nothing to sneeze at. She's all smiles as she greets me.

“ Heya , nice to finally meetcha!”

“ Hello . Call me. Gwen .”

My head jerks at the roughness of Gwen's voice, the contrast between her appearance and the jaggedness of what she sounds like is a stark contrast. Seeing my confusion, she offers me a wan smile and a brief explanation.

“ Stalker . Strangled me. Irreparable vocal cord damage. Don't talk much anymore. Hurts too much.”

Turning my head, I frown in confusion when I see that Einar has lingered by the door and didn't follow me all the way into the room.

“ What are you doing?”

“ Waiting for the females to invite me further into their room. It is rude to assume things, little Starshine ,” he says, tongue in cheek.

Heather chortles at that before calling out to Einar .

“ Y'all and your manners. Your momma must have been a real lady to instill such good values in her sons.”

His response is heavy as he walks across the room to set his bag on the table. “ Yes , she was a female of high moral values and taught us all well. Now , with your permission, I need to make sure everyone is healing well.”

To my surprise, all three of them immediately nod their heads in agreement while

murmuring verbal responses in agreement, sliding into chairs around the table. The swish of the door opening catches us by surprise, but Einar doesn't even look up from what he's doing as he examines Heather .

“Greetings Murgul . How nice of you to join us this rising.”

Gwen jerks around the second Murgul's name, leaves Einar's lips and blushes a becoming pink.

Oh ? What is this?

My inner gossip girl is instantly curious.

Einar's youngest brother, if I remember correctly, doesn't say a word, just walks in and goes to stand against the far wall, folding his arms across his chest while glaring at Einar , or more accurately, glaring at everyone in the room. Movement by his feet catches my attention and, to my utter surprise, I see the end of a tail curled around his boots. The end of which looks like a wicked blade. Not wanting to be rude and stare, I focus on what Einar is doing as he moves from Heather over to Bambi . His motions are fluid, like this is a well-choreographed dance, his hands unfailingly gentle, but professional, while he performs his exam on the other women.

“ Since my youngest sibling is not a conversationalist, allow me to introduce him. Females , this is Murgul . He is the weapons specialist on board and in charge of the armaments.”

Murgul's only reply is a soft hiss full of irritation with eyes full of menace as he glares at Einar . His dark body tenses, becoming freakishly still as Einar reaches Gwen to begin her exam. Electric blue eyes bore into Einar with an intensity that is rather intimidating until Einar moves away from her.

“ I am glad to say that all of you are healing well. The translators have grafted well, and I cannot detect any malfunctions or errors in how they merged with your cochlear nerve. This is excellent news. Now , Gwen , was it? I scanned your throat while checking your translator. I have good tidings and bad. Which do you desire to hear first?”

“ Bad first. End with good. ”

“ Bad is that I cannot fully repair the damage to your vocal cords. The trauma happened too long ago. However , I can ease the worst of the symptoms. You may never sound like you once did, but I can at least make it where every utterance does not cause you pain. The inflammation and ragged edges in your voice box is what is causing you the most issues. If you will permit me, I can apply a series of therapeutic injections to the area that will provide long-term relief.”

“ Thank you! ”

Tears fill her green eyes as she jumps up and wraps her arms around Einar in a hug, her shoulders shaking with the force of her sobs. Two things happen with her abrupt motion.

Einar freezes, with his hands relaxed down at his sides.

Murgul snarls, takes two steps from the wall, and I see claws almost twice the length of Einar’s slide out of his fingertips. His tail is held aloft, and I was right. The tip is a blade because it looks razor-sharp from where I stand across the room.

“ Uh , Gwen . I think it would be a good idea for you to take a step back from Einar right about now.”

As soon as Gwen releases him, Einar moves over to me and stands in front of me,



keeping his eyes on his brother as Murgul seems to be waging some sort of internal war with himself. Einar's next words snap his attention to us.

“ Accept what you have been given brother. Do not fight fate. You will only hurt her in the end.”

Snarling , he bares his teeth at Einar before resolve hardens his eyes. Stalking across the room, he heads toward Gwen , stopping in front of her as she looks up at him with an indiscernible expression. He scoops her up into his arms, bridal style with infinite tenderness, before prowling out the door.

“ Would you like to explain yourself, Murder Boy ? ”

Alarmed at what the heck Gwen just said, I look over at Einar , expecting him to do something, but he has a smirk on his face and looks rather unconcerned.

“ Einar , he can't just take her like that! Do something!”

He shoots me a slightly admonishing look before calling out to Murgul .

“ Bring her to the med bay when she is ready to begin her treatments!”

Murgul's slight pause is the only acknowledgment he gives Einar's words before they disappear down the hall. Heather , Bambi , and I look at each other before Bambi huffs out a breath, her brows creased in concern.

“ Where the hell is he taking her?”

Heather reaches over and grabs her hand, clinging to her in worry.

“ Einar , is she safe with him? He doesn't exactly look sane.” She winces at how

harsh her words sound but doesn't back down from her question. Sighing heavily, Einar looks in the direction his brother left.

“ That is because he is not sane, but he would sooner slit his own throat before hurting his female. I had my suspicions, but his reaction to her touching me answered them. No male, especially one experiencing an open bond, would permit his female to touch another male. It would be perceived as a threat to his status as her mate.”

Packing up his bag, he contemplates us before speaking.

“ Rowan , I must go tell Slavic about Murgul's mating so he is kept informed. Would you like to stay here to visit?”

Eyeing a concerned Heather and Bambi , I glance up at him with a tentative smile and nod.

“ Yes , I think I would enjoy that very much.”

### Chapter Thirty-Seven

ROWAN

I can feel Heather and Bambi's eyes on me as I watch Einar leave the room.

“ So , you and the biggest of the big guys, huh?”

Bambi's words are cautious.

“ That's what everyone is telling me, yes.”

Heather scrutinizes my face before she chimes in, somewhat sarcastically.

“ You're not happy about that, are you Mrs . McAllen ?”

Ice fills my veins at her question, and I stumble away from her in alarm, bringing my arms up around myself in a protective manner. To say that my reaction to her question is extreme is an understatement and both women watch me back away from them before looking at each other. Heather takes a step toward me, her hands out in a placating manner.

“ Rowan , I'm sorry! I didn't mean to offend you! It's just that I recognized you from watching some of your husband's political rallies on TV . I can't imagine after being with a rich, well-to-do man like Senator Robert Dean McAllen , that you'd be happy with one of these orcs, because that's damn sure what they look like.”

Fighting my revulsion at her words, I shrink into myself as memories bombard me. I know she didn't mean her words as an attack. I'm sure she believes what she saw on TV , and that I'm a high-maintenance politician's wife, and thus, too good to associate with someone like Einar . Heather's recognition of me caught me completely off guard and I wasn't prepared for it. The sound of the door opening is far away, but Ruby's fury filled voice is not.

“ What the fuck did you do to my sister? She was calm and smiling when I saw her earlier, so which one of you bitches do I need to educate on manners?”

Shaking my head, I banish the memories behind a wall in my mind, locking them away so I can have a chance at happiness.

NO MORE ! I refuse to be a victim any longer.

“ Ruby , what are you doing here? I thought you and Slavic were spending some quality time together.”

“ Oh , don't you worry, sis. We humped like bunnies and then I took me a good ole nap. Slavic is off doing captain stuff since the hyperdrive thingie said we were here; wherever here is. Slavic and the guys got us all crates full of clothes a couple days ago, and he suggested that we trade each other for the stuff we don't want. Einar popped by to give us the skinny on Murgul and told me where you were.”

That's when I notice a little floating sled out in the hall with the crate from my room and what must be her crate as well.

“ I figured we could do a 'swap and shop' here on the ship, but if these two are being bitches to you, we can just go back to one of our rooms and share between the two of us!”

Her indignant words end in a shout. Shit , she is really mad.

“ Ruby , it’s just a misunderstanding. Heather knows who I am ... no, that isn’t right. Who I used to be, and who I was married to. All she did was ask me a question. It’s not her fault I freaked out.”

Relief fills Heather’s face as she glances back and forth between Ruby and I .

“ I really don’t know what I said that was so offensive, but I truly am sorry. The swap and shop idea sounds great. There are a few things I don’t want or need in there.”

Ruby relaxes and loses a lot of her overt hostility at Heather’s heartfelt apology and tentative olive branch regarding the clothes idea. Bambi hasn’t said much but her perceptive gaze, apparently, doesn’t miss much and her quietly spoken words catch me off guard.

“ He abused you, didn’t he? That’s why you freaked out about being called ‘ Mrs . McAllen . ’”

Ruby scoffs. “ That is the freaking understatement of the century.”

Bambi and Heather are horrified, but before they can say anything else, I interject.

“ Yes , that bastard abused me for years. I’m extremely glad he’s deadlier than a damn doornail, and don’t ever want to talk about him ever again. He is the past and I’m going to look forward from now on. Has Einar been kind to you since you got here?”

Both of them have verbal whiplash from the abrupt topic change. Ruby comes over to me, pulling me into her arms for a hug. Keeping my eyes on them, I continue to push.

“ I need to know. Is the person he shows me all an act? If I have sex with him and

seal this so-called bond, is he going to turn into a monster? Because I've been there and done that and did NOT want the damn t-shirt!"

Sympathy fills their faces while Ruby huffs in exasperation. Bambi answers me, her voice filled with understanding.

"All of them have been kind to us, Rowan. Einar most of all. He tended our wounds before the translators were installed. We were terrified and even though we couldn't understand what he was saying, he made it where we did understand his actions. Isn't the old adage 'actions speak louder than words?' Because his certainly did. Einar didn't have to be kind or patient. He's so much bigger than us he could have forced us into compliance, but he didn't. Yeah, the translator hurt like a bitch, but he made it as easy on us as possible."

By the time she finishes, she's almost in tears, and I can tell that whatever Einar did for them, Bambi deeply appreciates it. Heather interjects at this point.

"Rowan, I don't know what happened to you, but I can say with utmost certainty that Einar is not going to hurt you. Ever. He's just not built that way. I don't think any of them are. Not even that crazy one, Murgul. Yeah, he abducted Gwen, but he didn't hurt when he picked her up and carried her out the door. He seems more than a little intense, but Einar said she's safe."

"Speaking of Gwen, shouldn't we wait for her to do the clothes exchange? I don't want her to feel left out."

Ruby smirks at me.

"Oh, don't you worry about that. My big bad is gonna go tell his snarly little brother to bring her right the hell back for girl time this afternoon, and to make it even better, the Jolly Green Giant is going to bring us all lunch so we don't have to leave the

room!”

“ Did you just call Einar the ‘ Jolly Green Giant ?’ Like the guy off the vegetable commercials?”

Heather sounds incredulous and Bambi is laughing so hard tears are rolling down her face at my sister’s antics. Shaking my head at her, I start giggling at the mental picture of Einar in that leafy outfit the cartoon guy wore, and before long all four of us are laughing so hard we can’t breathe.

That’s what Gwen and Murgul walk into.

“ What did I miss? ”

Murgul’s eyes go wide at the sight of us, and he beats a hasty retreat, but not before he leans down to nuzzle Gwen’s cheek with his own, his eyes closing in an expression that can only be described as bliss. Gwen hesitantly caresses his jaw in return before he turns and leaves the room.

“ Oh , missy ma’am, you are going to be telling us all about that!”

Her face turns as red as my hair at Ruby’s sassy quip.

### Chapter Thirty-Eight

#### EINAR

Rowan and the other females have been holed up in Falon's room for the latter part of this rising. Ruby said they were going to trade garments from their crates when I stopped by to update Slavic on Murgul's mating with the one called Gwen . I had not been in Slavic's quarters more than a few ticks when Murgul arrived with his mate in tow, growling out that she wanted to begin the treatment for her throat as soon as possible.

So , we did.

Ruby stopped by the med bay shortly after Murgul and Gwen's departure to tell me she wanted to set a plan into motion. At her suggestion, I visited only long enough to bring my mate and her new friends their midday meal. The happiness on my mate's face took my breath away. She was elbow deep in a massive pile of garments they had spread out on the sleeping platform.

Obviously , she needed some time with the other females.

It was now the end of this rising and Slavic , Murgul , and I are standing outside Falon's door listening to the sound of happy, chattering females from within. Murgul's face is the most relaxed I have seen it in orbital rotations, and it makes my hearts joyful to witness it.

“ Who wants to be the one to knock and interrupt them?”



Murgul huffs and takes a step back, while Slavic rolls his eyes at both of us.

“ I want my female. It has been too long since I held her, and she needs to eat before we retire for the sleep cycle.” His knuckle raps on the door with three sharp knocks. Tics later, the door opens, and his mate stands there with a hand placed on her hip.

“ Well hello there, my big grouch. Imagine finding you here, at a place like this?” she quips before hopping into his arms, her legs wrapping around his thick waist and her arms around his neck.

Slavic walks off without saying a word, but Ruby shouts a farewell to her sister and friends. “ Bye guys, I’m off for supper and a good fucking! I’ll be back for my box of clothes when Slavic realizes I’ll be naked after he rips this set off me.”

Smothering my laughter, we all watch as Slavic stomps back into the room, grabs her crate, and stalks right back out, growling under his breath as he goes. I have to force myself not be envious of how easily Ruby has accepted Slavic into her life. I must remember that, though they are sisters, their life experiences have not been the same.

Murgul brushes past me.

“ Which crate is yours, bright one?”

Gwen points to it and he picks it up in one hand while silently extending the other to her, waiting for her to make the decision to come to him. It is somewhat ironic that the gods paired them together since they both have damaged voices.

Murgul has desperately needed someone that could understand what he has lost, and the gods granted him that. We all watch as Gwen gracefully walks to him, only to be lifted into his free arm as his tail wraps around her, securing her to him since he is also carrying her crate of garments. Her muted words float to my sensitive ears as

they leave.

“ I can walk, Murgul . You don’t have to carry me all the time. ”

Ah , good.

Her voice is still quiet, but it’s lost the painful, jagged edge she had before I gave her the first set of injections. That she can now speak full sentences with ease fills me with relief. I was not able to fix Murgul’s voice, but I am determined to help his mate the best I can.

Ambling over to my mate, I pause.

“ Which crate is yours, little Starshine ? I will carry it back to our quarters for you.”

She points to the one on the left and I lift it into my arms with ease. Rowan waves to Heather and Bambi as we, too, take our leave.

“ Bye ! I’ll see you all tomorrow morning at breakfast! Thank you for today!”

Without a doubt, this is the happiest and most relaxed Rowan has been since she arrived on the Zenith . It pains my hearts that she is so at ease with the other females and so leery of me. She falls quiet, almost contemplative, as we head toward our quarters, and I wonder what thoughts occupy her.

And they are our quarters. All that I have belongs to her now, not that she knows that, or would even want me to tell her. Entering our chamber, I put her crate down just inside the closet, stumbling a bit as I do so, a wave of weakness hitting me. Bracing my hand on the wall for a tic, I get my bearings.

What the frack?

Straightening , I turn and motion to the closet.

“ You are welcome to store your things in here. That way, you do not have to deal with creasing or diving in and out of a box for your outfits.”

“ Einar , are you alright? You look a little pale.”

“ All is well, Rowan . Worry not.”

Eyeing me speculatively, she heads into the closet and starts putting away her things. Once I am sure she is completely occupied, I enter the refreshing chamber and look into the viewer.

Frack , I thought I would have more time. I should have had more time than this. Ruarc isn't showing any signs of mating sickness.

My mating collar is fading. A few risings ago, it was the darkest of blacks and now it is a middling shade of gray. It is a significant change in such a short amount of time, and it must be because of the genes the Aynar spliced into me. The wave of weakness earlier must have been when it lightened, or else my brothers would have said something about the change when we were all together.

Rubbing my fingers against the slightly raised flesh, I try to think if there is anything in any of the lore that I can do to give me more time with my mate. Desperately , I wrack my mind for the limited information about the beings on Atraxia and come up with very little.

All that is known is that they have fated mate bonds just like my people, but other than that, I know nothing.

Fracking hell.

Something is wrong with Einar .

In our albeit short time together, I've never seen him stumble or exhibit any sign of weakness. It didn't take me long to put my clothes away, so I'm sitting here waiting for him to get out of the bathroom.

The other women had no reason to lie to me when they told me about how Einar , and the others have treated them since arriving on the Zenith . If Einar can pleasure me without losing control, surely, he can sleep next to me, and I'll be safe. His big body doesn't fit on that couch he's been sleeping on, but he's refused to switch with me. The dark circles under his eyes tell me he isn't resting properly, and it's making me feel guilty as all get out.

He deserves to sleep in his own bed and if he won't swap with me, we will just share.

It'll be fine because with every fiber of my being, I know Einar is a good man. He is not a monster, no matter the fact that he's green and has horns. It must surprise him to see me sitting at the table waiting for him, because he stops just outside the bathroom.

“ Do you need something, my mate?”

Deep inside, my lonely heart thaws at his words. “ I don't want you sleeping on that couch anymore. You're too big for it and I can tell that it's not comfortable for you.”

“ Rowan , we have been over this. I will not permit you to sleep on anything other than my sleeping platform. It is unacceptable to me.”

Wrinkling my nose at the first high-handed comment that's left his mouth, I roll my eyes at him in exasperation. “ We should share the bed, uh, sleeping platform. There is plenty of room for the both of us.”

His jaw drops and I have to bite back a giggle at his incredulous expression.

“ You would permit me to sleep with you?”

Hopping down from the chair, I climb up my stool and slide into bed, flipping the covers back on his side in invitation.

Actions speak louder than words, after all.

Rowan is permitting me to sleep with her!

I am delighted by her offer and hurry over to the side of the sleeping platform closest to the chamber door. Groaning at how luxurious the cushion beneath me feels in comparison to the divan, I pull the covers up to my waist and relax back into the material.

“ See , that’s much better, isn’t it?”

“ Far superior, indeed.”

Closing my eyes, I realize I did not feed my mate the end of rotation meal. When she sees me moving to get back out of bed, she asks,

“ What are you doing? You just got in bed.”

“ I failed to provide you with the pre-sleep cycle meal.”

“ Einar , you lay right back down. The girls and I snacked on what you brought almost all afternoon. I’m not hungry in the slightest.”

Truth be told, I lack an appetite as well. My gut has been churning since I noticed my

fading mating collar, so I do as my mate bids me and relax back onto my sleeping platform once more. Tics go by when I feel a light touch against my side.

Opening my eyes, I see that Rowan has sidled closer to me and is so close now, her breath is tickling my side.

“Do you...”

She wets her lips before trying again.

“Do you think you could hold me as we go to sleep? I’ve always dreamed of being cuddled in bed by a big, strong man.”

“I would be delighted to cuddle you, Rowan .”

Rolling to my side, my back facing away from her, I open my arms and grunt when she practically dives into my arms, sighing in contentment as the heat of my body seeps into hers. Pulling her close, I fit the back of her body to the front of mine and surround her in my warmth when I notice she is chilled.

“All you ever need do is ask me and I will do whatever you bid me to. I am your mate, and my body is yours to do with as you please. Of course, it can be comfort and sleep, or anything else you desire. Sleep well, little one, and thank you.”

“For what?”

Her curious reply makes me smile.

“For trusting me.”

Settling in for the night with my Starshine in my arms, I am so content that I do not

recognize the second wave of lethargy for what it is. I sink into a deep sleep ... and my mating collar fading too almost nothing.

### Chapter Thirty-Nine

ROWAN

Ugh , I have to pee. Bad .

Sliding out from under Einar's heavy arm, I hurry to the bathroom. Once I've finished my business, I brush my teeth before walking back into the bedroom, only to realize Einar is still in bed. He's always been awake before me, and there's no way he would have slept through me wiggling out of his grasp, crawling over him, and getting out of bed.

Hurrying back to the bed, I clamber up to check on him.

He doesn't move.

Not an inch. His breathing is deep and somewhat labored. Something is different though ... Running my eyes over him, it hits me.

His mating collar is barely visible.

Shaking him vigorously, I try to wake him up.

“ Einar !”

“ Give me a few more tics, Rowan . I will be up presently.”



His mumbled words are barely discernable. Desperately , I wrack my brain, trying to remember everything Kallen said about how this mate bond works for his species, but I can't. Panicking is making it worse, and I don't know what to do, but I know where I can get answers. Jumping down from the bed, I sprint to the door, pausing only long enough for it to open.

Running down the hallway, I stop in front of what I hope is Kallen's room and start rapidly knocking on it. It must be super early, because no one else seems to be up and about yet. A scowling Ruarc opens the door, and I flinch away from his intimidating countenance. I haven't actually met him yet, so I'm not sure what kind of reception I'm going to get.

“ I need to talk to Kallen , please. It's extremely important!”

Kallen must hear me because she appears beside Ruarc before I stop talking. “ Greetings , Rowan . What is so important that you are here so early in the rotation?”

“ It's Einar ! He's extremely lethargic and the mark around his neck has faded so much you can barely see it! Can you tell me what's wrong with him?”

Her face fills with concern and just as she opens her mouth to explain, Ruarc cuts her off with a vicious snarl.

“ He is dying, you spoiled little bychit. If his mating collar has faded and he is that lethargic, then he has one rotation, maybe two, at the most left. It is the mating sickness but does not normally hit a male this fast.”

Kallen's gasp tells me whatever he just called me is not nice. Ruarc shoots her a quelling glance before continuing.

“ Einar warned all of us that you are damaged and were not to be pressured into

anything. That it was to be your choice, and your choice alone whether or not to seal the mate bond with him. Well , guess what? We are ALL damaged in one way or another. You are not special because you have suffered. Do you think, after hearing how we came to be on this ship, that we have not endured much? Einar may see a beloved mate when he looks at you, one that should be cherished above all else, even his own fracking life. I see nothing but a cowardly little bychit, too fracking scared to take hold of the gift, and the second chance at love that the gods of Ruk have given you.”

With that, he grabs a furious looking Kallen and shuts the door in my face.

Indignation wars with terror. Ruarc is the first person to lay me out like that after my escape from Robert . He isn't wrong, though.

Einar and his brothers have suffered.

I refuse to feel guilty for taking my time to get to know Einar the last couple of days because I needed that regardless of what Ruarc thinks, but Einar shouldn't die just because I'm scared shitless of having sex. Ruby and Slavic have been going at it like horny teenagers, so we have to be compatible. It's just ... Einar is quite a bit bigger than Slavic , even though Ruby and I are about the same size.

The main door to our bedroom is in front of me, but I don't remember walking back. Pressing my palm to the pad, like Einar showed me, I step into our room and shut the door behind me. Einar hasn't moved an inch since I've been gone. He's still on his back in the middle of the bed, with one arm thrown over his eyes.

Well , here goes nothing.

Determination fills me as I take a deep breath and whip my nightgown off over my head before climbing back up on the bed. Pulling the blankets down to his shins to

get them out of the way, I unlace the front of his sleep shorts enough to pull his cock out. My eyes widen at how huge he is even soft and I can't see how that is going to fit inside me once he's fully erect. Taking him in hand, I lift his dick and start massaging his balls and watch as he rapidly hardens. A deep rumble tells me that what I'm doing feels good to him.

I guess knowing my way around a cock and balls is a bonus right now.

Okay , well, he's hard, but I'm not wet and I would rather not tear. Been there and do not want a repeat. Crawling up the bed, I ease his arm off his face and lean down to whisper in his ear.

“ Einar , honey. I want you to use your mouth to make me feel good again.”

My breathy demand prods him enough to open his eyes, but they're hazy and unfocused.

“ You know you need only ask.”

He attempts to get up, and I press my hands to his shoulders.

“ Let's try something a little different. You stay right there, and I'll come to you.”

Swinging a leg over, I straddle his face and only flinch a little when his hands grab me by the hips, jerking my pussy down onto his face. Unlike the last two times, Einar lacks any amount of finesse as he tongues me. This is pure instinctual hunger, and it doesn't take long for him to bring me to the brink, my body hungry for the pleasure only he is allowed to give it. Moaning , I come all over his face. His grip on my hips prevents me from escaping when my clit becomes overly sensitive.

He forces a second orgasm from me.

And a third.

By the time he builds me to a fourth, I'm nothing but a panting mess clinging to his horns for dear life as the pleasure bursts across my nerve endings. What I do know is that between his slick spittle and my own fluids, I'm absolutely drenched. I can't possibly get any wetter, so I need to figure out how to get my slot b, in line with his tab a.

“ Einar , don't you want to claim me? I want you to fill me and seal our bond, mate.”

My sultry words do the trick, and he releases my hips. Again , he makes to get up, and I lay on the sugar.

“ No , honey. You stay right there. I've got this. Don't you worry, we are going to get you all better in no time.”

Scooting down his chest, I raise up and up, until there's enough space for me to grab his dick and position it at my entrance. The first niggle of fear hits me as memories try to break past the wall I've erected in my mind. I'm not sure if he smells my fear, but even in his current state, he tries to comfort me.

“ Rowan , you are well?”

“ Never better. You just lay back and let me make you feel better, okay?”

Notching the head of his massive prick against the well of my pussy, I force myself to relax. Tensing up will cause more problems than I need right now. I don't know what kind of magic spit he has, but I feel it the moment my flesh relaxes. His waist is so thick that my knees don't reach the bed on either side of him, so I either have to hold myself up with my hands or plant my feet.

Unsure which would be better, I guess I take too long to decide because Einar's rough hands grab me by the hips and slam me down on him, forcing my body to accept his. Keeping my eyes locked on his inhuman face is the only way I'm retaining my composure.

He is not Robert , nor is he Mark .

Einar isn't a human man. He's so much better than they ever were and isn't going to hurt me like they did because he's my mate, and he loves me.

Once he's fully seated, my eyes land on his mating collar, only to see there is no change.

What the hell?

We are having sex and doing all the things.

Why isn't his collar dark again? Maybe he has to finish?

Planting my feet I raise up, the sensation of his scales inside me making me moan with how good it feels. Talk about textured for her pleasure. I keep up the rhythmic give and take, teasing myself until I'm panting, and my legs are shaking from the strain.

“ Einar , you're going to have to help me. I'm not going to be able to do this for very long before my legs give out.”

Groaning , his bleary eyes meet mine as he takes over, lifting me up and down his dick like I weigh nothing at all. Tingling low in my belly builds into pressure and before I know it, I'm coming all over his girthy cock, grinding myself into him the best I can. My pussy is stuffed so full of cock it barely has enough give to flutter

around him as my muscles contract in bliss while he keeps a steady rhythm. Without warning, he shifts one of his hands so that his thumb is rubbing my clit in time with the motion of my hips.

Whining at how sensitive I am, he strums my clit until I'm coming again with a low cry as I collapse across his chest. A chest that still doesn't have a damn dark colored mark on it. Raising my head, I peer up at him and realize that what we're doing isn't working. He isn't getting enough stimulation to get off. I'm not sure what will happen to him if we don't seal our mating, and I'm not ready to admit why the thought of him dying terrifies me.

“ Einar , honey. I need you to fill me up. I need you to seal our mate bond. Please !”

### Chapter Forty

EINAR

“ Einar , honey. I need you to fill me up. I need you to seal our mate bond. Please !”

This is the best dream I have ever had in my entire existence. My Rowan is begging me to complete our mate bond, and I can do nothing to deny her. Flipping us so that she is on her back beneath me, I drag my hips back from her and snap them forward with a vigor that makes her writhe.

Her tiny little hands grab me by the jaw and pull my face down to hers for a kiss. She licks and sucks on my lower lip until I open my mouth for her. Our tongues meet for the first time, and I groan at the taste of her. My mate’s mouth is no less delicious than her cunt. Bracing one hand on the wall above her, I keep rolling her clit with my other thumb as I start fracking her in earnest.

“ Harder , Einar . Harder !”

She rips her mouth from mine and her cries of pleasure spur me on as I pump my pivy in and out of her tight sheath.

“ As you wish, mate”

Capturing her mouth with mine, I plunder it with my tongue, mimicking the motion of my hips. The urge to bite her where her neck and shoulder meet makes my mouth water; an odd taste tinges my saliva and almost overwhelms me, though I do not

know why. My release hits me with the force of a warhammer, and I feel my ovipositor extend out of my pivity and lock onto the entrance of her womb as my seed erupts from me in jet after jet. Ripping my mouth from hers, I roar out my completion just as Rowan screams and I feel her cunt flutter around me as she reaches her peak.

Clarity hits, and with it comes realization.

Gods of Ruk , what have I done?

Looking down at Rowan's flushed face and heaving chest, I realize none of it was a dream. I just fracked my mate into the sleeping platform without her consent.

Despair fills me, followed closely by self-disgust.

My body is locked to hers until my ovipositor relinquishes its hold on her and I resign myself to having a mate that hates the very sight of me for what I have just done to her. Her eyes are closed, and I count that a small blessing as I watch her mating collar form.

Delicate black lines encircle her throat and curl up both sides of her jaw before extending down between her breasts in looping, swirling designs to frame her navel. The pretty lines drop lower where we are still locked together and thus, out of my sight. Lifting my head, I meet her multi-colored eyes, and to my surprise, their depths hold nothing but concern.

“ Your mark is black again.”

Her quiet statement makes my head twitch. That is not what I was expecting her to say. Why is she so calm?

“ Rowan , what did you do?”



She smirks and shimmies her hips, making both of us groan at the sensation.

“ I think at the moment, that is rather self-explanatory. So , I’m not really up to date on sex with aliens, but are you stuck inside of me?”

For the first time in many orbital rotations, my face flushes with embarrassment.

“ Erm ... yes. I have what is called an ovipositor. It extends from my pivy into your womb to implant my eggs for breeding purposes, but you do not have to worry about pregnancy! I have an implant that is 99.9% accurate in preventing me from being fertile. You are the first female I have ever lain with, so I will need to check your hormonal levels periodically to ensure my implant is fully functional.”

The rapid-fire explanation makes her alarmed face relax back into one of sublime satisfaction before morphing into disbelief. At least I know that she experienced pleasure and not pain from our mating.

“ You were a virgin?!”

“ I do not know this word.”

“ It means you hadn’t ever had sex before me.”

“ Ah , then yes. I was a virgin. I was too scared to potentially leave a youngling behind in the event my implant failed. It is only 99.9% accurate after all, not 100%.”

Amused comprehension fills her face.

“ That is totally understandable. Well , whatever those evil fairies taught you, they did a damn good job.”

We both fall silent until I can no longer hold the words inside me.

“ Why ? You have no care or love for me. Why would you do this?”

My serious words sober her instantly. One of her little hands reaches up to cup my scaled jaw, her thumb feathering back and forth across my hide as she regards me.

“ Because you are a wonderful male, and didn’t deserve to die just because the universe paired you with a traumatized, human woman. I’m working through my issues and refuse to be a victim any longer. You’ve shown me more care, consideration, and kindness in the last few days than I’ve experienced from a man in my entire life. A guy like that deserves to live a full, happy life, so I made sure our bond was sealed to ensure you live to have that opportunity. It’s true. I don’t love you ... yet. What I’ve seen so far tells me that there is a reason you were picked for me, and for the first time in my life, I have the opportunity to fall in love with a good man, not the illusion of one. Einar , you are that good man, and you’re all mine.”

A broken sound escapes my throat as tears well and spill, running down my face unchecked as sobs wrack my body, making my shoulders shudder with every hitch of breath. My emotional distress is enough to soften my pivity to the point it relinquishes its hold on her tight sheath. Pushing up from her, I start to roll away but she stops me, her wee speckled hand a stark contrast to my mossy green hide.

“ Einar , come here. You didn’t do anything wrong. I seduced you, and if anyone is in the wrong, it’s me. I initiated sex with you when you weren’t in the right state of mind to agree to what we were doing.”

Allowing her to pull me back to her, she pushes and prods at me until I am reclined on the sleeping platform, my back against the pillows as she crawls up my chest, continuing to soothe my upset.

“ Take some deep breaths for me. In through your nose, out through your mouth. There , that’s better. I promise, Einar , you didn’t hurt me or use me in any manner. That was the best sex of my entire life, and you, more than most, will understand how I know the difference between what is given versus what is taken.”

She wipes the tears from my face while she continues to speak.

“ Now , we are going to go take a shower, get dressed, and go to breakfast. Slavic told Ruby yesterday that we’ve arrived at Deapra , and that Slavic wanted everyone to gather in the dining chamber for a meeting this morning. In addition to that, I’m sure Ruarc and Kallen have told everyone about my visit earlier, and they’re going to want to know you’re okay.”

“ You went to Ruarc and Kallen earlier?”

“ Yes , I was freaking out because I couldn’t wake you up and I realized your mating mark had faded too almost nothing. I went to ask Kallen some questions, but Ruarc ended up explaining some hard truths, amongst other things, before shutting the door in my face.”

Rowan shushes me when her words elicit and murderous snarl.

“ What did my brother say, and do not lie to me, Rowan !”

“ Well , he told me you were dying, and that you told all of them to leave me alone about sealing our mate bond, even if it cost you your life. Which you really should have explained all of that to me.”

Her words trail off, leading me to believe there is more, so I motion her to continue. Rowan rolls her eyes and starts talking again.

“ Then he called me a ‘bye-chit’, spoiled, and a coward before shutting the door in my face. There , now you know everything.”

Forcing my face to remain impassive is one of the hardest things I have ever had to do once I learn my brother called Rowan such a vile slur.

Ruarc will be dealt with for his meddling and for insulting my mate.

“ I know that look, and you are not going to beat the hell out of your brother. He loves you dearly and did what he thought best given the situation. Now , I have things leaking out of me. Let’s go take a shower.”

Grabbing my hand in hers, she pulls me along behind her as we enter the refreshing chamber. Her nimble fingers divests me of my sleeping trousers, and I realize that I fracked my mate partially clothed. Groaning , I hit my head against the wall, my horns making a dull thud with every strike.

“ Einar , stop that! You’ll dent the wall. What’s going on in that head of yours now?”

Peering down at her, I see the grin and realize she is jesting with me.

“ I did not even take all of my clothes off before claiming you.”

Stepping into the bathing stall, she beckons me to her.

“ Well , there’s always next time.”

My slack jawed expression makes her laugh so hard she doubles over in mirth. Grumbling at her with a smile, I hit the button to turn on the water, closing the door so that the water does not escape onto the refreshing chamber floor.

### Chapter Forty-One

#### EINAR

Hand in hand, Rowan and I walk into the dining hall. Upon entry, every eye lands on us and I see all my brothers relax in their chairs when they see I am hale and hearty. Ruby is sitting in Slavic's lap, Murgul and his mate are at the end of the farthest table, Ruarc and Kallen are sitting beside Bikar and Falon while the other two human females are seated on the other side of the room. The remains of a late fast-breaking meal litter the tables.

“ Good , all are present, so I do not have to repeat myself”, I say, pulling Rowan to a stop a few steps into the room. “ Before you start asking your questions, I will provide an explanation and then answer any follow up inquires.”

Looking around the room, my brothers all dip their heads in agreement.

“ As you can see by my mate's throat, she and I have completed our bond and my health is restored.”

Pausing , I glare over at Ruarc who does not look the slightest bit repentant, and that is when my patience with him snaps. Dropping Rowan's hand, I dart across the dining chamber before Ruarc can get out of his seat and slam my massive fist into his face three times in rapid succession. Quickly cataloging the damage done, satisfaction courses through me when I see his lip is split and one eye is rapidly darkening. Ignoring everyone, I lean in.

“ I know what you said to her, and what you called her. That will never happen again. Are we clear?”

At his decisive nod, I move back to see that Falon and Bikar had moved closer, while Slavic is watching us with interest.

“ Is all well, Einar ?”

“ It is now, Slavic .”

“ Good , if you will finish your explanation then, we can move forward with other matters.”

Stalking back over to my mate, I pull her body against mine, trying to calm myself down.

“ Rowan and I stopped by the med bay for me to investigate a hypothesis of mine. After reviewing my genetic analysis, I confirmed that the amount of Atraxian DNA I have accelerated the Rukuhk mating bond, and thus the mating sickness for denying the bond. That is why Ruarc is not experiencing any further repercussions for his idiocy.”

Ignoring Ruarc’s snarl and Kallen’s giggle, I continue.

“ It is known that the Atraxian’s had fated mate bonds just like our people do, so I not only have a Ruk mate bond, but I am also bonded to her via my Atraxian DNA . Time will tell if any additional differences arise as Rowan and I bond. If the stages for Rowan and I are anything to base the acceleration of the bonding process on, Murgul you and your female have a very short amount of time to seal your bond before the mating sickness hits you. Hard .”

Murgul's stiff nod tells me he is listening and will heed my words. I see his tail reach out and curl around Gwen's waist, dragging her closer to him, her face pale with shock. Bikar shifts uncomfortably in his chair, almost as if he wants more distance between him and the remaining unmated females in the room.

“ Now that we have that out of the way, do any of you have any follow-up questions?”

When no one says anything, I lead Rowan over to a seat next to her sister before looking at Slavic expectantly. He is the reason we are all gathered here, after all.

“ We have arrived at the coordinates Kallen provided for this so-called refuge planet called, Deapra . I want to get opinions from all of you before formulating some sort of plan of action; this is not a mission that only requires the captain's input. This our mam, and if Kallen is to be believed, a little sister.”

As Slavic talks, I move over to the replicator and enter the fast-breaking meal my mate prefers before joining her at the table, both of us tucking into our meal as Ruarc chimes in.

“ The females stay on the ship. Period . We do not know what sort of mess the bugs left or if anyone else has stumbled upon this settlement.”

Kallen makes a noise of objection, but Ruarc cuts her off.

“ Kallen you were abducted by the Velgriddix ; think with your mind, not your hearts. It is dangerous for all of us to go planetside, and if you were with us, our attentions would be divided.”

“ Unfortunately , Ruarc is correct, Kallen . We cannot afford any distractions since we do not know what we will be walking into. I want you to get with Bikar and give

him the exact coordinates for your settlement. That information is crucial.”

Slavic’s input is reluctant, but firm.

“ I will be happy to do so, I just need a map of the planet so I can point out everything you need to know.”

As soon as Kallen finishes, Bikar interjects.

“ Instead of landing for a recon trip, what if we perform some in-depth scans first? I have a few tricks up my sleeve that I can use.”

Leaning around Rowan , I look to see if Slavic agrees with Bikar or not. My oldest brother is more of a ‘hands on’ Ruk than one to rely on tech, but with a mate to protect that very well may change and his grudging words confirm my theory.

“ That is an excellent idea, Bikar . We will wait on the Zenith while you scan the planet first. How many risings do you need to perform what you have in mind?”

“ To get accurate readings without rushing the process, I need at least seven to ten rotations. Seven if everything goes correctly the first time, ten if I have to recalibrate anything to redo any scans. From my initial data, Deapra is not a small plant, and it is much denser than a lot of other worlds. It suggests that there may be something beneath the surface as well.”

“ Does anyone else have any ideas or anything to offer?”

When Falon and Murgul remain silent, Slavic gets up with Ruby in his arms.

“ Bikar , get started on your scans. We need that information as fast as you can get it. We all have questions that need answering, whether we like what we find or not.”



And with that, he strides out of the room.

“ That guy is super intense.”

Chuckling , I reply to the one called Heather . “ Yes he is, but it comes with the territory of being the oldest out of this bunch.”

Her eyes roam over all of us appreciatively, enough so that it makes me a tad uncomfortable, so I scoop Rowan up and plop her in my lap, disregarding her yelp of alarm.

“ Einar , what on Earth !”

Ignoring the other female, I cuddle Rowan closer.

“ You were too far away, my mate. Ruby was in Slavic’s lap, so I felt as though you should be in mine.”

My innocent smile only makes her narrow her eyes at me in exasperation.

After breakfast, Einar and I went back to the med bay. He told me there were some more things he wanted to look at regarding his dragon genetics versus his Orc ones and suggested that I take his personal tablet to start learning about my new world. Apparently , the fancy translator they installed works on the written word as well as verbal conversations.

That was several hours ago, and I can honestly say I’m overwhelmed after reading the alien version of current news reports. There are so many species, and so many worlds that I’ve no idea how I’ll ever keep them all straight. Setting down the tablet, a low chime at the door interrupts the quiet. Hopping down from where I’ve been curled in the corner of the couch, I open the door only to see Ruby’s smiling face.

Stepping back out of the doorway, I wave her in, and she follows me back to the couch as we settle into the cushions.

“ Hey Sis , whatcha doing?

“ Oh , a bit of light reading on Einar’s tablet.”

At her perplexed look, I explain.

“ Einar told me these translators are the fancy kind that work for reading as well as talking. We won’t be able to write in another language, but we can at least read them.”

“ Well , that’s pretty damn cool!”

“ Most definitely. So , what’s up? You don’t do anything without a reason, so get to talking.”

She rolls her eyes at my playful question.

“ Okay , Miss Sassy Pants . Yes , I’m here for a reason. Kallen told me exactly what Ruarc said and called you. That ‘bychit’ word is their version of bitch, cunt, or both rolled into one.”

“ Oof . No wonder Einar was so mad.”

“ I have half a mind to take a piece out of his hide, too!”

“ No Ruby , you won’t. Ruarc loves his brother, and though he said some nasty things, he was being honest. I’m pretty sure Einar fractured some of the bones in his face, and is refusing to heal any of them, so Ruarc is going to have to mend the old-

fashioned way. That's plenty."

"Well, fine. Be all assertive and whatnot then."

Her smile and twinkling eyes tell me she's teasing me, though her words are serious. But then her face sobers before she asks,

"Are you happy, Sis?"

Pausing, I take a moment to really think about the question before answering her.

"Surprisingly enough, yes, I am. I've really thought about my life. The past, the present, and the future after you helped me calm down under the blanket in the med bay. I do not want to be a broke down victim anymore. You're right, we've been through a lot, but things happen for a reason, and I refuse to waste my second chance. Sealing the bond with Einar was my choice, and the fact that he would have died before coercing or forcing me into something that permanent speaks to the quality of his character. I could do a lot worse than to spend the rest of my life with a man like that."

Leaning forward, she drags me into a crushing hug.

"I'm so happy to hear that, Rowan. You sound like the old you, before that fucker got ahold of you. I've got my sister back!"

"I'm not the same person I was, Ruby. Not by a long shot, but through all of this, with Einar's help, I've found a better version of myself. That's the Rowan you want, not the scared, spoiled brat I was growing up."

Releasing me from her hug, she says.

“ You weren’t ever any of those things, Sis . I promise.”

“ Are you happy, Ruby ? I can tell that you and Slavic have gotten really close since you woke up.”

Her face softens, and I know what she’s about to say before her mouth opens.

“ I didn’t expect someone like him, but I can’t deny the fact that I’m madly in love with the big grouchy fart. He and I go together like peas and carrots. What about you? Do you love Einar ?”

“ I wouldn’t say that I’m in love with him, but I definitely have feelings for him. He couldn’t be more different from Robert if he tried, and that makes me ecstatic. It’s really only a matter of time before what I feel deepens into love.”

“ That makes me so happy for you, Rowan . Well , I know how much you love to read, and haven’t had much time to do it in a long time, so I’m gonna head out. It’s been a minute since I’ve annoyed my big grouch, so he’s overdue for some harassment. See you at supper!”

Ruby hugs me once more before jumping off the couch and practically skipping out the door. Looking around the bedroom, contentment suffuses me as it dawns on me. Ruby and I are finally home.

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### Chapter Forty-Two

#### ROWAN

Over the next week, Einar and I settle into a comfortable routine. After expressing my interest in learning how to be a medic, or at least an assistant to Einar , we spend our days in the med bay after breakfasting with the rest of the crew, but the nights...

Oh , the nights...

After breaking the seal on sex, Einar and I have been going at it like rabbits, to coin my sisters' phrase. I'm not saying that I'm 100% better, but any time Einar senses I'm struggling with something we stop and talk it out. The powers that be couldn't have brought me a better life partner than him.

Unfortunately , Bikar's scans have told us absolutely zilch, much to his frustration. The technology he's using goes way over my head, but Einar's told me that Bikar has tried everything from thermal scans to something similar to echolocation, only to come up with the same results every time.

Zero life found.

It's been extremely hard on all of the guys, and you can tell that Kallen is holding on by a thread. Ruarc still hasn't sealed their bond, and the tension between them is palpable as well as building as each day passes. After reviewing another set of failed scans, Slavic made the decision this morning that he would lead the first team to go down to the planet to investigate in person.

Slavic , Einar , and Ruarc are going to be team one, while Falon , Bikar , and Murgul are on team two. None of the guys want any less than three of them left on board since we will be staying on the Zenith . The Velgriddix know where this planet is, so they're all on edge.

Watching Einar get suited up to go down to Deapra is like my own personal peep show, but in reverse. Who knew watching your man strap weapon after weapon onto his person would be hot?

“ Rowan , I can smell your arousal from across the room. We really do not have time for this, Slavic is waiting and has lost patience.”

“ Einar , honey. I don't think Slavic has ever had any patience. I've no idea how Ruby puts up with him.”

Shaking his head at me, Einar huffs out a laugh.

“ I cannot deny the validity of that statement, little Starshine . Now , as much as I would like to ravish you, I must head to the loading bay. Do you wish to walk with me?”

“ What kind of question is that? Of course, I do!”

The sight of Ruby and Slavic making out to the left of the shuttle door really shouldn't shock me. Seconds turn into minutes as Einar , Ruarc , Kallen and I stand there waiting for Slavic to remove his tongue from Ruby's mouth. My sister has never been one to worry about PDA rules, but I can't help but harass my brother-in-law every chance I get.

“ Slavic , I thought you were in a hurry?”

The impertinent sound of my voice jars him enough that he releases Ruby , letting her legs fall to the ground from where they were wrapped around his waist as he shoots me a frustrated look followed by a half-hearted growl. Mission accomplished, I turn and look up at Einar . His beloved face is wreathed in smiles after watching me admonish Slavic .

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Slavic and Ruarc enter the shuttle, so I know he has to go, but before he does, there's something I've needed to tell him for some days.

“ Einar , honey?”

“ Yes , little Starshine ?”

“ I love you.”

His jaw drops.

“ You tell me this now? Right before I am to leave and go down to Deapra ?!”

Poking him in the chest, I glare up at him.

“ Life is short and unpredictable. I wanted you to know before you left, just in case. Anyway , you're supposed to say it back, mister.”

He must see or hear the vulnerability I'm trying to hide because both arms pick me up, plastering our fronts together, and bringing our faces eye level.

“ Rowan , you are the greatest gift I have ever been given, and I thank the gods of Ruk each day for you. I love you with every fiber of my being, little Starshine .”

Sniffling , I don't try to wipe away the stray tears that've escaped in response to his

words. Cupping his jaw between my hands, I lean in and press a lingering kiss to his mouth before leaning back. His dragon eyes are blazing with the love he has for me, and I've no doubt mine are reflecting the same emotion right back at him. Slowly, he eases me back down until my feet touch the floor and he releases me.

“ I will be back soon, my mate. Then we will discuss your exceptionally poor timing when it comes to declarations of love.”

With that, he lightly smacks my ass before walking through the shuttle door, and I watch as it closes behind him while rubbing the warm spot on my behind.

The second Ruarc lands the shuttle safely within the Zenith, I unbuckle from my chair and hit the release on the door. Rowan's declaration of love caught me completely off guard, and I found it difficult to focus once we reached Deapra's surface.

Ignoring a laughing Slavic and Ruarc, I comm Bikar.

“ Bikar, where is my mate?”

“ Let me check. Ah, she is in your quarters.”

Feeling a grin creep across my face, I thank him and end the comm link. Sprinting down the halls, I arrive at the door in record time, barely stopping to swipe my hand across the pad to open it. Rowan's head jerks up at my abrupt arrival.

“ Oh wow! You're back already? You guys were only gone for a couple of hours. What happened?”

Momentarily distracted, my frustration and disappointment must show because she immediately gets off the couch and meets me in the middle of the room with a



comforting hug.

“ Rowan , there was nothing. Absolutely nothing. The dwellings are all empty. Some of them look like the residents left in the middle of daily tasks, as if they just dropped everything and departed. Fields once full of plants for harvest are rotting and decaying due to lack of care. If my mam and little sister were there, it was many lunar rotations ago. We are at a dead end.”

“ Oh , Einar , honey. I’m so very sorry. Is there anything I can do to help?”

“ As a matter of fact, there is. Remember the morning after we sealed our bond, and I retreated into the med bay to do some additional testing on myself?”

“ Okay , sudden topic change, but yes, I remember.”

“ When we were sealing our bond, I recalled tasting something sweet in my mouth. After collecting a specimen, I found that my saliva is more than I once thought. My Ruk genetics influence it to help a female stretch to accommodate our males without tearing, but my Atraxian genetics have presented with an aphrodisiac venom. With further research, I discovered there are two small glands in the roof of my mouth where the venom is stored. I have felt the urge to bite you many times while we have mated.”

Her eyes get wider and wider the more I talk before she spins, shedding her clothes as she walks to the sleeping platform. Fully nude, she climbs up, intentionally flashing herself at me in the process. Following her lead, I drop my weapons and clothes as I go, my pivy hardening with each step until I am fully erect and standing next to the sleeping platform. Gazing at my mate, I lick my lips. She is a feast, and I am a starving male.

### Chapter Forty-Three

ROWAN

Oh , this is going to be good.

Regular sex with Einar is off the charts, I can't wait to see what this aphrodisiac venom stuff is about. The fact that I have no qualms about him essentially injecting me with something to make me super horny proves that I trust him implicitly. Climbing up on the bed, I flash my now naked crotch at him and smile at his answering growl.

Einar is standing next to the bed, staring at me with heavy-lidded eyes.

“ Are you just going to stand there and stare at me or are we going to get this show on the road.”

Dropping to his knees, he grabs one of my ankles and pulls me to the edge of the bed, draping my legs over his shoulders as he buries his face in my snatch. If there was a pussy eating award, Einar would take the gold. He's ridiculously good at it. His talented tongue brings me to a swift climax before he sinks the dexterous length deep inside me, flicking my g-spot as he tongues me.

Satisfied with how wet I am, he leans back and positions my body to where I'm on my hands and knees at the edge of the bed. Due to our height discrepancy, this is one of the few ways he can take me from behind without holding my hips up off the bed. Lining himself up with my weeping slit, he fills me in one gradual thrust of his hips,

pausing long enough to allow my body to adjust before his control snaps.

Bracing my hands on the bed, I push my hips back against him with every thrust, reveling in how he, and he alone, makes me feel. Einar sets a punishing pace, pistoning his pelvis into the curve of my ass. Without warning, he reaches under me and pulls my back to his front, plucking at my sensitive nipples while his hips still, his hard cock throbbing where it's buried deep inside me.

“Are you ready, Rowan?”

Tilting my head to the side, my hair falls away from my neck. Every romance book I've ever read with a mating bite comes to mind, so I know that's the spot he's been eyeballing. I beat him to the punch before he can say anything.

“Go ahead, my love. I'm ready for the ride.”

Wiggling my ass against him, I'm rewarded with a guttural groan before his mouth clamps down on me. There's a slight pinch where his sharp teeth sink into my delicate skin and then nothing but fire. My nipples bead so tight, they're almost painful and slick gushes out of me. I don't know when he releases my neck, but I hear the deep sound of satisfaction he makes and feel him rise up before pressing me down onto the bed until my weight is held only by my knees and forearms.

“Arch your back, Rowan.”

Einar rasps out the command before he wraps one massive hand around my throat, his fingers holding my mating collar while the other hand alternates between breasts, strumming my aching nipples. It's as if he instinctively knows what I need and where I need it as his hips pick up an almost violent rhythm, the textured length of his dick hitting my g-spot with every thrust at this angle. Abandoning my painfully sensitive nipples, his calloused hand drifts down to my clit and begins massaging it in time with his thrusts.

At this point, I'm beyond conscious thought. I'm a writhing mass of need as hot fire licks across the nerve endings in my entire body. Einar's ministrations pull an orgasm from me and I feel my pussy clench down on his cock, eliciting a hiss from him at the sensation. I don't know how many times I come, but the fire in my veins is raging out of control, and I need more.

Somehow , Einar understands that.

Releasing his hold on my neck, I feel him part my ass cheeks, and something slick lands against my rear. Without warning, he pops his thumb past the ring of muscle, thrusting it in and out with rough strokes, his entry eased by the spit he thoroughly coated his thumb and my back passage with. The additional stimulation with the dark edge of pleasure/pain sets my body off like a rocket. My eyes roll back into my head as I come so hard, I see stars and I feel Einar's ovipositor emerge from the tip of his cock, locking to the entrance of my womb as he bellows out his completion.

Collapsing beneath him, I feel the fire in my veins begin to wane as I try to catch my breath. Turning my head, I peer at him over my shoulder and smirk.

“ When can we do that again?”

Einar breaks out into raucous laughter, causing his body to rock and jolt over me. The sensation makes my eyes cross in pleasure. Eventually , his mirth dies down, and I finally stop moaning at the feeling of his dick rubbing against my swollen g-spot.

“ Rowan , you are a delight to behold. Mam always said that the gods would bring me someone one rotation that would be my whole world, but they offered me something even more than that. Little Starshine , you are my entire galaxy, my gravity, and I love you with every fiber of my being and always will.”

Who would have thought being abducted by aliens would be one of the best things to ever happen to me?

“ My heart beats only for you, Einar . I love you to the moon and back again. The world I came from only had one moon, and it would have taken an entire lifetime of heartbeats to travel there and back. That is how much I love you.

The End .