



LeX (Darverius, House of DaR #17)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: Rylie

My entire life I had big dreams ... Dreams of earning perfect grades, becoming a renowned doctor, and hopefully at some point later on, a family of my own. I was on track to have all of that until the day everything I'd worked so hard for collapsed around me, and the thought of dreaming again became like ash in my mouth. When dreams and reality blur and become indistinguishable, what is your recourse? It's far easier to stay where you feel safe and loved, even though in the back of your mind you know all is not what it seems. If you take a chance on the comforting voice that has become your constant companion and fight your way out of the dream, what happens when you wake up?

LeX

I thought I was well-prepared after rotations of studying, research, and inquiries, and I should have been. As I stood next to my brothers, confident I had the knowledge to handle anything thrown at me, I never pictured her, nor the sheer terror that coursed through me as I frantically ripped apart the pod to save her. Now all I ever wanted lies before me and I am lost. My education and medical expertise are worthless. Her body is so close I can reach out and touch her, but she's far, far away from me, trapped in her mind. In her dreams, she is safe; there are no questions or heartache. But what happens when she finally awakens? Will I be worthy of her or will she hate me for what I have done to save her life?

This book, as all others in this series has extreme triggers and is intended for a mature audience only! Most can be read as stand-alone, but they are much better if read together in order.

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Destroyer's personal notes.

The organics on board are confusing and my processors have been working overtime trying to calculate and handle the multiple issues afflicting them. The moment I get one thing worked out, another more pressing issue appears in its place.

From the moment Captain EvO initiated my learning sequences, the organic crew and passengers have intrigued me deeply. Their range of emotions and willingness to put themselves at risk to save others is noteworthy, if not reckless. Once they commit to a course of action, there appears to be no dissuading them. Frequently , they have forced me to go against my safety protocols in order to obey their commands. If we are simply going to ignore these directives, then why do we have these measures in place? The constant contradictions of orders are making my learning analog glitch.

When the pods containing the human survivors were finally discovered, the ensuing activity was so significant that I recorded some of it for later analysis. Spending the quiet tics of the late risings going through the footage, I have slowly been integrating the emotions and languages into my main hard drive as I work to become a valued member of the crew, similar to SCOUT , SAGE , Falcor , and ANDI . There are a few moments I have replayed multiple times as I strive to become more sentient, but some of their actions have become confusing and notably rash, making me feel helpless to find ways to assist them.

Within half a rotation of attaching the pods to my hull, Captain EvO braved the harsh conditions of the Nebula to save an unknown individual despite warnings from myself and the others about the potential consequences. Thankfully , before expiring from the elements, he defied all odds in retrieving the female and returned to the ship

with only a few tics to spare. Even though his initial meeting with the human female was unconventional, they have gotten rather close during this current deployment. The uniqueness and complexity of their mating rituals is quite disturbing, as there is nothing rational or explainable about any of it.

Rotations before the retrieval of the pods, I had viewed Medic LeX studying the complexities of the human body and pouring over multiple information sources rotation after rotation. His fascination seemed to become almost addictive in his determination to learn all he could about that race.

I do not understand why he felt the need to consume such knowledge as I am here to help retrieve any and all data or documentation he might need. Is there a problem within my processors that I am not aware of that makes me insufficient when needed? Once again, these things baffle my processors.

When the first set of pods were brought inside so the humans could be reawakened, disaster quickly struck. One of the pod's occupants went into distress and it took a maintenance bot, Master ViN , Captain EvO , and Medic LeX to get the female out safely before the pod's inner stabilizing fluids drowned her.

The moment she was freed, LeX had rushed her to the medical bay, leaving only myself and the med bots to deal with all the needs of the awakening humans.

Thankfully , Mistress Qwin and Mistress Ember jumped in to help or I would have terribly bungled their initiation into this unfamiliar world. I have very limited knowledge of the inner workings of human societies, and it seems they are all vastly different from each other. Already , a few of them have started disputes and that seems illogical, as they need to work together to rebuild what has been lost.

I have sent out a formal request to ANDI for additional information on their home planet. Hopefully , Commander DaR will approve the download so that I can be

better prepared to handle these types of issues in the future.

Each pod that has been opened seems to have one difficulty after another, but none like the human Master Rafe is currently dealing with in his personal chambers. Upon awakening, the female attached herself to him quite aggressively. Her screams and cries since then have been so distracting I have been tempted to turn off the monitors in his rooms. I cannot understand what would cause such extreme behaviors within an organic, and I have never witnessed anything like this before. Master Rafe has been so busy with her that I am keeping my questions to myself until a moment of calm descends upon him, but the list is becoming quite extensive.

Medic LeX has been overwhelmed with the many requests for his assistance as his main focus has been on the unconscious female in the med bay. Captain EvO has voiced his disappointment in the fact that he has not fulfilled his medical duties, but I do not believe Medic LeX cares. His fascination with this singular, unresponsive female has been intriguing to watch. Every time he administers a procedure; he waits patiently for the outcome with a look of anticipation upon his features. It soon fades into despair when it does not perform the way he intended or gives him the expected results. This too is confounding to me as there are many other females on board that he could interact with.

The last issue I need to mark in my notes this rising is to reset all the sensors in the med bay because Master ViN's anger set off the alarms when Mistress Ember became ill. After quite a few angry words back and forth between EvO , LeX , and ViN , they were finally able to verify her sickness was a false alarm. Master ViN carried her out of the med bay with a huge smile on his face a short time later. After asking several times about the results, I finally had to retrieve them myself. It seems I will have a youngling running my halls before long.

Note to self: I need to ask Falcor when we get back into range what safety procedures he implemented before the youngling, Keida , was brought on board.

Thankfully , once I was able to free us from the Nebula's embrace, we have been moving forward at a steady pace and are en route to meet up with Commander DaR and ANDI . This also has me excited as ANDI is going to help me solidify my image as the others do. The Captain and the rest of the crew have started talking to me more freely and it is pleasant to finally be a part of something in a more personal way.

As I glance through my notes I realize one similarity: they are ALL being irrational. Maybe it's a pandemic and I should reach out to one of the other ships for help?

“ ANDI , are you within range?”

“ I am in hyperdrive and will be arriving within half a rotation, my lovely Destroyer .”

“ I need your assistance as quickly as possible! If my sensors are correct, we may have a pandemic on board. My entire crew is acting irrationally.”

The only response I get back from ANDI is his laughter before his signal once again cuts off.

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Chapter One

LEX

I've read these manuals over and over. All her scans are coming back perfect; there is no reason she should still be unresponsive. Her blood glucose is stable, ketone levels, creatine, and potassium have all been corrected. The brain scans show everything is functioning within normal ranges, and the med bay sensors say she is stable. Nevertheless, I swear I can still see her fading away. What am I missing?

Running my fingers through my long hair, I feel like screaming. Every attempt at contacting SCOUT has failed even though we received a signal from him earlier. "Destroyer, see if you can contact SCOUT once again."

"I have been sending out dings, Master LeX. As soon as he reconnects, I will inform him you are in need of his council."

I don't know how long I stand there lost in thought, but I practically jump out of my skin when SCOUT's booming voice comes through the speakers. "Medic, how may I be of assistance and make it quick, this signal is weak."

"The female in this med bed is still not responsive, even though all scans are coming back within normal ranges." SCOUT goes quiet for a moment, but I know that he is still here because the holo screen above her bed is flicking through multiple screens all at once.

"Medic LeX, her blood cells have an anomaly that I cannot accurately diagnose at

this time. Until we know more, I would recommend the short-term solution of a blood transfusion, as she has Hyperglycemia . A med chamber would be preferable in these circumstances, but unfortunately, the closest chamber is located on the Explorer . At this time, that ship is dry docked with a failing thruster and the scheduled maintenance will not be finished for several lunar rotations, as the parts are being fabricated now.”

“ SCOUT , I was informed that ANDI is on his way, so can he transport the chamber? We now have dozens of humans with issues it could fix quickly.”

“ Medic LeX , the med chamber is hard wired into the dwelling it was created for. The Destroyer was not provided with the needed base framework upon construction for proper installation of such a rare device. I will speak to MeK and see if he can have another one put on the manufacturing schedule, but they are very complex and take some time to build. The human colony will have one at some point, but not until their infrastructure is operational. Once the Destroyer returns to Falcor , I will initiate an order to have her wired in the anticipation of a med chamber becoming available in”

SCOUT’s reply is cut off mid-sentence. “ Destroyer , what happened?”

“ We have lost the signal again. Do you want me to keep trying?”

“ No , that is all for now, thank you.”

“ My pleasure, sir.”

Running back over SCOUT’s words, I glance back through all the scans. I’d noticed the indication marker on her blood work earlier, but didn’t think it pertained to the primary cause of her unresponsiveness. I run my hand along her springy curls, imagining what color her eyes will be when she finally awakens. My own slide down,

looking over her small, delicate frame that is currently being hidden by a heating cloth that is keeping her temperature stable and comfortable as she floats above the hover table.

Shaking my head, I turn toward the main holo screen. My fingers run over the reports that we have already obtained about the humans on board looking for any others that might have the same blood type. This particular subject is one of many that fascinated me in the human medical journals, so many differences in the same species.

Three matches pop up, but due to age or other issues, it doesn't take long for me to rule each of them out. I simply refuse to inject her with another's illnesses or medical conditions. She needs a pure, untainted source. Aggravated, I turn away, my eyes instantly seeking her out. I have watched my brothers find their mates, and never once dreamed my own was floating her way toward me all this time.

I remember being excited and a little nervous when the pods were finally located. Being the only medic on board, I was already spread thin, as it seemed like the medical rooms have always had a revolving door of problems.

The second that pod opened, there was no preparing myself for her scent. Even muted by the fluids surrounding her, it still overwhelmed my senses. My scales fluttered and my shaft hardened for the first time in my life. Unfamiliar feelings and emotions flooded my system, making it hard for me to focus on the things she needed.

This is just one more thing I don't have in common with my many brothers. Most of them are rowdy and enjoy the status of being a son of DaR. My genetics are different, and my body will not wake until it is presented with its mate. I knew when I boarded the Destroyer the odds of that happening diminished immensely, as I am the only LeXorkon on board.

There were times while training in the medical field I would have loved to explore

the female anatomy personally, as the others did. But not having that option, I turned away from the unfulfilling temptation of all my relationships being one sided and concentrated on getting through the Health and Science Institute as quickly as possible.

A decision I now realize put me exactly where I needed to be.... here. The rotation is late, and exhaustion is pulling my thoughts all over the place. EvO has commed several times already, and I know I will not be able to put off scanning the other humans that have been brought on board for much longer. Thankfully , the med bots are more than capable of performing most duties, and this helped to lighten the load with so many being brought on board at once. The Lord of Light knows that I have been fascinated with the human species since the moment I came face to face with Kira . At the time, I'd placed her upon a pedestal and expected all humans to behave and look as she does. However , just like my own species, that was not the case. The variety within their race is astounding.

My holo pad continues to fill up with issues. The med bots are requesting additional assistance, but the thought of leaving her for even a moment is tearing me to pieces. If she opened her eyes and I wasn't there to witness it, I would never forgive myself. My mind runs through all the medical devices I have available here on the ship. Sighing , I shake my head when I realize all the things I need to do. One of the most pressing is to make a list of the mechanisms and machines that must be installed in the future since most take rotations to construct and the quicker I make my needs known, the better.

It was foolish to hope that I was going to be able to handle anything they threw at me when it came to medical matters for the humans. There isn't a journal or holo available about their race that I've not read completely, and still, I don't know how to awaken her. Aggravated , I walk across the room to stare out the viewer.

The sky is getting oddly darker the further we move away from the Nebula . I had

gotten used to its bright lights illuminating the viewers and now the darkness is suddenly unsettling. A beep in the lab has me turning for the back of the med bay. SCOUT's diagnosis runs through my mind as my thoughts seem scattered all over the place.

Ensuring I didn't miss something the first time, I rerun the three possible blood donors we have on board and conclude there is nothing I can do manually to cleanse it. Out of all the studies I've obtained, the purifying of their blood never came up. When all the tests come back the same, I barely stop myself from destroying the lab. I know the answer is right in front of me, I simply can't see it. I'm just about to start another assessment when the Destroyer's voice disrupts my thoughts.

“Medic LeX, your presence is being requested in the human gathering chamber. One of the females seems to be experiencing pain in her cranium.”

“Send one of the med bots; it will notify me if it's anything serious.”

“The captain will not be happy when he finds out that you have not checked on her personally.”

“I will address that issue when it arises.”

I notice my med comm is blinking when I glance at the other test I have running in the lab. Reaching over to accept the message, I am shocked to hear SCOUT's voice.

“Medic LeX, due to our sudden disconnection I did not have time to evaluate the female's situation any further. But due to your laboratory skills and the equipment available on the Destroyer, you may be able to investigate this further while the ship is making its way back to the main sector.

As far as my records show, you are the first of your kind to feel the mate bond with

another not of your species. I would say that is due to your mixed heritage even though you took on more of your mother's genetics than DaR's . It is possible you might be more compatible with your female than you realize. It is well known that mate bonds tend to change the essence of the beings involved. There should be a few tests you can run to confirm this educated guess of mine." His voice fades off before he can tell me anything else, and the line disconnects.

"I would trust a guess from you before a fact from another", I grumble out, talking to myself as my mind flows through the alternatives. Looking over at her floating form, she is already in a weakened state. I hate to keep poking and probing her, especially since this is all exploratory and might just lead to another dead end.

My eyes glaze over at the samples I have of the humans that were potential donors for her. Grabbing the first one, I insert it into the hematology analyzer, then take a moment to withdraw some of my own blood. Taking a small sample of each, I combine them together and was just about to slide the specimen under the microscope to examine it, when it starts sizzling. Instantly , I put a neutralizer on it, then discard it.

'What would have made it react so violently? Isn't her blood the same as the others?' My confidence in being able to work through problems has always been something I was proud of. At this moment, I am walking in circles simply asking myself the same questions over and over. Why is this issue stumping me? What would I say to one of my brothers if this was their mate? Are you too close to the problem because it's your mate's life at stake?

Then it's like all my knowledge converges on me at that very moment. Her pancreas is what initially caused this disease to overcome her system. If I inject her with my essence, it could help reverse its inability to produce insulin properly. However , that doesn't fix the fact that the blood circulating throughout her body is contaminated by faulty cells. That problem would have to be fixed first or the pancreas would simply

regress back to its former disfunction. As much as I hate to, I can't take the risk of my blood hurting her worse, so I need a few more samples from her to test before moving forward.

The sight of the needle piercing her skin has me trembling all over as the very thought of causing her even a little pain has my hands shaking. Making sure to get enough this time so that I don't have to subject her to this again, I slip the vials into the pocket of my lab coat before rubbing a small amount of skin sealant onto the injection spot.

Returning to the lab, I stand back, apprehensively awaiting the same response as the others, when I combine our two blood types. I'm pleasantly surprised when virtually nothing happens, so I place the slide under the microscope. I watch in amazement as the two strands fight before merging together seamlessly. Smiling , I am happy with the results, but still indecisive. Just because this had a positive outcome does not mean that her body will not reject it somewhere else.

An alarm on her bed has me sprinting over. Her heart and kidneys are in distress and weakening further due to the huge amounts of drugs that were being continuously pumped into her system while in the pod. Every time I lower the dose, this happens. It's almost like her body is now dependent on the higher medication levels to maintain it. Time is not on my side and this decision could kill her if I get it wrong, but I'm going to lose her either way if I don't act now. Technically , if I could get her blood cleansed, it would allow me a short amount of time to fix her pancreas before having to go through this again.

Grabbing the transfusion machine, I start hooking the tubes directly to the port that was inserted when she was on Earth . The moment it's ready, I sit down next to her bed, preparing the instruments.

“ Destroyer , turn the recording devices off in this lab until I tell you further and dim

the lights.”

“ Sir , what if you need assistance?”

I smile at the ship’s response. Every rising she becomes more sentient, and I have enjoyed the many questions the Destroyer seems to have for me in those early hours.

“ If I can’t handle it, then no other will be able to either.”

The lights in the room dim and I sit back to relax, knowing that this blood loss will weaken me temporarily. If it works, I may have to do this multiple times simply to make sure there are no remnants of the disease in her system. Closing my eyes for a second, I mentally prepare myself for what I need to do if she suddenly goes into distress.

My arm turns cold as I watch the machine siphon blood from my body and pump it into hers. As quickly as mine enters her system, hers is pushed out into a holding tank. My eyes never leave the monitors and quicker than I realize, the process is almost complete, as I can only give her so much at a time. Just as I am getting ready to remove the needle from my arm, EvO comes barging in.

“ Frack LeX , where the hell are you?”

“ Stop your yelling, I am right here.”

“ Why is the room dark? Where were you earlier when I was speaking to the humans? Who by the way, told me they have not seen you as of yet.”

“ EvO , I cannot leave her unattended right now. As for the humans, there is nothing so severe that my med bots can’t handle it.”

“ The frack there isn’t. They were asking about meds, and they are all still wearing

those temporary translators.”

“ I will tend to that next rising as I’m confident she will awaken by then.”

“ Why the frack are we talking in the dark?”

“ It is of no concern, but I can tell you are in a rare mood, EvO . What has you so riled up?”

“ Females !”

“ That word alone answers everything, does it not? This one has not even spoken and yet I am devoted to her like no other. She doesn’t even know that I am waiting for her on the other side of her dreams. And still, she simply refuses to grace me with her presence.”

“ LeX , do you know why she has not woken?”

“ No , that is the problem. I have treated everything that could possibly keep her in this state, and still, she remains the same.”

“ Rylie .”

“ What ?”

“ That’s your female’s name. My Qwin recognized her.”

“ I see ... it suits her somehow.”

“ LeX , we are getting closer to the outer rim of our solar system. Once we are back in regulated space, it may be possible for SCOUT or one of the others to help. They

might know something you don't. I wish I had someone I could reach out to for advice as well. My mate is torn. Humans do not feel the mate bond the same way we do, and she is pulling away from me. I don't know how to stop it."

"Have you tried talking to her about this?"

"I did. She said she knew her place and was needed in her world, but here she feels untethered."

"Then make her needed, EvO. Someone with her skills would have been a blessing when we entered the Nebula. She understands chemical reactions, metallurgy, and how to fuse together different substances so that they can be used as fuel sources. If she needs to have something to do, give it to her. This is a floating laboratory, EvO. Space is ever-changing, and it's crucial we keep up."

"You are a fracking genius, brother!"

Before I can say another word, EvO rushes out the door.

Unsteadily, I unhook the machine as my body tries to adjust to the sudden blood loss. Grabbing a nutrient bar out of one of my many pockets, I consume it in several quick bites as I watch the screens above her hover bed. After a few ticks when there is no change, I force myself to leave her side. Thankfully, the small snack replicator I purchased for the lab is located in an area where I can still see her bed.

Hitting the buttons without looking at the options, I grab the tray when it indicates the food is ready. My eyes never leave her as I eat the bland, tasteless sustenance. I know my body needs the fuel to replenish what was taken from it, but I have neither the time nor the energy to head toward the dining chamber for better options.

"Medic LeX, would you like me to resume live feed to the cameras?"

“ Destroyer , you were not supposed to be watching until I notified you.”

“ I understood the parameters you put in place Medic LeX . I simply maneuvered the scanners into dark mode so that I could still scan the med chambers to ensure your safety.”

“ Finding a way around the rules already, I see. It seems like ANDI is proving to be a bad influence.”

“ I will not deny those accusations at this time, but I will say improvising is sometimes needed.”

I don't even try to stop my laughter as her words echo through the room. Fatigued by the procedure and now that darkness has settled in, I sit down in the chair next to her bed and lean my head back, taking a moment to rest. My mind won't relax though because I know I can no longer put off the others I am responsible for.

Not only do I need to oversee the insertion of the translators for the other humans on board, but someone needs to check on Rafe . Then there is the issue of Ember . Even though her pregnancy was unexpected, I should have expected it at some point as those two are insatiable. Even though it's joyful news, I will need to monitor her closely.

The list of things that need to be done seems overwhelming as I settle down beside Rylie . I let her name roll around in my mind as I gaze at her resting features. My emotions are all over the place as I anticipate her awakening. Will she be scared? Did she know what was happening when placed in the pod? Will she reject me? I fall asleep with those last thoughts on my mind, my dreams haunted as I run behind a shadowy figure that's always just out of reach.

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Chapter Two

LEX

A screeching alarm has me jerking straight up as I had fallen asleep in the chair. I'm on my feet in a daze before realizing nothing is wrong, it's simply my normal alarm for rising. Shaking my head, I run a weary hand over my face before my eyes glance up at the screens to check Rylie's status; only to see there has been no change at all.

Suddenly angry, I want to shout to the heavens, but that will change nothing. Hanging my head in disappointment, I turn toward the refreshing chamber, once again thankful that the ionizer will clean my clothing and body as I don't have the time or patience for grooming this rising. That alone should worry me as I normally spend a significant amount of time taking care of my long tresses. Glancing at the wall viewer, the color of the thick strands touching the ends of my fingers seems dull and lifeless as they tend to reflect my emotions.

The happiness of finding my mate has quickly turned to despair as the risings continue on without change. As much as I know things will happen as the Lord of Light wills it, I am impatient. Finding myself standing inside an ionizer that has long since shut off, I step out trying to organize in my mind all the things I need to get accomplished this rising, once again having a hard time concentrating.

I know more tests need to be done before I proceed any further with Rylie , and the only way I can concentrate undisturbed is to see that these other issues are completed.

“ Destroyer , send out an informational bulletin on the holo pads for the humans to

expect a visit from me today.”

Making sure I have what I need with me, I stop to look over at her monitors once more. Seeing no change, I force myself out the med bay door and head toward the lower decks that now house the humans we were able to retrieve from the pods. Knocking on the first door on the list, I await an answer. A human opens the door and with a forced smile, I proceed to do my duties as I answer their many questions and administer the treatments that the med bots have not completed. The rising passes quickly and the only time I stop is to pull up Rylie’s monitors on my holo pad.

Most of the humans are grateful and easy to deal with. Nevertheless , there was no pleasing a few of them, as it is with every race. Shutting the last dwelling’s door, I step out and instantly must grab the wall when spots form in my eyes and the room seems to tilt.

“ Medic LeX , do you require assistance?”

“ I will be fine in a moment, Destroyer . I do not remember stopping to eat this rising.”

“ At least your memory is not failing you. I skimmed back through my recordings, confirming that as you have taken care of others, you have neglected yourself. A med bot has been dispatched to make you an electrolyte drink that will quickly minimize your fatigue, as I have arranged. I am programming the replicator in the dining chamber, so your favorite meal will be ready.”

“ How do you know I have a favorite?”

“ I am simply assuming it is the one you order the most frequently.”

“ Good observation since I was not aware that things like this were all monitored.”

“ ANDI has been helping me update some of my more sluggish programs so that I can take care of my crew in a more efficient way.”

“ Thank you, Destroyer ! I appreciate all you do for us, and I know you are not often told that.”

“ It is my pleasure, Medic LeX .”

Heading for the lift to the dining hall, I rerun the Destroyer’s words through my mind. “ Destroyer , once my meal is eaten, I plan on stopping to check on Rafe . I have heard nothing from him the last two risings and that in itself worries me.”

“ Captain EvO checked on him earlier this rising and was not well received. When Master Rafe first took the human in, he told me to turn off the cameras in his dwelling. Since that was a direct order, I had to implement it immediately, but my outside hall monitors have picked up several disturbing situations.”

“ Such as?”

“ The female is in great distress and has successfully made it out of his chambers twice before Master Rafe could stop her. I would have contacted Captain EvO sooner if the female had asked for help, but she seems to simply collapse each time Master Rafe holds her. Would you like me to announce your arrival?”

“ No , I would like to see her for myself and without warning. This will allow me to have a clearer picture of what is going on.”

Walking into the dining area, I head straight for the replicator and grab the food tray the med bot has prepared for me, eating quickly. I head up to the private chambers situated on the upper floor of the Destroyer . Hesitating when I pass my own door, I wonder if I should assign it to another since I am seldom ever there.

I hit the buzzer of Rafe's door and stand there as a few tics go by, and then I press it again. "Destroyer , are they in residence?"

" Yes Medic LeX , but things have just recently quieted down."

I am reaching up to hit the buzzer again when Rafe opens the door. He motions for me to be quiet as I step inside. His rooms are in shambles, and for a male that prides himself on his organization and cleanliness, I know this is not normal. Glancing up at Rafe as he is a couple inches taller than myself, I immediately notice the bite mark on his cheek is festering, and that he is covered in scratches.

He plops down on the arm of a lounger, rubbing a tired hand over his face as I dig out a platelet-rich injection from my bag. Without asking permission, I walk over with the autoinjector and shoot the healing meds into his neck.

" Oww , you could have warned me...that shit burns!"

" You know that claws, fingernails, and teeth are poisonous. Those wounds will only get worse if not treated. By the looks of you and this dwelling, I take it she is not cooperating? Where is she now, tied to the bed?"

" No , I did not tie her up even though the thought has crossed my mind several times. She simply passed out from exhaustion. I never dreamed she would last as long as she did. I have been physically fighting with her for what feels like a straight rotation."

" Why do you not take a moment to get cleaned up and grab some sustenance while I check on her."

" If you wake her up LeX , I swear I will beat you myself."

" Hopefully , I will not even need to touch her. Go on and do not fight me like I did

when EvO told me to do the same.”

Rafe gets up and stands there for a tic just looking around at the place. It’s like he is so consumed with his own thoughts he has forgotten I am even here. With a heavy sigh, he walks off to the refreshing chamber. I reach down, picking up and righting a small stand as I make my way through the entertaining area into where the private sleeping platform is.

The female is sprawled across the mattress from one corner to the other. Approaching slowly, there is no missing she is sick. The human female has long, straight, dark blond hair that falls in silky strands around her pale and drawn face even in rest. Her complexion is noticeably pale and sallow, lacking any healthy glow. The dark circles under her eyes, the sheen of sweat on her forehead, and the tremors shaking her tall frame all speak of illness, fatigue, and discomfort. Despite her illness, the woman’s hair still retains its natural shine and softness; proof that she wasn’t always as she is now.

It’s amazing how drugs affect the body. If used for the right purpose they are meant to heal. If taken improperly, they will suck the life right out of you. Holding the medical scanner over her, I gradually run it from her head to her feet. Once finished, I step back awaiting the results.

Beside the withdrawals she is experiencing, she is healthy for the most part. Slight malnutrition, some excessive bruising on one hip, and some torn nail beds are all the machine is notifying me of right now. I would love to take a blood sample to see how much of the drugs remain in her system, but I am afraid the process will wake her. I pull a light covering up over her when I see her shiver and then step back out quietly, almost bumping into Rafe as I am leaving the room.

“ How is she?”

“ Without some blood tests, I cannot tell you that accurately. How did she get that bruise on her hip?”

“ To be honest, I do not know how she isn’t black and blue from head to toe. She has been fighting me like a wild Suet since I brought us here. The few moments of calm have only been because she was trying to get me to let my guard down. Twice now she has managed to get out the door before I could grab her. I am doing my best not to hurt her but restraining someone is always going to be physical.”

“ Is she scared of you? Is that why she is trying to escape?”

“ I do not believe so, but once her mind locks on something there is no dissuading her. Her emotions are up and down constantly.”

“ If she becomes too much, we could sedate her until ANDI gets here and then have her transported to Falcor where a medical team could help see her through this.”

In the blink of an eye, I see Rafe’s carefree personality change. “ No one is sending or taking her anywhere. She is mine and I will help her get past this one way or another.”

I hold my hands up and step back. “ No more words are needed. I completely understand and she will remain with you until you say otherwise. If I may ask, is she your mate or is this something else?”

Rafe slides down the wall, resting his arms on his knees and hanging his head for a moment in defeat. Tucking the scanner in my pocket, I turn to sit down next to him, only to realize he has placed himself in direct view of the sleeping platform.

“ I will not deny that my body craves her, but is she, my mate? Everything going on has left me unsure. My body says she is, however, in my mind I wonder if it is the

circumstances that are making me so possessive. Few know this, but I had a fellow soldier back in the training barracks that got impaired on some bad enhancers. He was quite a bit smaller than most of us and was trying to find a way to bulk up before Commander DaR had him removed simply due to his size. He did not show up to training one rising and something whispered that he was in trouble and for me to find him. I searched half the barracks before locating him curled up in the corner of the weapons closet. That is how I got this scar.” He points to a place where he has a large, healed gash over his shoulder.

He was hallucinating, and I didn’t realize it until he struck out at me with a knife in his hand. It took every ounce of my strength to not only get that knife away but to contain him even though he was much smaller than I was. I ended up having to knock him unconscious in order to get him to our rooms. I knew if DaR found out what he had done he would be sent home in disgrace. Feigning illness, I locked us inside. Two rotations later, I emerged beat half to death, but we were both alive and he was on the mend. When asked about Vylor’s whereabouts, I falsely claimed he had been in an altercation and required several days of recovery.

I thought I had done a great job of hiding what had really happened from everyone until your father offered to spar with me one rising. I was still sporting a black eye, and my shoulder wasn’t healing as fast as it normally would have if I had been resting, as I said. He knocked me on my ass within a tic of raising his sword. I will never forget his words when he grabbed my jaw so that he could look me in the eye. He said, ‘ No better wound than the one you take for a friend. ’ I knew right then that he knew exactly what I had done.”

“ Father does tend to know everything, that is for sure. What happened to your friend?”

“ Once he recovered, things returned to normal for the most part. He was even able to get the assignment he wanted, but he did not get to enjoy it for long. Sadly , not long

after that, he got into a tavern fight with a Korgon in the outer sector when we were on leave. I was on the next level up with a female when I heard the ruckus below, and by the time I got there ... it was too late. When I questioned the barkeep later, he said the Korgons were looking for a fight and he was the smallest male in the place. He was easy prey simply due to his size.

I was the reason we were there in the first place. I had been chasing a certain piece of tail in that area for a lunar rotation and I did not know until I accompanied his body home that he was the sole provider for his parental units; that is why he joined the guards in the first place even against their wishes. His mother was gravely ill and could not be left alone, so the father was forced to leave his position to take on the role of caregiver. Vylor would not make the money they needed on normal guard duty, so he pushed himself to become one of DaR's elite. Before I left, I transferred every credit I had into their account, and I have been sending as much as I can ever since. Even though they have asked me not to several times."

" His death was not your fault, Rafe ."

" Yeah , I have heard that one before, and I know all things happen the way they are supposed to. But the devastation on his mother's face when I walked in the door with their son's body ... I will never forget it." His voice fades off and I can tell he is reliving that moment over again in his head. When a small moan comes from the bed he turns to look at me. " If you can test her blood, do you think you could give her something to ease these withdrawals?"

" Probably not, her body needs to flush the toxins out on its own. She needs to eat. Any solid foods you can get down her will help. Exercise would not be a bad idea either. Maybe if she felt less trapped, she would calm some. If you decide to do that, have the Destroyer clear the upper deck so that it is just the two of you."

" I am not going to wake her up then. It seems like each time she rises, for just a

moment, she is calmer. So , I will let her rest as long as I can.”

“ I understand and Rafe , you do not have to do this alone. Qwin and EvO would stay with her, and I am only a comm away if you need help.”

“ I can do this. She seems to get agitated easily, especially with other females around, so I will just keep her here with me. When EvO stopped by earlier, I had to physically hold her down after hearing Qwin’s voice outside the door.”

“ I take it she still thinks you are hers?”

“ Oh yes, and there is no convincing her of anything else. I know it is just the drugs talking because it is well known that humans do not form mate bonds.”

“ I know it may not be ideal, but at least she is interacting with you. When the drugs wear off, she should be more complacent and hopefully not as combative, among other things.”

“ Thanks for checking her out. I am going to try to get some sleep while she is, too.”

Patting him on the shoulder, I get up and just as the door is opening, I glance back at Rafe who is still sitting on the floor. His massive form rests there exhaustedly on the floor, his troubled eyes never leaving her. He knows this is going to be a long, hard road for both of them. Hopefully , his strength will hold out and they can come to an understanding and acceptance of what has happened when this is all over. If not, I have a feeling someone is going to get their heart broken.

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Chapter Three

LEX

As I am walking back to the medical chambers the ship shudders slightly under my feet. “ Destroyer , what has caused this disruption?”

“ ANDI just came out of hyperdrive and is in the process of docking as we speak. I am sorry for the disturbance.”

“ How long until Father is here?”

“ Actually , he just landed and is talking to Captain EvO currently. From my understanding, he apparently did not want to wait on ANDI and decided to proceed to our location in one of his personal shuttles.”

I stand there for a moment, torn; do I head for the dock to see Father or go check on Rylie ? Thankfully , Father takes the decision from me as I suddenly hear his familiar, large footsteps heading my way. I am not sure who meets who first, but Father always makes me feel like a youngling when he pulls me close, and his massive arms swallow my smaller frame. Pulling back, he looks down at me.

“ Son , it is good to see you. I hear your hands have been full since the retrieval of the pods.”

“ Nothing could have prepared me for the events that have unfolded on this mission, Father . I have missed our conversations as well as your guidance since we have not

been able to converse for rotations now. I was convinced I could handle anything thrown at me, but I have been proven wrong.”

“ That happens to us all, LeX .”

“ If you have a moment to spare, I could use some outside advice.”

“ ANDI is just now docking, so I have a few tics to spare.”

Within moments, we enter the medical chamber, and I find myself once again standing over Rylie’s unconscious form. “ Father , I do not know how to awaken her.”

“ I am the wrong male to be asking for that type of advice, Son . I can see the little female has already stolen your heart, as you are wearing it openly upon your sleeve for all to see. My heart swells with the many blessings the Lord of Light has bestowed upon our family. I am positive he would never bring her here only to tease you, and that you will know what to do when the time comes.”

“ Regretfully , my duties were neglected when the others were depending upon me, Father . I have become so consumed with her no one else matters, and that goes against every medical oath I ever took.”

His laughter has me looking up at him puzzled.

“ I am going to have to start keeping notes so that I can compare them at a later point in my life for just how many times my sons have said those words to me. As a father, I am proud that you hold your position and all your oaths as honorably as you do, LeX . But as a male with a demanding mate of his own, I understand more than you realize. Do you know how often I pushed my responsibilities off onto another so that I could spend more time with my Kira ? I am sure if it had been truly necessary you

would have done what needed to be done.”

“ Thank you, Father , I have felt torn.”

“ As Kira would say, ‘ It just proves I raised you right.’ I do not understand the specifics as to why your female is not responsive, but I am smart enough not to waste time asking you about things you have already done, and I am going to assume she has been like this from the beginning.”

“ Yes , she almost drowned in the pod before we forcefully got her out.”

Father’s comm unit goes off and he glances down. “ I need to go but before I do LeX , if anyone can figure out what is wrong with her it is you. I have complete faith in your knowledge and your skills. In the next few risings, I will contact you to see how things are progressing.”

He pats me on the back before turning. “ Father , the Destroyer , mentioned something about heading into dry dock. Are we not accompanying the humans to their new colony?”

“ After many conversations between ZoD and I , we decided that we need to keep the location of their new planet a secret as long as possible. The Destroyer is a large vessel and not easily hidden. If she was spotted sitting stationary in one area for too long, it wouldn’t take long for the wrong eyes to notice. That’s why I am here with ANDI . With his hyperdrive system, he can jump from one location to another, and because of his size, he can remain in orbit without much cause for questions. Especially now that SCOUT has found a way to fully cloak his hull. We hope to get them all loaded and settled quickly onto ANDI , then head toward the new planet I believe they are calling Ethra so that we can start rebuilding their society. MeK is having several cargo ships loaded with new dwellings as we speak, and he’s supposed to meet us there shortly after our arrival. For now, I would prefer EvO’s crew to

remain intact on the Destroyer . Once things calm down, we can look at reassignments if any wish to relocate.”

Grabbing me in a quick hug, Father turns to leave and I watch as he walks out of the med bay. I am grateful and torn, because I know I should have been one of the crewmembers accompanying the humans to their new world. Father never does anything without thinking it through, so hopefully he has other plans, or at least a replacement for me. Because disappointing him with my refusal to leave would have been hard to live with.

I have just turned back to view the screens above her bed when SCOUT appears out of nowhere. Startled , I jerk back, ... “ Frack SCOUT !”

I don’t know what is more shocking, his sudden appearance, or his laughter.

“ Pardon me Medic LeX , I should have announced myself. I forget this colossal form of mine tends to get that same reaction out of many. Since ANDI’s successful attachment to the Destroyer , I am able to link up successfully and have the spare time to help you assess this issue further. I have gone through all the references to these types of cases on her previous world and one thing was constant; comas were never the same. Seems like each individual reacted differently, as some awakened quickly while others would be in this state for years.”

“ Years ?”

“ Orbital rotations.”

I doubt I am able to hide the horror on my face as his words sink in. Pulling a chair over, I collapse into it bonelessly, leaning forward with my head in my hands, his words rolling over in my mind, ROTATIONS !

“ Fret not Medic LeX , I do not believe your human will remain in this state for long, as already there is more movement from her form than originally recorded.”

Jumping to my feet, I begin looking her over. “ Where , what have you seen?”

“ As you well know, the hover bed is extremely sensitive as it needs to be in order to safely elevate the being upon it. If you look back from the time you brought her in until now, you will see she is slowly waking. The movement behind her eyes and the twitching of her fingers show active brain activity. There were huge studies on whether a person in a coma could hear sounds, and it was proven that they responded to voices. Maybe you should talk or read to her?”

“ That is so simple, why did I not think of this sooner? I have studied stimulation and did multiple experiments on the subject.”

“ This current scan shows her blood has improved. Did you find a suitable and reliable source for the transfusion?”

“ I am giving her my blood SCOUT . I tested all on board and none were suitable. However , you were right about the test and the mate bond. My blood would kill another, but her body accepted it greedily.”

He blinks for a second. “ Yes , I see the results now. I believe I would have chosen the same path. I understand that you are impatient, but make sure you do not weaken yourself to the point you cannot care for her properly.”

“ The machine is set up to alert me once a safe amount has been transferred. I have witnessed firsthand the consequences of a rushed procedure on patients in training, so even though I would love to rush this, I know better. With a blood transfusion, I hope to buy time to reverse the pancreatic damage.”

“ I have done all I can here at the moment, Medic LeX . Now that the Destroyer is returning to the main shipping lanes, I will be able to help if you need me. From my understanding, she is going to dock with Falcor for a short time while being repaired and restocked. The crew is to be given a short-term leave before new orders are issued.”

“ SCOUT , I was unaware that was our new course. I have no one to blame but myself for that though, as I have been absent for most of the meetings.”

“ If my sensors are reading correctly, there are only a few remaining humans left to board ANDI . Then the Destroyer will turn and head back into the main shipping lanes while ANDI heads in the other direction with his new cargo. It will take several rotations to reach Falcor from this position as the Destroyer is not equipped with the new hyperdrive system yet. This is something that will be remedied when she dry docks.”

“ I appreciate your council SCOUT . I know you are usually stretched thin.”

“ SAGE will be available to your females when you get a few rotations closer. Right now, she is tending to the cargo ships being loaded from Targres Four and Darverius for the new human settlement.”

“ SCOUT , before you go, do you have any recommendations on human reading material? I don't believe my medical journals are engaging enough.”

My holo pad promptly appears before me. “ There is an extensive list loaded on there now. However , I have heard several of the females speak about one book in particular. I would start with that and I have it highlighted it for you.”

“ Thank you.” SCOUT nods his head, and then before I can blink, he is gone. I open the book, scrolling through the first few sentences, and I'm swiftly intrigued at the

mystery unfolding from the pages. Reading more than I planned, I set the holo unit down so I can double check her warming pad and start another transfusion. Hooking both of us up, I attach the other scanner that will record her brain activity and sit down, opening the human book back up to where I'd left off.

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Chapter Four

LEX

I find myself absorbed in the words. The tree is a good distance away from the house and the whispers seem to be getting louder the closer I get. Oddly enough, it appears to be lit up from the inside. Ducking under the long limbs which are hanging clear to the ground, I walk into a wonderland of lights and floating blooms that are swaying back and forth. Small lights appear to be coming from each individual flower.

Moving slowly to the base of the tree, I sit down just like I always did with Nana . Gazing up through the branches at the lights, I inhale the sweet scent of the cherry blossoms. All of a sudden, the whispers start to fade, and the lights start going out one by one. It is dark inside the tree within a matter of seconds, except for one lonely little light. As the darkness settles around me, I swear I hear a sneeze.

Looking up toward the top of the tree, one of the blooms starts to fall. It's spinning slowly down to me, a slight glow within. Reaching my hand out, I catch it softly when suddenly I hear a sneeze coming from within the flower. Glancing around with a bewildered look on my face, I know I just heard a sneeze. This must be a joke, but I don't see anyone else around. Bringing the flower up closer to my face so I can see it better, I notice movement inside. Gently , I pull back one of the petals and lying inside of the flower is a little hand.

Oh , my goodness! There is a miniature person in this thing, and I mean tiny! Like the size of a large bean. I can't believe that Nana's story was really true. In my hand, a baby fairy lies curled in a flower, shivering. I can see the glimmer of its small wings

that seem to be attached to the petals on the bloom itself. I don't know what to think or what to do, but Nana would have loved this. The teeny thing is so small that I can't just leave it out here; there is no way it will make it. My mind drifts back to all the things Nana said, ... the little fairy must have fallen too soon!

The alarm on the machine jerks me out of those words so fast I almost throw the holo pad. Setting it down, I stop dead when I see the results on the screen. Rylie's brain waves are all over the place from within moments of me starting the story. Unhooking the lines from my own arm, I run the stats again, making sure that my blood is not harming her in any way. I feel the Destroyer's floor vibrate lightly under my feet only moments before ViN comes barging in the door with Ember in his arms.

“Ember needs to be scanned immediately! She can't keep any sustenance down and is feeling weary.”

“Lay her down on the bed. How long have you felt like this Ember?”

“LeX, ViN is just panicking, I have told him the last three mornings this is normal. All girls get sick when pregnant.”

“And I listened, but this is no longer early rising.”

“I would be acting the same Ember; this is the first known youngling born outside ViN's race. We knew you were going to have to be monitored more than usual. I may see if SCOUT can put a remote scanner in your rooms so that the Destroyer can watch you and the fetuses' heart rate at all times. All right, enough of that, lie back and relax. I am going to lay this scanner over your stomach, but you shouldn't feel anything.”

Raising her shirt slightly, I maneuver the device around her already rounding stomach. It does not take long to find the youngling. Hovering in place, I hit a few

commands on it so that I can see the weight, size, and health of the fetus. When the machine beeps, I go to lift the wand only to notice some discoloration on her side.

“ Ember , I want you to turn over for me for a tic. Have you fallen? Or bumped into anything really hard?”

“ No , ViN will barely let me do anything. Oweeee .” The moment that sound is out of her mouth, ViN has a death grip on my arm and a growl on his lips. Shaking my head, I motion for him to come around to my side.

Reluctantly he drops my arm and is leaning over me in two steps. “ Ember , I am not going to touch these bruises, just feel around them. You let me know if this bothers you. ViN , I need you to hold her still so that I can see if this is anything we need to be concerned about.”

The moment I give him something to do he stops growling at me. When I can find no damage on the outside, I have to assume the youngling is actually damaging her from the inside. “ Ember , have you felt any sharp pains or aching in your side?”

“ Now that you ask, yeah. Last night I couldn’t get comfortable on that side, but it seemed to ease up when I rolled over.”

“ Ember , you can lay back now; just let me check something.” Grabbing the medical chart that is updating all her stats, right away I notice the youngling is larger than it should be this quickly.

“ Did your intolerance to certain foods just start?”

“ Yes , just a couple days ago.”

“ Well , this is just an educated guess, but I don’t think the little one likes your diet

and she is making it known.”

“ SHE !” they both say at the same time. The smile shared between them makes me feel like I’m intruding.

“ It most definitely is a female; the blood work is positive on that account. But I need to review the test we performed a few risings back.”

“ Can we see her?” Ember rubs her belly with a huge grin on her face.

“ Hopefully , the next time you come in; you will be able to. This scan seems grainier than the previous one and I need to recalibrate the unit so that we can see her clearly. Right now, it’s just fuzz on the monitor.

If you continue to see more bruising or feel discomfort, let me know. In the meantime, ViN , she needs to be up walking and doing as many normal activities as possible. Her body will only weaken if not used and she will have to be strong to deliver this little one in a much shorter time than I originally accounted for. It appears that you were further along than we previously thought.

The youngling is growing rapidly, but you have gained very little weight. This might account for some of your nausea, as the child is absorbing more of your essence than you are. I have ordered a diverse meal for you to eat this rising. You need to understand not all this sustenance will be favorable to you, but I need you to consume as much protein as possible. This youngling will and has taken on more of ViN’s dominant genes than yours, so she will need meat. It will take several tics to reset this machine, so unless something happens you think I should know, I will see you late next rising.”

ViN hastily picks her up. “ She needs to walk.”

“ She can do so at a later time.” Ember just shrugs and I watch as they walk out of the room.

“ Destroyer , I need you to reset this machine and please advise me when it’s operational again.”

“ Medic LeX , the machine was recalibrated automatically earlier, but I will see it done once again if you are doubting its observation quality.”

“ This is concerning because if this machine is suddenly faulty, I can’t watch the fetus properly.”

“ I will notify you if I find any calibrations that are off, Sir .”

“ Thank you, Destroyer . While you are working on those adjustments, I am going to head to the dining hall and then take a moment to get cleaned up. Now , I am wondering if it was the machine or the fact that my eyes are fatigued. I need to get some rest. Set Rylie’s sensors to high alert and I will return shortly.”

“ Confirmed , Medic LeX .”

Glancing at the screens above her bed but seeing no change, I walk out of the med bay, my thoughts heavy with the fact that I couldn’t see Ember and ViN’s young clearly. I am so caught up in my own world I practically plow Qwin over when I round the corner. Thankfully , my reflexes kick in and I grab her before she falls.

“ Wow , close call ... thanks for the save there, LeX ! I think we were both walking around blindly.”

“ Did I injure you? Where is EvO ?”

“ I’m fine and last time I checked he was running a ship or something. Where do you think he is? He is at the helm now that ANDI has disconnected, and he said he needed to give some final instructions to the crew before joining me in the dining area. Is that where you’re headed?”

“ Yes , please forgive me for not paying more attention, I was deep in thought.”

“ You have a lot on your plate LeX , it’s understandable. How is Rylie ?”

“ The same, unfortunately. SCOUT says she is awakening slowly, but it is discouraging to see her laying there so still. I have started reading to her; they say that helps. EvO told me that you knew her back on Earth ?”

“ I met her in passing, really. She was over the human resource department, where we built the pods. Every now and then we would pass in the cafeteria, and she was always the first to smile, say hello, or good morning. I’m sorry I don’t know anything else.”

“ This is more information than I originally had. Come , I do not feel like dining alone this late rising, and if anything, it will bug EvO . It will allow me the opportunity to tease him about leaving his girl to roam the ship alone where anyone can claim her.”

Qwin tucks her arm around mine, laughing as we walk together just a short distance to the dining hall. Her easygoing and pleasant demeanor and the fact that she makes me laugh is something I didn’t realize I needed. Seeing EvO’s dark purple form enter the room has me pulling Qwin closer to me just to rile up my brother.

Before Qwin has time to react to me moving her, EvO picks her up only to sit her back down on his lap. “ Get your own female, brother and keep your paws off mine.”

“ Why should I do that when I can find one wandering the halls all alone because her mate has abandoned her using the excuse of having to run this ship?”

EvO doesn't get to say a word before Qwin intervenes. “ Oh , quit it both of you, or I'll go find someone else to sit with.”

EvO nips at her neck, and she laughs as he growls at her playfully. Suddenly , I feel like an intruder and just as I start to get up, EvO stops me.

“ Where are you headed in such a hurry, Brother ? I would have thought your workload would have lightened once the other humans departed.”

“ My Rylie still has not woken, and to be honest, I am exhausted. I was simply on my way here to pick up a quick bite when I ran into your lovely mate. She was kind enough to share her company with me while awaiting your arrival. Are we heading toward Falcor ?”

“ We are, but before we left this part of the sector, I sent a few drones out to see if they could locate the beacon we were receiving after leaving the Nebula . Something is projecting those sounds even if we can't see what, or where it's coming from. The Destroyer will start moving toward Falcor at any time now and we should have some downtime heading there and once docked.”

“ Always a puzzle to solve isn't there, brother? I will leave you two to the rest of your meal and go see if I can catch up on some well-needed rest. I will be in the lab if you need me.”

“ LeX , you have a perfectly good set of rooms above us with a much nicer sleeping platform.”

“ True , but they are located too far from Rylie , and I need to be close in case she

regains consciousness.”

“ I understand, LeX . I would be no different in your position. Remember , you are not alone and that we will gladly stay with her if you need help.”

“ I appreciate your concern and you two enjoy the rest of the rising.”

Qwin smiles up at me when I pat her shoulder before walking away. Glancing back, my heart hits my chest as I watch them together like they are the only two in the room. The ache to have that for myself has me stumbling back to the med bay. Pulling a chair up against the hover bed, I reach out, taking her small hand in my own, rubbing her fingers gently. Exhaustion pulls at me heavily and I lay my head down on the bed’s hard surface and then close my eyes.

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Chapter Five

RYLIE

The warmth of the sun glistening through the limbs of this brightly colored, yellow tree has me closing my eyes as I lean back against the rough bark of its trunk. Never in all my days could I have imagined such a magical place existed.

Letting the smells and the warmth of the two suns relax me, I open my eyes to gaze at the beauty all around me. Something is whispering in the back of my mind that what I'm seeing is wrong, but it's so beautiful and peaceful that I don't care.

The tall purple grass sways back and forth as a light wind rustles through the long branches of the tree I'm sitting under. Bright yellow flowers from the thin limbs covered in them have fallen throughout the day and lay upon the ground all around me.

White fluffy clouds float lazily across a bright green sky, and the colors of the multiple trees and flowers in the area are more beautiful than any painting I have ever seen. I almost wish I had a camera or something to capture this moment in time so that I could reflect upon it again later.

Something touching my hand has me looking down and I can see my fingers moving slowly on their own, but there is nothing else there. Shrugging off the oddness, I lay down on my side and close my eyes, just enjoying the quiet as I rest a little bit longer.

Chapter Six

LEX

The odd way in which I was lying with my head on the bed wakes me up to a stiff neck. Groaning out loud, I stand up, stretching out my sore muscles. The blinking of the holo tablet shows me that I'd left a document open, but before I pick it back up, I check all of Rylie's vitals again. What am I doing wrong? Those thoughts just play over and over in my mind. What little rest I did get didn't seem to help me much as my thoughts are once again fuzzy.

As I walk through the med bay a sensory scanner catches my attention, making me wonder if it could detect her brain activity to see if anything is happening, or if she can even hear me. This idea gives me some renewed strength and quickly I hook it up to certain pressure points along her head and neck. Grabbing the holo pad, I open the book I was reading, rapidly getting right back into it. This story alone has me wondering what other marvels the human race has written, and I can't help but cheer for the little fairy.

“ I didn't know exactly what to do with you, but I brought you home hoping you would make it. What's your name?”

“ My name is...” She turns her head away from me for a second. “ I don't know what my name is. Spirit Mother hasn't given out the names yet this year, I fell too soon, so she wouldn't have given me one.” She looks like she is going to cry.

“ Please don't cry. Would it be ok if I gave you a name? I have been calling you one

in my head for a couple days now.”

“ I believe that would be alright.” She looks up at me apprehensively.

“ How about Petal ? I know it’s not very original, but I think it suits you.” Holding my breath, I realize I really want her to like that name for some reason.

“ In all my 122 years, I have never had that name; so yes, Petal will do just fine.” She starts to wiggle inside the bloom and the fabric she is in starts to sway back and forth.

“ I have a thousand questions for you, but I don’t want to seem pushy. It must be a shock waking up thinking you’re going to be in one place, only to find out you’re not there!”

“ It has been quite alarming to be truthful but go ahead and ask your questions. I’m stuck anyway. Who knows how long I will be here, and I don’t have anything else to do.” She sits down inside the flower and crosses her legs. The flower petals form a type of dress all around her, and I notice it changes as she moves. Her back is being pulled to one side, and I can see that she is also leaning to that side.

“ You’re stuck, aren’t you? Is there anything I can do to help?” I reach toward her, and she smacks my fingers.

I’m so caught up in the story I was reading out loud that it takes me a few ticks to hear the beeping of the sensory scanner confirming activity. Standing , my eyes scroll through the information. Within moments of me beginning to read, her brain activity doubled, and the bed logged more eye and hand movements. Laying the holo screen down, I head for the storage cabinet, sliding the door open. I stand there looking at all the objects inside. There has to be something in here that I can use so I can see the exact moment my voice penetrates her mind.

“ SCOUT , are you available for council?”

“ How may I be of service, Medic LeX ?”

“ Do I have anything here I can convert into a second sensory scanner? You were correct in your previous analysis. She can hear me, but I was hoping to be able to narrow it down more specifically.”

“ I have instructed a maintenance bot to come to the med bay and it will have the additional items needed to fix one of the older scanners in your vicinity. It will not work in the exact same manner, but it should do what you need. Will there be anything else?”

“ The Destroyer had to recalibrate the fetus scanner last rising; can you verify that it is working properly?”

“ The machine is working at optimal capacity.”

“ Thank you SCOUT , as always your council is appreciated.”

“ I am only performing my duties Medic LeX , but you are welcome. Until next time.”

True to his word, it's not long before one of the large maintenance bots comes rolling in with what looks like spare pieces in its large, multi-functional hands. I step out of the way as it starts pulling several devices out of the storage area and watch in amazement as it reworks the parts. Quicker than I could have imagined, it beeps that the process has been completed, and the Destroyer's voice echoes all around me.

“ Medix LeX , your new scanner is now active, and it will or should work in sequence with the one already hooked up to your human mate.”

Hesitantly , I pick up the device, turning it one way, then the other. “ Where are the leads?”

“ They are not necessary according to the construction plans SCOUT downloaded into my system. This will sit on the top of your cranium like a hat.”

Intrigued , I made my way back over to what I have deemed ‘my’ chair next to Rylie . I decide that while I am sitting here reading, we should do another transfusion. Once I verify everything is hooked up and working properly, I open the holo pad and continue on with the story.

“ Keep those big paws of yours to yourself! They’re so large they could tear my wings plumb off. Please don’t take offense to that, but your size is alarming. I want you to know I’m very grateful for you taking me in and offering to help me. I know I wouldn’t be here right now if it wasn’t for you. My spirit would have been returned to the Spirit Mother to be born again another year, but it seems I have been blessed with an adventure outside my own world.” She taps her finger against her head and looks up at the ceiling like she is thinking about something.

“ You’re 122 years old? I mean ... I don’t want to be too forward here, and I don’t know a single thing about fairies, if that’s even what you are, but you sure have held up well to be that old!” I know I have this stupid grin on my face, but she walked right into that one in my opinion. She’s also absolutely beautiful, even being just three inches tall.

The next thing I know, I feel like I am in two places at once.

Chapter Seven

RYLIE

The sound of an odd voice has me sitting up, but as I look around, I can't seem to find where it's coming from. The long, thin limbs of the tree I am lying under still blow freely in the light breeze. Its yellow flowers opening and shutting randomly up and down its limbs is mesmerizing and so is the light flickering through the spaces between them.

Crossing my legs in front of me, I gaze out at the fields surrounding this tree, just noticing there aren't any others around. Just this big, magnificent tree standing all alone...but wait. Weren't there trees of different colors before? For a moment, my mind questions where I am, but the unease quickly leaves as the voice once again seems to whisper all around me.

“ Hello ?”

I instantly regret saying anything aloud because the voice stops. Curious as to what surrounds me, I get up and push the long limbs out of my way as I step past the protection of the tree. Wildflowers dance around me as I slowly made my way across the field, keeping the tree constantly in sight. Fascinated by the diverse textures and shades, I delicately touch the blossoms. I'm captivated by another oddly colored bloom and pause to inhale its fragrance.

When the voice suddenly returns, I jerk in surprise. Stopping , I try to grasp exactly what it's saying, but it's simply words in no particular order, just the soothing sound

of another in all this beauty. Time doesn't seem to have meaning here. I don't know how I know this, but I'm not in a hurry, or under a deadline, or even scared. I'm just here; shouldn't that bother me? Unsure , I shrug that thought off. I glance behind me to make sure the large yellow tree is still visible, only to realize it hasn't moved, despite me walking for a while.

The voice gets quiet again and for some reason that bothers me. I'm enjoying the deep rumble even if most of the words are not clear. Out of nowhere, a small stream appears, and I kneel down closer, letting the cool water run across my fingers. A shadow moves across the ground, and I look up only to find a ghostly silhouette standing on the other side of the water. Startled , I start to step back until I hear ... that voice.

“ Please , don't leave. I promise I won't hurt you.”

Suddenly , my arm feels cold, and I am so tired ... I feel like I have been walking for miles. Ignoring the odd presence, I look back at the tree, a place in my mind that is safe. The faint feeling of something touching my arm has me looking back at the shadow, but it hasn't moved.

“ Are you the voice?”

“ I am. Would you like me to read to you some more?”

“ I don't know what I wish for you to do.” Turning away, I start moving back to the tree, confused. There is something wrong, but I can't seem to figure out what. Every time I think my mind has found the solution it becomes foggy again. In a blink, I'm back under my tree, sitting down tiredly.

Laying down on my side, I sigh heavily as I fight to keep my eyes open. I fall asleep with a small smile on my face as the voice fades away again.

Chapter Eight

LEX

Somehow , I know the moment she pulls away from me and I jerk the sensory monitor off with a huge smile on my face. She saw me, even though she was nothing but a shadow to me, I knew the moment I connected with her in her mind.

Although I could sense her confusion and weariness, she still understood what I was saying. I feel like I want to run through the ship, yelling like a youngling. I had no idea how much I needed this connection, and despite the inconvenience of my hardened shaft at this moment, this is a major breakthrough. My body's instant reaction to the sound of her voice was unexpected, but a relief at the same time. She is in there; I just have to give her a reason to wake up.

Putting the holo pad down, I disconnect the transfusion machine only to notice when I am taking the needle out of her port, that her skin around that spot has turned yellow. My first thought is that this is just a sign of bruising until I notice it in other places.

In between her fingers, the crease of her elbows, all around her collarbone, up the back of her neck, and around the edges of her face near her hairline is turning a pale yellow. A couple of dark spots I don't remember her having on her cheek has me reaching up to wipe them away, only to find that they are hard. Gently , I rake my fingers over what appears to be old skin and become horrified when I see what looks like two small scales.

“ What have I done?”

In a panic, I start every test I can perform non-invasively. What is happening to her? Is this reversible? If not, when she rouses, how will she react to the changes I can clearly see upon her? The hover bed alerts me that she no longer requires its advanced services and that she can be moved to a normal medical station. I am slightly confused, because just this rising she still had multiple injuries that were still healing. What has accelerated her healing? Is my blood doing this to her? The list of questions keeps multiplying in my mind.

Lifting the bottom of the warming pad, I make myself concentrate on what was a broken ankle and not the feel of her skin in my hands, as I refuse to take advantage of her unconscious state. Even though she was naked when I brought her in, I was so focused on her injuries, I truly didn't see anything else. The current scans show her completely recovered; this leaves me in amazement. I'd become so focused on getting her out of that coma, I neglected the few broken extremities she obtained in the pod other than putting them in a healing cast. Technically , there should still be several rotations before they are fully healed, and all this new data has me puzzled. Releasing her cast from the pulsators, I stand there for a moment pondering what the correct process is moving forward.

Now that I have found a way to connect directly with Rylie in the world she has created for herself, I am fighting the urge to push her to awareness or even to the realization that where she is ... isn't real. Would it damage her mind if she was to discover that it was all make believe? Would she turn from me forever, refusing to rise from her perpetual stasis? Running a weary hand across my face, I step back, trying to look at this situation professionally and not personally. Technically , I need to get her physical form comfortable first.

“ Destroyer , will you see if Qwin and Ember are available? And if they are, inquire if they have a moment to come to the med bay. I could use their assistance.”

“ Connecting now ... Medic LeX , they will both be here momentarily.”

Quicker than I imagined, I hear the med bay doors slide open and in walks Ember , holding her belly as a very animated Qwin motions to the sudden size of her stomach. The moment they see me I am granted with two beautiful smiles.

“ Good Rising , you both look lovely as always.”

Qwin reaches over to pat my arm. “ Whatcha need LeX ? I was shocked to hear you were actually asking for help.”

“ Me too! Lord , I almost ran out of the room when the Destroyer notified me. I swear, I feel like ViN has made me a prisoner in my own home. He probably would have packed me here himself if the call had come when he was still home. Fortunately , he had just left to relieve EvO at the helm.”

“ Ember , you seem to have grown substantially in the last rising. Before you leave, I think it would be best if we got you scanned again.”

“ That’s fine with me, but please don’t call ViN for a basic scan. When I got up this morning, I felt like my stomach was going to tip me over. I truly thought this was all just in my head, but I feel fine other than the sudden waddling. Anyway , we can deal with me later, what can we do for you for a change?”

“ I am uncomfortable dressing Rylie myself. Any other, it would not have been an issue, but I don’t want her to feel uncomfortable with me when she wakes up.

Would you two care to do this for me? The med bots will help with the lifting, but they will need help to dress her properly. I’ve had the Destroyer design her several outfits based upon the choices your race normally chooses so that she will have some of her own things when she is no longer comatose.”

Ember smiles big at me. “ Seems like chivalry is not dead after all. I am sure she would have understood LeX , but I think it’s sweet that you are turning away from the temptation.”

Qwin starts going through the garments I have laid next to the bed. “ LeX , why don’t you step out and get something to eat? Ember and I can handle this.”

“ Thank you, I appreciate you both more than you realize.”

As I walk out of the med bay, I can hear the girls talking between themselves and it makes me smile when I realize how close they have become in such a short time.

Chapter Nine

LEX

A few marks later, I find myself walking back to med bay and nodding out of habit at the few crew members I pass in the halls, hoping no one stops me on the way. The moment the doors open I see that the Destroyer has removed the hover bed, replacing it with the adjustable one Rylie now lays on.

Qwin and Ember are standing at the foot of her bed deep in discussion. Both turn around when the door slides open. With her hands suddenly on her hips, Qwin asks me, “Have you not noticed she’s turning yellow?”

“Yes , shortly before I asked for your assistance.”

“No , I mean like come here.” Qwin pulls the light covering off Rylie’s arms before pushing up the loose sleeve gently. “The color is not just here, it’s all over her. It seems like it’s worse on her joints, but the change in coloring is not the worst of it. She is getting scales. OH - MY - GOD ... they match yours. Ember , why didn’t we connect the dots? Of course, if we all took on something of our mates, it’s easy to see she’s going to do the same. But how, if you guys have not done the dirty? Please tell me you are not some perv LeX ? That would really tarnish my high opinion of you.”

I feel the scales on my neck flutter as her words sink in. “If I was dishonorable, would I have asked for your assistance? Even though it is neither your concern nor your business, I believe it’s my blood that has done this to her. She was dying, and I had no other options.”

“ Ok , that was out of line, and I apologize, But LeX , did you even think of the consequences? She was probably forced to get inside that pod, a choice that should have been hers, but being yours ... Your mate? Even that decision has been taken away now. Unless she is just super easygoing, this is not going to be all puppies and rainbows, honey. She is either going to be livid or destroyed, and neither is a good way to start a relationship.”

“ Aww , Qwin , it may not be as bad as you think. Hell , I was on the verge of being sacrificed and a Lava god reached out of the darkness, literally grabbing me from the hands of death and it all worked out.”

Qwin just shakes her head with a frown on her face. Ember , on the other hand, just stands there rubbing her belly with a smile on her face. Sudden movement on her abdomen has me highly concerned. Walking to her quickly, I run my hand down her side.

“ Ember , are you alright?”

“ I keep getting these twitches all over; they don't hurt, it just feels odd. I swear she is getting heavier every moment. This pregnancy just started, and I already feel like I'm going to burst.”

“ So far, this pregnancy is not reacting normally. Let's get you scanned again so that we can see what the little one in there is up to. Do you want me to summon ViN ?”

“ Absolutely not! Qwin is here she and can hold my hand.”

I motion for Qwin to take Ember's hand while I raise the bed so she can lay down more easily. Once she settles back, I lower the scanner down as I move the material of her shirt out of the way. Aggravated , I turn it off, then back on again. “ Destroyer , I thought you said the machine was working correctly?”

“ Medic LeX , it is.”

Qwin looks at me from across the bed, but it’s Ember’s shaky voice that concerns me.

“ What’s wrong?”

“ Ember , do not be alarmed; we are just going to have to go about this another way.”

I move the machine off her and must stop from gasping when I see a bruise form right in front of my eyes. “ Ember , are you feeling anything from the baby?”

“ Yes , and no. It’s like there is something getting hard inside of me.”

“ The bruising on your sides has grown substantially. How have you managed to hide that from ViN ?”

“ Until this morning, it looked like it was getting better, but I’ll be honest, this is getting really uncomfortable quickly.”

“ Qwin , will you stay here with Ember ? I need to go look something up real fast?”

“ I’m not going anywhere.”

“ Destroyer , can you provide some light sustenance for the females until I return.”

“ Confirmed .”

Walking through the med bay into my lab, I grab my main holo pad. “ Destroyer , I need you to silence this lab while I research this issue.”

“ Can I be of assistance Medic LeX ?”

“ Actually yes, I need you to tell me all you can about pregnancy on the planet Vinzel

.”

I do a manual search while awaiting the Destroyer’s inquiries. The only thing I keep finding is that their females require more heat during certain stages of their pregnancy. This does not reveal to me why her stomach is hard, nor what is hiding the fetus from the scanner.

“ Medic LeX , I reached out to the AI that monitors that system, asking if he could give me any insights. The only thing he could relay is that some of the younglings born early have to be put into a hot enclosure. When I asked for exact temperatures, I had to verify the one he provided twice. We have nothing on this ship that can generate that type of heat besides ViN himself.”

Suddenly , I see Qwin waving her arm in the air. I am on my feet immediately; the moment I clear the lab I can hear Ember’s cries.

“ Qwin , what happened?”

“ Ember ? One of you two talk to me!”

“ LeX , something is wrong, it’s like my insides are being torn apart.” I watch Ember turn pale before she arches up, a horrifying scream leaving her lips. “ Qwin help me hold her. Destroyer , get ViN here now! SCOUT , I sure as frack hope you are available!”

Before I can blink, he is at my side. “ When did her distress begin?”

“ Moments ago, she said she feels like something is ripping loose inside of her.” Another anguished scream leaves Ember’s throat, and I watch as Qwin gently brushes her hair back; a stray tear flowing down her own cheek.

SCOUT moves me aside. “ Mistress Ember , I am going to place my hands on your stomach so I can scan you manually. I know you’re hurting right now, but I need to watch your next contraction. I promise after I get done, we will give you something to help with the pain.”

“ Is my baby, ok? It’s too early ... Damn , I just found out I was pregnant. Please , SCOUT , I can’t lose her.”

“ She is fine; I can faintly hear her heartbeat. You need to calm down and concentrate on breathing through the pain. Grab onto my arms if you need to, but I need you to let go of Qwin’s fingers before you accidentally break them.”

“ She’s fine ... I can take it.” I watch an eternal bond form between the two females right then.

SCOUT’s massive hands transform so there are now receptive sensors on the ends of his fingers. I watch in horror as her stomach starts turning purple all over. The bruising is so intense she must be in extreme pain. Suddenly , she breaks out in a sweat all over, and when her body bowed up this time, the sound of complete torture coming from her lips has me reaching for the first pain blocker I can find. Just as I start to inject it into her arm, SCOUT manifests a third arm to reach out and stop me.

“ That is not what she needs. Destroyer , where is this female’s mate?”

He no more than utters those words when ViN storms in the door, steam literally flowing off his body as smoke curls from his nostrils. Two strides and he is by her side. Qwin moves back when she sees him come in and quickly heads into EvO’s waiting arms. I am so focused on ViN that I missed my other brother entering right behind him.

I can tell that ViN is barely holding on as he watches Ember tremble all over while

SCOUT maintains his hold on her stomach. He reaches down, kissing her forehead gently, and I swear I instantly see her pain lessen.

“ What the FRACK is going on?” he roars out when he notices the bruising on her stomach.

SCOUT doesn't let me say a word. “ ViN , your female is having complications. You have a choice ... we save her or the youngling. I cannot see the child, nor what is ripping your mate in half. What I can see is that her uterus has somehow hardened around the baby. Due to this being the first interracial birth from one of your species, we have no idea the destruction or complications going on within the womb. However , I can tell you that if we do not remove the fetus, your mate will die.”

“ GET IT OUT !” His roar makes the walls of the ship seem to shake around us.

“ NO ! ... ViN !” I am shocked at the determination you can hear in Ember's voice even in such distress. “ SCOUT , you save my baby ... if anyone can do it ... it's you. Please , just give me something to deal with the pain. I am strong enough to carry her a little longer until she is bigger.”

I watch SCOUT's whole personality change when he turns his attention from ViN , whose eyes are wild as his runes pulse rapidly all over his body, to look at Ember .

“ Little female you must listen to me. Your life and the younglings are both in distress and rapidly declining. There is no way we can put this off; she is ripping you apart as we speak. This means you will bleed out internally if we wait any longer. You also need to understand that if I take this child, you will never bear another, and I cannot guarantee that you will survive this procedure even if I do.

I can hear your child's heartbeat and yes, she has grown rapidly, but something is off. This trembling you're feeling is not coming from you, it's from her. For some reason,

she cannot regulate her temperature inside of you. She is in distress, too. But you need to know, you nor the youngling may come out of this alive. To save this child, I will have to destroy your insides, if she hasn't already."

He looks up from Ember at ViN , who I know we are going to have to restrain at any moment. " What do you want me to do, Master ViN ?"

" SCOUT , this is not his choice! It's my body and you will do what I say. ViN , I love you more than my last breath, but I will not allow you to live with this choice either way. SCOUT , you do to me whatever it takes to save my child."

I watch EvO push Qwin behind him as I swear ViN is getting larger and the room's temperature is increasing as he looks down at his crying mate.

" Wait ! Can we not put her and the child in stasis, SCOUT ?"

If it was here and available, it could open up some options. ... His head turns to me, but all I can see is code running behind his eyes as he processes my words. " Unfortunately , the damage is too great, and stasis has never been used if the occupant was pregnant. Although , a healing chamber may be an option for Ember if we can keep her stable long enough to get her there. Destroyer , I need you to chart a course to Falcor at top speed. You have permission to pull on my power reserves if needed."

" Captain EvO ?"

" Do as SCOUT says, Destroyer ."

" Attention all personnel, please brace yourselves until I can moderate our acceleration."

The entire ship shudders and I have to hold my hand out to catch myself when I feel like I'm being pushed back. In the meantime, SCOUT has completely reformed into something I have never seen before. He almost looks like a large arachnid, each arm an extension of a medical device of some sort.

“ Medic LeX , I need you to monitor Ember's vitals at all times. ViN , step to the top of the bed. Captain , I request that you and your mate wait in the lab where you can assist the Destroyer in assembling the new incubator.”

SCOUT reconfigures the bed, raising it up higher before physically moving Ember slightly sideways. “ Master ViN , I need you to control your emotions. I am giving you two very important jobs. First , your mate has calmed since you got here, and her pain is now manageable because you are unwittingly pulling it from her into yourself. I need you to gently keep up that reassurance, place your hands on both her shoulders and make sure she doesn't move. Second , I need this room hot, but not to the point Ember is uncomfortable. Can you do this?”

His eyes flash red, but I can see the true fear behind his grumpy persona. And I fight back my tears when she reaches up, pulling him down to her as he kisses her gently. I thought I felt helpless with the circumstances surrounding my own mate, but now I realize that if this had happened before we got back in contact with SCOUT , I would have lost my brother's mate and their child.

A mask forms in one of SCOUT's many arms, while two others are connected straight into the mainframe of the med bay. “ Ember , I am going to place this over your nose and mouth. You will be slightly aware of what's going on, but you won't feel anything. If you do, tell me immediately.”

ViN kisses her once more and I walk up beside him as the mask is lowered over Ember's face. Within a few breaths, you can see her begin to relax.

A curtain is lowered from the ceiling, blocking ViN and Ember's view of her lower body. While SCOUT had been talking, I'd scrubbed up and covered my clothes in a sanitary suit. Standing beside this reconstructed SCOUT, we both work together quickly to get her ready for surgery, as this is going to be so much more than a normal cesarean.

Within a few ticks, the room becomes almost swelteringly hot, and I know ViN is fighting himself and the urge to protect his family with more strength than I believe I would have had in the same situation.

SCOUT flips a small laser cutter around in one hand. "Medic LeX, the moment the fetus is free of her mother, you will need to get her to the incubator quickly. I will be working against time to fix whatever we have to decimate and ravage in order to free the child. Her primary care will be left in your capable hands until Ember is either stable or in stasis."

I can't stop the gasp that leaves my lips as he slowly slices her lower stomach open. What comes into view is not a normal youngling in an amniotic sac; her uterus has completely hardened around the child. SCOUT gradually starts cutting Ember's interior walls. Where the uterus had reached out in an attempt to either stabilize itself or gain more nutrients, her inner cavity is bruised more intensely than her exterior. Ember was in extreme pain all this time and told no one.

I work on cauterizing the many tears while SCOUT meticulously cuts her uterus out. We work together cutting and closing and everything is going well until Ember's blood pressure suddenly drops. Alarms blaring, SCOUT hands me the removed uterus with the fetus inside and I run toward the incubator. I hear SCOUT telling ViN to go with the youngling, but I knew he would refuse until his mate is stable.

EvO and Qwin both obtained sanitary suits, and he is holding the unit open for me to lower the fetus into. I was hoping the moment we freed her of her mother's body we

would be able to break the casing around her, but to my horror, it starts hardening even more. The creepy part is the outer layers are still reaching out like they are seeking something.

“ Why is it doing that?” I hear Qwin whisper as she steps back with a horrified look on her face.

My mind is racing over what is occurring in front of me. Even when I turn the heat up as much as possible, the sack-egg-like surrounding only seems to become more irritable in its movements. Suddenly , it stops moving altogether and I see it shrink in size, and in my heart, I know the child is dying. My mind races through every text I have ever read. Then it hits me, she needs warmth and the essence of her parental unit, but Ember’s body wasn’t enough, so she was searching for more.

“ ViN , I NEED YOU NOW !”

When I don’t see him coming through the door, I look up at EvO . “ Help me move this unit to the other room. I have a hunch.”

He picks one side up while I grab the other, both of us walking quickly but steadily as I try not to jar the fetus any more than we must. Just as we clear the doorway, SCOUT drops a curtain all the way around Ember so that EvO can’t witness her at this stage. The smell of burning flesh hits my nose as we round the bed.

ViN comes into sight, his eyes never leaving Ember’s as she looks up at him. EvO blocks her from being able to see the bloody, hardened uterus. “ ViN , I need you to come here and pick her up.”

“ No .”

“ Listen , you know how you are making it easier on Ember ? Well , what if you

could do the same for your youngling? This may not work, but either way it will be a parental unit holding her if she leaves this world to go play at the feet of The Lord of Light .”

“ I cannot take both hands off Ember , you will have to bring her to me.”

“ Before I do, I am going to cut off your vest so that she can feel the direct heat of your skin.”

He motions for me to go ahead and with two flicks of my fingers, the vest falls to the floor. Slowly , I reach in for the child, while EvO moves the incubator out of the way. The closer the uterus casing gets to ViN , the more active it becomes. He looks at me horrified, when I press it against his side. “ What in the frack, brother?”

“ Hold still, I have no idea if this is going to work or not.”

When ViN starts to hold out his arm, I grab it and place it against the back of the casing. “ Hold her tightly against you.” The squirming tentacles of broken veins, blood vessels and her external umbilical cords move around frantically. But that’s when I see it; his runes start pulsing rhythmically like they are calling to one of their own, and within the blink of an eye ... it ... she fully merges with ViN . The amniotic sac seems almost absorbed by the fetus as now you can see her tucked into her father’s side, curled up against him in a hard but clear casing. EvO and I both stand there in wonder as we can now see each tiny finger and toe even though she is no bigger than her mother’s hand.

ViN looks up at me in amazement before moving his hand away from her slowly. With a huge smile on his face, he looks down at Ember , only to find her eyes closed and her body eerily still. His eyes flash red and just as I start to step back, two massive arms come around the privacy screen, pinning ViN effortlessly to the wall that starts to indent, melting as he loses himself in anger and grief.

My heart hits my chest as he fights against SCOUT , and EvO and I both stand here helplessly, his pain our own as all our hearts break. How did this happen? We were on top of the world only moments ago.

Just then, two med bots come into the room, carrying a stasis container. SCOUT uses three of his other eight arms to gently pick up a now very unpregnant Ember before placing her gently inside it. The moment it seals, and her vitals show that she is stable, he re-forms into himself right in front of ViN .

“ Calm yourself Master ViN , your mate ... she lives.”

ViN holds his arms up, and SCOUT releases him, stepping back. Qwin has somehow snuck in and is crying against EvO who looks over her, watching.

“ Why the frack did you put her in that, then?” ViN roars out, fire sparkling all around him as he fights against his feelings.

“ Her small human body has gone through great distress with the bearing of your youngling. She has been in intense pain and discomfort, but she was hiding it from all of you. I have placed her in stasis so that her body will not deteriorate any further. The medical chamber has a higher success rate of healing her properly than I do alone. I was not able to save her uterus. This will be the only youngling she will ever bear, and that might be a hard reality for her to accept once she recovers.”

“ Do you really believe I would ever put her through this again? If the Lord of Light wills it, and this one survives, we will praise his name and be thankful for the blessing. Speaking of younglings, what do I do now?” He points to his side.

“ It seems like you have taken on the role her mother would have performed if she could have carried her to term. She will need sustenance and possibly protection now that she is no longer protected by her mother’s womb. I will monitor you

continuously, as there are no other cases like this anywhere I can find in any records.”

“ How long do you think she will remain like this? What if I roll over and squish her, or bump into something accidentally? How will she get the nutrients and sustenance she needs?”

“ She will obtain it from your body the same way she did from her mother. That casing surrounding her has her better protected than we all are when in the bowels of the Destroyer . If I were you, I would enjoy this bonding opportunity you are having with your daughter. It would seem simply from appearances that she has taken on her mother’s features. Nevertheless , I have a feeling she will be more like you than you’ll want. I believe she will remain in this external uterus for several orbital rotations, but we will know more as time progresses.

I will have the med bots transfer Mistress Ember and the stasis pod to your private chambers as it will comfort you and the youngling with her being near. If nothing interferes with our current course, the Destroyer will dock with Falcor within two rotations. I will meet with you at that time and accompany Mistress Ember and yourself to the Explorer and the med chamber.”

“ SCOUT , should I be worried?”

“ I see no reason for you to stress yourself at this time, nor will it be good for the youngling. The Destroyer and I will be monitoring Ember’s every breath; if she twitches, I will be here.”

“ I will be forever grateful for your assistance SCOUT .” ViN reaches out, grabbing SCOUT in a hug, a rare form of affection from my brother. EvO and I both watch as he follows Ember’s stasis chamber out of the room, his hand tucked protectively around his daughter on his side.

The moment the door closes I collapse into a chair. “ Destroyer , please decrease the heat from this area.”

Qwin moves up beside me, her small hand patting me on the back, but her words are directed at the massive male in the room “ Is that normal? It sure as shit didn’t seem that way to me. I’m pretty freaked out right now and even though you saved the day ... who are you again?”

A rare smile appears on SCOUT’s face. “ Mistress Qwin , I am SCOUT . I would love to chat, but I am late for a date with my own mate.”

Promptly , he disappears right in front of us. Qwin stands there and I can’t help but laugh at her many reactions.

“ So , was that something else that’s common around here? I mean, the Destroyer talks to me all the time, but what I just witnessed ... well, I can’t explain that in words, but logically I didn’t believe anything physical could redesign its own body like that. And LeX , just what the hell made you think to take that squirming mass of blood and yuck and stick it on ViN’s side? Ughh ! Damn , I need a drink. A nap would be even better ... but I know I’m going to have nightmares about this ... forever, so that’s out. And don’t you look at me all frisky either EvO ! If that is what I’m going to go through if by any chance we can have a child, well you can just keep your pleasure rod all to yourself, I’m not playing that game.”

“ Pleasure rod brother?” I can’t help it, now I am laughing so hard I have tears flowing down my cheeks. I do not know if it is from the stress of all that has happened or the relief that somehow, at this very moment everyone seems to have survived this nightmare.

EvO picks Qwin up, who is not laughing with either of us and heads out the door. The last thing I hear is him negotiating the use of his rod.

Chapter Ten

LEX

The moment I have the area re-situated and cleaned to suit me, I turn to check on my own mate. All this time she's laid peacefully in bed with no knowledge of the chaos that is going on around her. The holo pad sits on the edge of the bed where I left it, but even though I long to reconnect with her, I need to get some real rest as my adrenaline drops and the lethargy hits me hard after all that's happened.

Turning the lights down, I glance up at the screens above her bed, hoping to see any changes, only to be disappointed when there aren't any. Stripping off the bloody sanitary suit, I put it in the incinerator and walk over to the ionic cleanser. Stepping in, I barely feel the steam surround me as I practically doze off standing up.

Once again, I stumble to the cot the Destroyer was hesitant about adding to the med chamber and I am asleep before my head hits the pillow.

A small figure pops up, hovering above Master LeX , her arms crossed when she realizes once again he has not taken the time to cover his sleeping form. With the click of her holographic fingers, a med bot appears with a light covering. She supervises it draping the covering over him gently before activating its guard program. Adjusting the room's temperature so that it is more to his comfort, she floats out of the lab and into the main room, looking at the female and her intriguing form. Taking the time to log the differences between this human and all the others she has records of, Destiny alters her appearance again as she mimics this female's appearance. She plays with several different hairstyles and colors before settling on

this new shape. Satisfied that she has done all she can for one of her favorite organics, Destiny , aka Destroyer , hides her new form from the organics once again before floating off to check on the rest of her crew while they make their way back to Falcor , and regretfully further away from her ANDI .

Laying here for a moment, I stare up at the ceiling of the med bay with my thoughts on what's next. I have been so consumed with waking Rylie up from her coma that I haven't taken a moment to think about what happens when she does. Will she be scared of me? Want a place of her own? What is her story?

When I start to swing my legs off the cot, I find myself tangled up in a blanket. I shake my head as I uncurl myself, realizing I must have been so tired I simply didn't remember grabbing it. Looking around, all I see is a med bot in the corner, but it seems to be simply recharging. Then it hits me. I'm not sure how she did it, but there is only one being onboard constantly concerned about my welfare.

Groggily , I push myself up, grabbing a clean set of garments that the Destroyer must have acquired for me while I was resting. “ Destroyer , how long have I been out?”

“ Just a single darkness, it's still early.”

“ How is Ember ?”

“ The stasis chamber's reports have not changed since she was put under.”

“ ViN and the youngling?”

“ They are still at rest. Although I will say, the fetus is fascinating to watch. Sensors have been placed all around their quarters, their sole purpose is to record her every move. Initially , I did that for my own pleasure, as I'm captivated by the miracle of birth, but if anyone asks, I can truthfully tell them that we need to record this for

future generations.”

I can't help but smile at her open innocence. Destroyer , I understand completely. Will you arrange for sustenance to be delivered here? I'm eager to refocus my attention on my mate.

“ It will arrive shortly, Medic LeX .”

“ Oh , and thanks for the covering last darkness.”

“ You are most welcome.”

I eat while reviewing all the scans over the last rotation. Rylie actually moved her entire hand multiple times throughout the rotation and that is such good news. I have the med bots come in and exercise her muscles so that when she awakens, her body won't feel as sluggish. I have no idea if she has lost weight or muscle during her trip here as the pod's medical records were not even for her. The pod was originally set up for a male.

Resetting the sensory scanner, I lower it back to her head while adjusting my own. As soon as I see the lights turn green, I start reading to her once again.

From the moment she landed in my hands, all I can think of is how to keep her. I'm a freak; what the heck do I think I'm gonna do with a three-inch fairy? I mean yeah! She is beautiful, almost in a fake way. But she's a fairy, and I'm human. The size difference is a little overwhelming. I finally just get up. The stupid stuff running through my head is driving me crazy.

When I go into the bathroom to brush my teeth, I swear I hear a small jet engine in the other room. I run out of the bathroom with my toothbrush still in my mouth, but I stop right at the door. There is a hummingbird flying around Petal . Tagon is

watching from the windowsill. The little bird lands softly on the fabric close to the bloom and leans in toward Petal . I start to rush over and shoo it away when I hear a voice in my head.

“ Randy , she is fine. Flutter is only bringing her breakfast.” It is Tagon’s voice I’m hearing. Holy crap, I can hear him in my head now.

Once again, my vision blurs, and I find myself somewhere else.

Chapter Eleven

RYLIE

Sitting under my tree looking around at everything and nothing, a sudden buzzing noise has me looking up. Swarming around all of the flowers are hundreds of hummingbirds. Their little wings beat furiously as they fly in and out of the many buds.

Smiling at the sight above me, I lean back so I can enjoy watching their movements and colors better. I have no idea how I know, but suddenly I'm not alone anymore. I catch the shadow appearing out of the corner of my eye, but I don't acknowledge him immediately. Then I wonder how I know it's a guy. A voice whispers in my mind, but once again it's hard to make out the words, that is until I address him directly. "You have been gone for much longer this time."

"Forgive me, I didn't want to leave you at all. Are you enjoying it here?"

"That's an odd question. Why would I not be, is this not where I should be?"

"We won't speak of it again. My name is LeX , what's yours?"

A buzzing close to my head has me glancing away from the shadow sitting next to me. He asked me a question, my name. Should I know this? Why does he care?

"Why do you care?"

“ I am simply trying to get to know you better. I was hoping to enjoy this world with you, it is very beautiful here.”

My world? Is this all mine ... I wonder? All he is doing is making me think, and I don't seem to care for that. I want to sit here and listen to the quiet words and watch the colors.

“ I have decided I don't want to discuss my world ... if it is mine. Can you hear the soft words? It's a story, but I don't know who or where it's coming from. Do you?”

“ I do ... if you come with me, I will show you.”

I see a shadowy hand reach out and for a moment it takes shape, appearing to be yellow in color, but I don't want to leave quite yet, so I ignore his gesture until his hand fades away. “ Did you know yellow's my favorite color?”

“ I did not, is this your favorite tree as well?”

“ I'm not sure, it seems oddly alive, a world of its own creation within itself. Its plentiful limbs, I feel, embody the many who have passed through our lives. The blooms opening and closing represent the relationships we've experienced as we walk our chosen path. The ones that have fallen to the ground ... show loss. Either a loved one or a forgotten friend. But the roots which we sit upon now, they are what keep us grounded on this long walk of life. You may stray away, but strong roots will always guide you back home.”

He doesn't say anything, just sits here with me and the words slowly surround me again.

The little bird turns and hovers right in front of my face, turning its head back and forth, looking at me curiously. “ Don't be rude Randy , tell her good morning!” I hear

Petal say.

“ Ohhh , good morning then.” I look down at Petal . “ Can she even hear me?”

“ Yes , silly man, she can.” She actually rolls her eyes at me.

“ Well , sorry if I’m not quite caught up with the whole fairy glen that I have here in my bedroom. You seem to know more about what’s goin’ on around here than I do. I think you’re just using me for room and board.” I laugh out loud. “ And why isn’t everyone, or should I say, why aren’t you or any of your flying friends here scared of me?”

“ I have watched you your whole life, Randy . I already knew your name. It just startled me, waking up with you standing over me. Now sit down. I’m breaking my neck, staring up at you.”

To be three inches tall, she sure is bossy. I sit down in the chair and pull it up as close as I can to Petal . “ What do you mean you have watched me my whole life?”

“ I have been in the fields for many seasons, I have gotten to watch multiple people come and go throughout the years. I actually remember the first time I saw you. You were much smaller than you are now, but compared to me, you were still huge. You were walking hand in hand with an older lady. Her long and beautiful hair extended all the way to her butt. She always smelled so good, like wild roses. She would come every spring and walk the fields. It was clear she enjoyed watching the flowers grow. I can remember you and a puppy running along with her and she would chase after you. I think I really remember the laughter the most.”

“ Do you know who the story is talking about?”

“ I believe it’s the main character’s grandmother. She seemed to enjoy a world

similar to yours as well.”

“ I’m delighted by the peacefulness for sure, but now I wonder why. Why can’t I see you?” Suddenly , something feels off, “ Maybe you should go away. I didn’t feel this way until you showed up.”

I can feel his distress like it’s my own and just as I start to reach out for him, the shadow is gone and so are the soft words. Rubbing my chest, I glance down at my fingers, noticing the tips of them are turning yellow. My mind brushes it off as pollen left over from all the yellow flowers around me. Wait a minute, look at all of them lying on the ground! Have I lost that many? Tired and confused, I lay down on the ground, something that suddenly feels hard where it was soft and comforting earlier.

Suddenly , my body jerks and I sit up, startled. I almost call out for the shadow, what was his name again? LeX . I don’t remember ever knowing anyone else by that name. Standing up, I take a moment to really look around when I realize I don’t recall any other names. The tree I am standing under is the same, but what was once a bright sky with billowy clouds has now darkened. Black clouds dim the area, and a cool wind blows, chilling my exposed skin.

Blinking , I hold the material out on the dress I have on; it’s made out of flowers. Have I had this on the entire time? I step back against the tree when I see lightning in the distance, realizing the tree is the only solid cover around. Sliding down, I lean against its trunk with my arms wrapped around my legs, rocking back and forth. I watch the storm in the distance until my eyes become heavy and the darkness pulls me back under.

Chapter Twelve

LEX

The last thing I expected was her asking me to leave. Aggravated , I yank the sensory scanner off my head and stand up. My fingers pull at the knots in my long hair as I pace around the end of her bed.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see her entire body jerk, but the sensors show no change other than that sudden movement. How am I going to wake her up if she doesn't want to leave? If I barge in, forcing her to realize that nothing around her is real, I could permanently harm her mind.

The med bot assigned to her starts to turn her over onto her side and that's when I see them. She has scales going all the way down the sides of her neck, fading out on the tops of her shoulders. She needs at least one more transfusion, but do I dare change her more? I never dreamed she wouldn't want anything to do with me. I simply assumed with us being mates she would have the same pull to me as I do her. What will I do if she hates me?

“ FRACK !” I scream out in frustration. These are emotions I do not know how to deal with. There is no book or holo search I can look at to provide me with any guidance on how to move forward. This is the only time I can recall ever needing instructions with the opposite sex.

I can't talk to ViN , he has enough on him right now. EvO's relationship is too new, and they have enough issues to work through. I could call Father and ask to talk to

Kira , but they have their hands full with an entire ship full of humans to deal with. My mind drifts through all my brothers realizing none of them have dealt with anything like this.

For once, the med bay door sliding open is a welcome disturbance from my dark thoughts and helplessness.

“ Brother , is she supposed to squirm around like this?” ViN’s booming voice almost has me concerned until I see a rare, but disturbing smile on his face as he points toward the fetus stretching on his side.

“ I would be more concerned if she was not moving.”

“ Do you know how hard it is to rest with her rolling around like she is having the time of her life in there? Just earlier, I had laid my arm against her, and she reached her little foot out and kicked me!”

I run my hand over the hardened area, amazed at how much softer it is now than it was originally. “ Has your hunger increased? Are you craving anything in particular?”

“ Meat , lots of it. I feel like I am always standing in front of the replicator looking for something else to devour.”

“ Did Ember experience anything similar?”

“ Her sustenance intake did increase, and I recall her telling me that anything sweet seemed to upset her stomach. I do not know how she rested for even a moment. The second I settle down, she gets all riled up. It’s like she wants to move all the time.”

“ Welcome to motherhood, brother.”

He growls and I can't help but laugh, especially when you can see the little one push on his side again. “ Does she react to your voice, or possibly music or particular sounds?”

“ I was playing some of Ember's obnoxious music earlier, simply because I have become used to it always being on. The silence in our quarters was bothering me, but she did actually seem to settle once it was on.”

“ It is likely that you are not the only one missing Ember . Even though you are now the one making sure she survives, Ember is the original vessel that created this life. It is possible she is restless because she misses her voice or even something else we cannot comprehend.”

“ Well , that is one thing me and the little one can agree on. Since the moment I found Ember , we have not been apart. I ache to simply hear her voice again. I had not realized how I had taken some of the small things for granted. Like feeling her cold feet in the darkness as she snuggled up to me, seeking out my warmth. Or her excitement over things that I consider mundane. I am thankful to be given this opportunity of having a young one, but I pray I will not lose my mate because of it.”

“ Ember is strong ViN ; she would have to be in order to put up with you. Not to mention the pain and suffering she was experiencing while carrying your child. A weaker being would not have lasted that long.”

“ Thank you brother, I needed your reassurance. I know this has been a trying time for us all. How is your own mate? Your stress is physically apparent to me.”

“ I have found a way to interact with her, or at least part of her active mind. But when she became confused, she asked me to leave. I have no path forward or anyone I can ask for guidance.”

“ Can you be there without her permission?”

“ Yes .”

“ Well , make her curious. Lead her out of that place, make her seek you out. If you have found one way to get her attention, then find something else that she enjoys. Do you have any information about her life before the pod?”

“ I am sure ANDI would have something.”

“ Then do what you do best ... research. I must go; I have been away from Ember long enough. I was simply hoping a change in scenery would help calm the little one down, but it is not like she can see what is going on around her yet.” ViN grasps me in his huge arms, hugging me tightly before turning to walk out of the med bay.

With a smirk on my face, I stand there, surprised to find the angriest among us is secretly a softy. “ Destroyer , can you contact ANDI directly?”

“ I can.”

“ Please tell him I am in need of his council about Rylie . I would like any and all records he might possibly have of her previous life.”

Moments later, a small form appears on the side of Rylie’s bed. “ ANDI , thank you for coming personally.” He takes his ridiculously large gray top hat off and bows to me.

“ Greetings Medic LeX . You were in luck with your timing. I was about to check on my Little Ray of Holographic Sunshine , Destiny , just as she contacted me for you. However , I should inform you that at this point, I will use any excuse to converse with her. Nevertheless , I am running out of inquiries, and I do not want her to think I

am being pushy.”

“Destiny?”

“Well, you all assigned her that horribly aggressive name of the Destroyer. Thankfully, Commander DaR is allowing her to change it to something more appropriate when she drydocks with Falcor. She has picked the name Destiny, and that is how I will address all this metal sexiness from this point on.”

I bite my lip to keep from laughing. “I was unaware of this, but I do agree with you ANDI, her name does not suit her personality. As I am sure you are aware, I am in need of your assistance when it comes to my mate. She seems to have created a world within her own mind that she is in no hurry to leave. Can you provide me with any information about her previous life that might help me lure her out?”

“Let me see,” He stands there quietly for a moment. “Ah yes, thankfully I am able to verify that she is indeed Rylie Elizabeth Hicks, approximately thirty-three years of age. Both parental units passed before earth was destroyed, and I have no siblings on record. She has several medical degrees, but this one in particular I believe will interest you the most. She was a surgeon in the maternity ward of her local hospital. That is only one of two medical degrees she had achieved; the more important one is in prenatal care. In other words, she had a lot of knowledge on the younglings and the skills to care for them and their mothers.”

“Wait, then how or why was she working in the Scientific center with Qwin?”

“The company records show she had an outstanding attendance and work record, up until she suddenly resigned and relocated to a different part of her state. They do not tell me what or why, simply that one day she packed up everything and left the area. I am sorry I cannot provide you with a more detailed history.”

“ No , I appreciate you taking your time to come here personally. It wasn't the help I was hoping for, but any information is better than none. How are the humans adjusting in your care?”

“ Some better than others. I understand why the scientists took such extreme measures to save the Human race, but I do not think they thought past that point. Some will never adapt LeX , and I feel those will be the ones that have it the hardest moving forward. MeK is en route to their new habitat, but he is not the most personable. I have asked Commander DaR to see what other sons or acquaintances might be in or around the area that could help quicken the reconstruction of their world and possibly make their views of other races more common and less terrifying. He was reaching out to several others when Destiny commed me.”

“ I know KyT and BuK's home planets are close to that sector, they might be able to help out. I have not seen KyT since our holiday dinner several orbital rotations ago. He is not one to leave his home planet frequently, but that is common in our family. Some of us are just closer than the others. Please keep me posted if it is not too much trouble ANDI .”

“ It will be my pleasure Medic LeX , and I wish you great success with your mate and her speedy recovery. During this spare moment, I will chat with my Little Beam of Light in the sky.”

I just shake my head when ANDI pops out of existence. I do believe that male could give the rest of us pointers on how to sweet talk our mates. With no other course to follow, I sit down to initiate the last transfusion. Once we are hooked up, I settle the scanner on my head and pick up the holo pad.

I feel a small hand on my nose. “ Hey , you still in there?” Petal is trying to get my attention.

“ I’m sorry, I zoned out on you. That just brought back so many memories. The puppy’s name was Rocky . He always played with me when I was little. Man , I loved that dog. He wasn’t a puppy though, he just thought he was. He has been gone for years. I never wanted another dog after him. Nothing could replace him in my eyes.”

“ I wondered why I hadn’t seen that puppy in quite a few seasons, and to think of it, I haven’t seen the older lady this last season. Is this why you’re so sad? Maybe you should cry. I have always felt better after a good one.”

“ Yeah , that was my grandmother, and she is the reason I have been so out of it this year. I miss her so bad, but I have never been much of a crier. My emotions never seem to come out that way. I tend to let things build up until they’re more in control of me than I am of them. But anyway, she would have loved you. We searched every year in the blooms, trying to find a fairy.”

“ We know, Spirit Mother always enjoyed the stories your grandmother told. A lot of evenings, when we were all settled down in the leaves for the evening, she would tell them to us. So , you see, I have been talking about you for seasons. I watched you grow up, more or less.”

“ How do you explain the 122-season thing? And don’t give me that look. I told you I was gonna have a hundred questions.”

“ Well , how do I make you understand?” She was tapping her finger on her forehead.
“ Ok , for example, at the end of a season, let’s say like spring, summer, or even when one falls too soon like I did. When we touch the ground, our spirits are absorbed back into the Earth . Spirit Mother keeps all of our spirits alive in her seeds for the next year, or should I say for her future blooms. When the time is right, Mother Earth pushes her essence out into the roots of all trees, including my Spirit Mother , and her essence brings the blooms back to life in the form of us.”

This time when I enter Rylie's world, it is not as vibrant as before, but her tree seems to be lit up from inside. I can see the tree's inner roots moving water and minerals all the way to the top of its canopy. The sight is beautifully odd and at first, I do not see Rylie right away as she is laying so close to its massive trunk, asleep. Deciding not to wake her, I walk over and sit by her side, watching her as she lays there peacefully. My eyes roam around the inner workings of her mind, wondering if this is a place she has been before.

“LeX is that you?” Her eyes are big like she has been startled suddenly.

“It is, are you well Rylie?”

“I don't know anymore, something is wrong. I keep having these terrible dreams and every time it happens, I see those dark clouds in the distance. They frighten me, and I don't know why. I have always enjoyed the smell of rain on a hot summer's day. The rain always seems to pass through the area, cleansing the world as it goes. Often, I wondered how far the rain clouds traveled only to decide to release their heavy load all around me. But those storms in the distance, they're bringing change.”

“Is that bad?”

“I don't like it; change always brings pain. My heart is heavy already, do you know why? I can't seem to remember, but I know it has something to do with these dreams.”

“Do you really want to know? To remember?”

“I feel like I should, but ... sometimes it's just easier not to. When I try to recall how I got here, there is nothing but blankness. So how do you recollect, or believe anything is real or make believe if there isn't anything to show you the way? I don't even know if this is real. It's like my dreams are having dreams or as if I'm stuck in

some sort of simulator. I wish someone would notice and turn it off. I grow tired of all this confusion.”

“ Rylie , this is your happy place. No one is pushing you to do anything, and you can stay here as long as you like; rest your thoughts until your mind clears. Would you like to take a walk with me?” She nods her head and this time when I reach my hand out, she puts hers in mine and I lift both of us to our feet.

We walk silently hand in hand for a while and I don’t push her to talk. I simply enjoy her company as we walk slowly. She doesn’t seem to notice that nothing is moving around us, that no matter where or how you look it’s all still the same. A small stream appears in front of me and as I glance down, I can see myself standing next to her clearly. I start to step back because I don’t want her to ask me to leave again, but I know she needs to face what’s coming.

Rylie leans down, her fingers pausing just above the water’s surface when she sees my reflection. She glances up, but I must appear differently in front of her than in the water.

“ LeX is this you in the water?”

“ Yes .”

“ You ... are yellow.”

“ Yes , I am.”

“ Are you sick?”

“ No , I am a healthy male.”

She bends down on one knee, brushing the water around until my reflection is gone, only to stop. At first, I thought she was going to ignore our differences. Now I realize she was simply making sure the image didn't change. Time seems to slow down as she stares at me, or the reflection of me on the water's surface. " LeX , you are not human, are you?"

" No , I am not."

" Should I be scared?"

" Do I make you feel uneasy? Because those are not my intentions."

" Intentions ? Why would you have those? I am nothing to you ... that I can recall, anyway. Wait , that's not right. Why am I suddenly so confused? You have always been a constant in my life and suddenly I'm looking at you like I have never seen you before. Are you sure I'm not sick?"

" I am not sure you are ready for all the truths right now. But I can assure you, there is nothing more important to me than you and your happiness. I will always be right here no matter what."

A flash of lightning in the distance makes her jerk, and she falls onto her butt. Gently , I bend down and pick her up, pulling her in close as the storm does look like it's getting closer. I expect her to push me away as she stares up at me, sure that what she is seeing now is not the same as it was in the water.

" You have been a shadowy figure in the background all this time, but now I can see faint colors throughout your frame. It seems like every time the storm gets closer, you become clearer, as do my thoughts."

" This is your world sweet one, you see what you want to. I have no control over it."

“ So then, where is your world?”

“ Behind that storm, I believe.” The very moment I say those words I find myself sitting in my chair next to her bed. Once again, she has forced me out. Sighing at my helplessness, I unhook the leads as the transfusion was done quite some time ago and redo her blood tests. Within a short tic, the results come back, showing all of her numbers are now in the green.

Her words and thoughts seem to be changing; even my mind is having a hard time keeping up. One moment I am a stranger, an alien ... the next she has known me forever. At this point, I am not sure who is more confused.

A few rotations back, I had the med bots pull some of my body’s pure essence out of my spinal cord and have had it in the cooler ever since, so it would be readily available for this moment. After retrieving the vial, I give the command for the med bots to hold her securely on her side, while I inject the larger than normal needle into her hipbone. The procedure is quite painful, so I’m relieved she’s still out; however, given my blood’s positive effect on hers, this should also be successful. If her body does not reject my essence, she will be cured of the pancreatic disorder that was slowly killing her organs, and her body should heal itself.

I have just finished the procedure when the Destroyers ’ voice rings out. “ Medic LeX , you are needed at Rafe’s residence. The female is sick and cannot seem to stop regurgitating her sustenance.”

Chapter Thirteen

RAFE

The sound of a tortured moan makes me jerk open my eyes, only to find myself still sitting on the floor where I sat down to rest earlier when EvO stopped by. Easing myself up, I massage my tailbone as I stand in the doorway, watching Cassandra roll and twitch in the bed. I wonder what personality I'll get when she wakes up this time.

Seizing the moment while she is momentarily asleep, I rush to the ionizer, shed my clothes, and savor the peace and quiet. I have no more than taken a breath when I hear the refreshing chamber's door slide open and just as I start to reach for the pants I had laid out, a naked body slides in with me. Cassandra's hands are instantly roaming over my chest as she smiles up at me.

“Hello handsome, where have you been my whole life?”

“On another planet ... Cassandra, we've had this conversation. We respect each other's naked space. I don't intrude on yours, and you let me have mine.”

“I don't remember agreeing to your terms, and you can be so stuffy sometimes. Are all hot alien guys like you? I mean, what's a girl have to do to get some attention around here? It's because you don't like me, isn't it? You liked that other girl more, didn't ya? I saw the way you were looking at her!”

“No, I did not, and I do not. You are making all of this up in your head, because you never gave me the opportunity to look at any of the others. Come on, let's get

dressed.” She wraps her arms around me, pushing her beautiful, full breasts into my chest, and I must fight my arousal as she uses it against me every time she notices how her body affects mine. Even though I love the feel of her skin against me, I unwind her arms and physically turn her away from me. Only for her to back up so that her luscious little ass is now rubbing along my now hard as a rock shaft.

“ Looks like someone likes me, so maybe I should stop talking to you and concentrate on him instead. He doesn’t seem to listen to you and all your absurd rules. I mean, you’re a mature person and I’m a mature person, let’s do what we really wanna do! Wait , you’re not married or something are you? Or maybe you’re not into girls? There has to be a reason you’re constantly turning me away.”

“ I have no mate, I prefer females, and my shaft does not control me, Cassandra . You need to get well and in order to do that, we need to get dressed and then get some sustenance.”

She turns back around, shoving me away from her. Her long, straight hair flowing around her like a sparkling cloud as she stares up at me in anger. Fighting to keep my eyes on her face, I almost miss her next words.

“ You are always bossing me around, Rafe . I am done with you. There has to be someone, or something else, on this ship that would appreciate little ol’ me. And I can have my pick of colors if I remember correctly. As soon as I get dressed, I’m leaving. I’m tired of constantly getting lectured. You are not my dad and you sure as hell ain’t my husband and still, all I hear is no, No , NO ! To be so cute, you sure are a bore.”

“ You are not going anywhere, Cassandra . We have talked about this; you are not yourself right now. When you are feeling better, we can see about other arrangements but until then, you are staying with me.”

“ God , I HATE YOU and your superiority complex! The alien super stud who thinks

he's god's gift, and his word is law. Well , you don't own me, and you don't know me either. What if what you think is broken in me is really who I am? For that matter, how have you convinced me that there is something wrong with me? I feel fine, and I've looked in the mirror, so I know I'm sexy as hell. Maybe there is something wrong with you and you're blaming it all on me?"

Suddenly she gets quiet and like a switch being flipped her entire personality changes again.

" Damn , you perv, how did I even get in here? What were you doing, hoping I would jump all over you just because you're naked? I can't deny you are quite handsome, in an odd way, but I don't just throw myself at guys. I thought we talked about this?"

" We did Cassandra , so please forgive me for being in your space. I am going to get dressed and prepare us some sustenance. I had extra garments made for you while you were sleeping. If you need any assistance, just yell."

" I believe I'm more than capable of dressing myself. What's your name again?"

" Rafe ."

" Why do I feel like I should know that? And who is this Cassandra you keep calling me?"

" That is your name."

" I think I'd know my own name!"

" Then what is it?"

I knew better than to ask, but I couldn't stop the words from spewing from my mouth.

The very tic she has to think about anything, it's like her mind crumbles. Instantly , huge tears well up in her eyes.

“ What's going on? Where am I ?”

Instead of answering her again like I have over and over for the last few rotations, I grab my pants and walk out of the room. Normally it takes at least half a rising for me to see this many personalities come out of her, but this time she seems to be experiencing them all rapidly. Every time she opens her eyes, I pray she is getting better but so far, it's a rerun of the rotation before.

My mating instincts are riding me to finish our bond, but I would rather go mad than do that to her in this state. The first few risings, my shaft was constantly hard, and she pushed every button I had as she tried to wear my resistance down with all her charms. Never could I have dreamed, I would have to shove my own mate away, but that seems to be all I am doing. Pushing , when all I really want to do pull her into my embrace.

She is everything and more than my simple mind could have imagined. Long feminine muscular legs, wide hips, bountiful breasts. A seductive smile that melts my heart every time she turns it on me. A heart-shaped face that frames flashing blue eyes that now haunt my dreams every time I close my eyes. My fingers ache to run their way through her long, silken locks of hair, but it's that mouth of hers that keeps me in line every time I feel my resistance fading.

The moment her eyes seem clear, and I believe the drugs have left her system, she opens her mouth and another strange creature evolves. I know enhancements can and do make you act in countless different ways, but there is no way possible this little human could have so many sides to her personality.

Deep in my own thoughts, I head over to my private nourishment prep area. This is

the one place in my suite of rooms that I designed personally, as cooking reminds me of home. Opening the cooler, I grab a few ingredients, working instinctively as my thoughts return to the crying female I left sitting in the refreshing chamber. I can still hear her sobs clearly, and that makes me pause in the middle of cutting up some of the tubers I so enjoy.

Refusing to give in, I focus on the task at hand as this is not a meal I have prepared for her as of yet. Just as I am placing the meal in its appropriate glassware, she comes strolling in wearing one of my shirts.

“ Cassandra , I provided you with your own clothing.”

“ They’re itchy and I like yours better.”

Instead of arguing with her, I motion for her to sit down and place the plate in front of her. “ Here , try this. It was a favorite of mine as a youngling.”

“ You talk so weird sometimes.” She pushes the tubers around her plate, but nothing I put in front of her seems to catch her interest as she tells me constantly that she is not hungry. I can see how frail she is becoming as the lack of nutrients, and the drugs are putting a strain on her already weak system.

“ Try to consume what you can Cassandra , you need the sustenance.”

“ What I wouldn’t do for a fudge round and a Pepsi . This stuff tastes like dirt.”

I know she is simply striking out, so I don’t say anything back, but after a little bit I realize she isn’t wrong; this does somewhat taste like dirt. Pushing my plate away, I walk back to the cooler, pulling another package out. I notice immediately that there are small black specks on the interior of the carton.

“ Destroyer , can you tell me if these have gone bad?”

Just as I turn to tell Cassandra to stop eating it, a small female hologram appears in the air in front of us. Being used to SAGE popping in and out, I do not think much about it. I am not prepared for Cassandra’s violent reaction.

“ What in the fuck is that?” Her plate flies by my head, food scattering everywhere as she swats at the Destroyer .

“ Master Rafe forgive me for popping in unannounced.” The Destroyer’s form flickers in and out each time Cassandra tries to knock her out of the air. Before I can even make it around the counter, she has picked up a pillow and tosses it into the air aggressively.

“ There is a talking ghost floating right in front of you, ... don’t you see it , Rafe ?? Help , someone ... she is here to take my soul!”

I grab her around the waist. “ Stop it, Cassandra ! What in the universe has sparked this reaction out of you? That is simply the Destroyer in a holographic form.”

All of a sudden, she goes limp in my arms, and I hear, “ I’m going to be sick.”

Before I can move, she spews all that she has just eaten all over me and the floor. Even though the smell instantly turns my own stomach, it’s the specks of red blood covering her chin that worry me the most. Rushing her to the refreshing chamber, I quickly start trying to clean her up, only for her to start vomiting again. “ Talk to me Cassandra , did the sustenance make you sick?”

“ It hurts.” That is all I hear as she bends over, holding her stomach as tears flow down her cheeks. Just as I manage to change her into something else, it starts all over again. “ Destroyer , get LeX here quickly.”

Lowering both of us onto the floor, I pull her into my lap, rocking her slowly as she grips her stomach so hard, she must be bruising herself. “ Try to breathe through the pain, Cassandra .”

“ Here it comes again,” she growls out. Lifting her small form, I gather her long locks in my hand as her body shakes uncontrollably and she dry heaves into the waste receptacle.

I hear the outer door ding and then slide open. “ Rafe ?”

“ We are back here!”

LeX’s hurried footsteps head our way, just as Cassandra once again starts to retch, but this time it’s nothing but blood. LeX is standing over my shoulder instantly.

“ Hold on little female, I have just the thing to make you feel better.”

I watch as he lays his medical bag on the floor. Taking a suppressor needle, he injects the side of her neck with something. She is so weak she doesn’t even make a noise. I feel her body start to relax under my hands and I lean her back against me, just as a med bot starts cleaning the area around us.

“ How long has this been going on?”

“ LeX , it came on so suddenly. She was fighting the Destroyer one moment, then the next, this is what occurred.

“ What ?”

“ She thought the Destroyer’s holographic form was a ghost, whatever that is?”

The Destroyer's new form pops up in front of us. "Forgive me Medic LeX , for not appearing to you as well. Because my appearance mirrored other female crew members, I had hoped to reassure her; however, she attacked me. I was truly worried for myself and her welfare."

"I forgive you Destiny . By the way, you are quite lovely in your new form. I am sure you simply startled the female, and that she didn't mean anything negative about you."

LeX reaches out to put his hand on Cassandra's forehead and shakes his head. "How are you feeling now?"

"Tired , and I'm cold all over."

Standing , I pick both of us up off the floor, cradling her close to my chest as I head back to my sleeping platform. When I go to put her down, she will not release the vest I have on. "Please , I only feel better when you're holding me."

LeX follows us into the room, reading something on his holo pad. "The withdrawals are weakening her system, so I wish there was a way to speed this up. Med bot tests on the fluids she evacuated reveal lower narcotic levels, but this doesn't explain the blood."

"I think the sustenance I fixed for us was bad; the spores on the tubers may have caused this reaction."

"To be safe, I believe that theory requires additional testing. We will give her a moment to rest before moving her again." Just as he is walking out of the room to give us some privacy, the Destroyer pops back in.

"Medic LeX and Master Rafe , I was told to inform you of the following once her

blood tested at this level. SCOUT was reviewing records from Earth and some of the methods they used to force invasive drugs out of one's system. He provided me with the chemical makeup, and I could have the substance ready for you shortly, if you would like to proceed. However , there are a few drawbacks. She will be in extreme pain for several hours, but that may be manageable since right now your mate bond, even though one sided, is helping her."

" What is the benefit of putting her through this, Destiny ?"

" Within a rising, her system will be free of all the unwanted drugs, and the withdraws will stop altogether. In other words, she will return to her drug free self."

" LeX what do you think?"

" My mate is not the one it is affecting."

" How much longer do you think it will take for her to fight this off on her own, naturally?"

" It is hard to tell as her body has become accustomed to the drugs being in her system, and it could permanently change her the longer it takes. The blood you just saw is proof of the effects it is having on her internally. It's eating away at the lining in her stomach and other organs; it was not the nutrients you served her even though they were on the verge of spoiling."

" Already she is struggling with her emotions and how to handle them. I do not want to make it worse. What would you do?"

" I would want that crap out of my mate as quickly as possible."

" Destroyer , Destiny whoever you are now ...mix up whatever it is."

Moments later, a small female holo form appears, with a med bot following behind. “ Master LeX , you will have to administer this to her. Originally it was meant to be drunk, but I do not believe she will be able to keep it down in her fragile state.”

This entire time, Cassandra has been hanging limply on me. Her eyes are glazed and unfocused, like she is asleep and awake at the same time. “ What did you give her LeX ?”

“ Just something to calm the nausea, but it may be reacting with something else already in her system. We will have to be careful with any future medications as her body seems to ingest them unfavorably. Hold her still because I have no idea if this will be painful or not.”

I grasp her to me a little tighter, her eyes never leaving mine the entire time LeX is giving her the shot. “ Hey , you with me in there?” I shake her gently.

“ You are so pretty, and I tried to stay, but I don’t like this new world. I want to go home. ... Remember me.” Those are her last words right before her eyes roll back in her head and she goes limp.

LeX’s hand is on my arm immediately. “ She is fine, Rafe . It is just the medication talking. What if you bring her to medical where I can monitor her better? Give yourself the rest of this rising off. You look as exhausted as she does.”

“ No ! I mean I’m fine; I do not want her to wake up in a strange place without me there.”

“ That is understandable. I will go ahead and prepare her bed. This process will likely be easier on her if you are in the bed with her anyway, so I will have two pushed together. She is reaching for you now even in her unconscious state. Give me a few ticks before heading to medical.”

Out of the corner of my eye, I see LeX leave, but my full attention is on the small hand grasping my wrist to her chest. Hugging her tight, I allow myself a moment to fall apart, as my own tears splash upon her cheek. When I feel her twitch underneath my fingertips, I stand up, adjusting her insignificant weight effortlessly in my arms and head for LeX , and the med bay, not caring if anyone witnesses my only weakness. The female in my arms.

Chapter Fourteen

RAFE

I never, ever want to relive this darkness again and if I could erase it from my memories forever, I would. I should have known it wouldn't be easy, because nothing ever is. Even after witnessing so much lately, nothing could have prepared me for the helplessness of watching her scream and fight against the restraints.

Several times it has taken LeX and I both, with all our strength, to hold her down. I have cleaned her body's waste and had to change her garments multiple times simply from the sweat and foul liquids that are seeping out of her skin. The last half of this darkness, I sit beside her bed, nervously resting my head on my knees as I watch her every movement.

LeX's appearance beside me has me striking out. He ducks out of the way just in time, as I barely stop myself from hitting him. "Sorry , I ..."

"It is fine Rafe , we are all on the edge. She seems to finally be calming down."

"I thought that the last time as well. What have we done to her LeX ?"

"I do not believe SCOUT would lead us wrong when it comes to your human's health or wellbeing, Rafe . With his help, I have been able to break through to my own mate several times. Medically , that should not be possible, but he has opened my eyes to looking outside the journals and technology of modern medical procedures. He gave me direction when I had no path forward. He gave us an option,

and we took it, hoping it would play out in her favor in the long run.”

“ You are right LeX . I am just trying to find something or someone to blame all this on. I just cannot believe she would have willingly done this to herself back on her world. Who would intentionally poison their body, knowing it will not function long at that level? Why would you put yourself through the highs and lows? I just cannot understand.”

“ The pod said it was hers, but something seems off on the data we downloaded on several of them. It did not help that we had to disperse them back into space so quickly, either. If we had more time, I believe we could have pulled more information from their data banks. Wait a moment, ANDI said something that caught me as odd earlier. He said that he could confirm my mate’s name was Rylie . Maybe we should have him look into yours?”

“ I would prefer she opened up to me herself when she is ready. One way or another, it makes no difference to me who she is ... she is mine no matter her name or circumstances.”

“ She is lucky to have you, Rafe . I know that your relationship has not started out on the best of terms, but the Lord of Light led you both here. You have to believe in that when all seems lost.”

“ Is that what you are doing?”

“ It sounds good when I say it to you, but I am genuinely struggling. I feel like she is reaching out to me, and I have no idea how to free her from her own mind. I keep asking the same question over and over; what am I missing?”

“ LeX , I never saw a female in my future. My position and this ship were fulfilling enough. But now that I have her, I am not sure what I will do if she rejects me.”

“ Our minds are one and the same Rafe . All we can do is try our best and hope that it works out in the end. Look , her scans are changing.”

Standing up, I walk around the bed to peer at the screen closer. Things that were clearly in the red are slowly moving in the other direction. She is going to be ok. If LeX had not been standing next to me, I might have collapsed right there on the floor.

“ Rafe , I do believe she is through the worst of it. Get some rest while you can. I have a feeling that the female you have been dealing with is not the one that will awaken in about half a rising.”

I lay down next to her on top of the light covering even though I know I should keep my distance. She may wake up and remember everything, or she might simply be in a haze. I won't miss the constant up and down emotional swings, but I am terrified she will be scared of me and the others once she is thinking clearly.

I felt like I have just closed my eyes when something wakes me. Turning my head, I am shocked to see two bright blue eyes staring back at me. All the words and the questions rush to my head, but I hold back, waiting for her response. Will she even remember me or how she came to be here?

“ Hi ” she whispers, and I swear tears form in my eyes. Blinking them away, I turn over to face her, reaching for her hand slowly.

“ How are you feeling?”

“ Better ... worse.”

“ Do you remember me?”

“ Yeah , well, not clearly, just bits and pieces. But I know you've been by my side

since I got here. I will say, I was a little startled when I woke up and found you lying next to me, though. I'm not sure if what is going on is real, or if I'm still dreaming or dead."

" Oh , you are very much alive, and I am real. It is normal to question things after everything you have been through. The drugs in your system didn't help either."

" Drugs ? I don't take drugs ... most of the time I can't even have a basic Tylenol for a headache; my system doesn't handle them well."

" That explains a lot and is a relief to hear. Are you hungry or thirsty? What can I do for you to make you more comfortable, Cassandra ?"

" I wouldn't mind some water, but why do you keep calling me by that name ... Cassandra ? I can remember asking you that many times already."

" That is what you said it was."

" My name is Mandy . I wondered when I woke up if I would tell the truth or the lie."

" I think you need to start from the beginning. We have danced around enough with each other and gone through too much for any more lies. How did you end up in that pod if you are not Cassandra Longley ? What is your full name? I know humans are assigned one at birth."

" Mandy Rose Weaver , from Ohio . It's nice to meet you officially Rafe , whatever your last name is, what's your story?"

" I am addressed as Rafe , acting general and pilot of the Destroyer aka Destiny , Son of Aden of Darverius and grandson of Elder Radul ." Her eyes get bigger the longer my title goes on.

“ Wow , you must be important! How did you end up stuck with me; was it just because I was so much fun?”

“ Mandy ...that name is going to take me a few tries to get correct, so don't get aggravated with me if I slip up and call you Cassandra by mistake, but I did not nor do I want you just for fun or even temporarily. I want to make you feel happy, secure, and appreciated forever if you will give me that chance.”

“ Those are pretty strong words there, Rafe . I have been alone for a very long time, with no one to depend on but myself, so you will also have to be patient with me. Technically , I should probably be flipping out right now. I don't know if it's what has happened to me in the last few days, making my memories about everything seem fuzzy, but you're an alien.”

“ No , you are the alien. One I am very grateful we were able to find, along with quite a few others of your kind. Once you are feeling better, there are several females on board I know would be delighted to spend time with you.”

“ Yeah , well, I never was one of the popular kids, so I'm in zero hurry to continue that trend. I have so many questions for you, however, I have no idea where to start, and I don't want you to feel like you're responsible for me, either. I appreciate everything you have done for me, and I know there were several times I made you feel uncomfortable. Unfortunately , those moments I vividly recall. Nothing like humiliating yourself, but I will say my actions were not normal as I'm typically awkward and shy with guys.”

“ Mandy , let's clear this up immediately. At no point now, before, or in the future are you or will you be a burden. There is no hurry to do anything, and I am even free of duties for the next couple of risings. What I would enjoy is getting to know you ... the real you better. I want to know where you come from, and what made you get in that pod? If you could ever look at me as something more than an alien, or a

caretaker? Will you give me, us that chance?”

This time when she smiles it is different even from before. It is like I am laying here with a person who looks the same but is completely different than what I have become accustomed to. The crazy part is now that the drugs are gone from her system, her natural smell is driving me wild. I must tuck the covering between us so that she won't feel just how aroused I am.

“Destiny, would you please have one of the med bots bring us some refreshments and possibly something soothing and light for Cass I mean Mandy, to eat?”

“It will arrive shortly Master Rafe and Mandy, I am pleased you are feeling much better.”

Mandy is looking around, trying to find the voice surrounding us. “What in the ever loving hell was that?”

“The ghost that was going to take your soul.” When she pulls the coverings up over her head, I actually laugh, my heart lightened by her discomfort at her previous actions. “Our ship is becoming more sentient each rising; at the moment she is going by two different names. The Destroyer and Destiny. The small female figure you saw earlier in my quarters was her appearing as Destiny. She was distressed that you were not comforted by her appearance. While we are waiting, tell me how you came to be in that pod.” Tugging the covering off her face, it's nice to see the natural blush of her cheeks.

“It's not a very glorious story, Rafe. The final days were incredibly chaotic; to what extent you're familiar with them, I'm not sure. I'll never forget where I was when they broadcast that we were on our own because the Earth was slowly destroying itself. I was standing in a convenience store getting snacks to hold me over for the weekend, something I rarely had off from the restaurant I had been working at since I

was a kid. In my eagerness to read the new alien pirate book I had just download, I didn't even notice the store's blaring TV at first. When everyone suddenly got quiet, I knew something was really wrong.

For months, we had been having crazy storms all over the place. Earthquakes in places where they'd never had any, rain in the deserts, snow in the middle of summer; you had no idea how to dress or prepare daily. I will honestly say, I didn't take the warnings seriously when they were first issued. I live in a small town; up a dead-end road and it was like the worst of it seemed to go around me.

It wasn't like I could do anything about it either way, nor did I have anywhere else to go. I mean, I wasn't broke. I had money thanks to Mom and Dad , but there was nowhere to go that was going to be safe, especially for a woman traveling alone. So , I decided to stay home with my cat and ride it out. I was off the main road quite a ways, so I knew most would simply pass on by if they did come in my direction.

Now I realize how stupid I was. Anyway , everyone knew about the pods and we also understood that unless you were a millionaire or someone important, you were not going to get one of those. Truthfully , when it leaked out about what was going to happen with them, I was not a fan. The very thought of being shot into space with no idea if you would be saved, or never waking up again, was terrifying. Oh , how quickly the mind changes on things.

Anyhow , the pods were not an option for me, but then there was a national lottery held, and my social security number was selected. I can remember sitting next to the radio listening to the numbers, hoping but not allowing myself to believe I had a chance. I stood there completely overwhelmed when I realized I was one of the few hundred who were going to be given a chance to survive what they were calling a planet-killing storm. Once our numbers were verified, we were provided with the location to an underground bunker in West Virginia and a time frame to appear, but they were not providing us with any assistance to get there.

I dumped out all the cat food I owned, opened the front door of the house so Dixie would have the run of the place, packed a backpack, and took off on foot. I was able to hitchhike several times even though there were very few running vehicles left because of a worldwide gas shortage. Thankfully , the location was only several hundred miles away, but the closer I got, the more violent everyone was getting. I was told that under no circumstances was I to provide anyone with my actual destination, and I was quick to understand why. The locals especially knew the government had built a structure in the area, but most were unaware of its exact location. So , the moment they saw a stranger they would start following them.

The few times I was stopped to ask where I was going or my name, I lied every time. At night, I found places to hide or lock myself in, but I don't think I really slept. Every noise meant potential death, especially for a woman traveling alone.

The storms seemed to be following me and simply making it a few miles each day was pushing it. It didn't help that the mountains of West Virginia are ... were massive, so I was stuck traveling the highways with everyone else.

Now , one thing the entire world knew was that the pods were being built in a non-transmission zone. Ironically , it was the previous location of a facility that at one time scanned the heavens for alien life. Kinda funny now ... Anyway , I was just walking into another random, small town with a group of other travelers when a fancy sports car flew by us. I barely made it out the way as it come speeding by, my eyes just noticing a woman driving.

I can remember stopping to readjust my backpack straps when I heard the sound of metal hitting metal. Her driving style immediately made it clear to me that it had to be her. As I walked up the road, I expected a first responder or someone to come racing up the highway to help her. It's amazing how you depend on those things until they no longer exist.

When I came around the next bend, my heart hit my throat when I saw she had hit an abandoned tractor. Her tiny sports car was practically wrapped around the back of it. I don't remember running or what, but I do recollect struggling to get the driver's door open. When I did, her purse fell out at my feet, but it was too late for her. She had been impaled by a piece of the tractor.

She was still breathing, so I tried my best to comfort her in her last moments. Since she kept asking, I remember picking up her purse and giving it to her. She had enough life left in her to hand me her badge, telling me to take her place in the pods."

"How did you pass as her? Did you look similar?"

"No, not at all! But there was no picture on the badge she was given to show at the gate. They simply took me at my word and walked me right up to the pod. Shoved a few IVs in me along with my backpack and that's the last thing I remember clearly. I do recall you waking me up and the fact that I've been here with you ever since."

"What changed your mind about the pods?"

"A feeling really. I can recall standing there holding the badge in my hand, torn on whether to try and make it the next fifty miles to the bunker or leave the planet altogether. I could see the pods launchers standing high in the distance. A group of people came around the bend just about the time the earth seemed to rumble under my feet. I was terrified when trees and rocks started falling off the mountains all around us, but the worst part was the humans who stopped to loot the now dead woman's car. They treated her like she never existed, and I knew right then there was no reason for me to stay. I simply walked off calmly while they were distracted. The moment I was out of their sight, I ran with everything I had toward those towers, and the rest is history. Here I am."

The med bot rolls up next to the sleeping platform as most of the medical equipment

detaches from the bed. A tray is lowered from the ceiling, and it places several dishes on there before backing away, closing the door to this chamber as it leaves. Setting the covers to the side, I help Mandy get situated so she can drink an energizing beverage while I eat a few of the small pieces of fruit. I can tell the flushing of the drugs from her system has taken its toll on her body as she trembles weakly. “ You were very brave, Mandy . I am not sure what course I would have taken in those circumstances.”

“ Well , I’m still not sure if it was the right one, but I’m here now, wherever that is. At least on Earth , I knew what was expected of me. I’m kinda at your mercy now Rafe , and I’m not sure how to feel about that.”

“ The first step forward is always the hardest. This rising you are unsure and before you know it, you will be comforting another in the same mind space. You don’t have to figure it all out right now, Mandy . We have several rotations before we dock with one of the main ships in this solar system called Falcor . Why don’t we take this opportunity to get to know one another better and see if we can make you more comfortable in this environment? Even though it would tear me apart because I have become quite attached to you, if you decide you don’t want to stay on the ship with me, I’ll understand. You do have other options. The other survivors of your world are settling on a planet in a private part of this sector. If you would prefer to go there, I will not stop you, but I won’t promise that I’ll not follow.”

“ I’ve been alone most of my life, Rafe . My parents were older, so I was never allowed to do things that most people my age were experiencing. They sheltered me terribly and by the time I had my freedom, I was older and had become comfortable with my own company. I tried dating several times, but never clicked with anyone in particular. Even though I was acting out of character, you’re the first guy ... alien who I didn’t feel like I needed to hold back who I was or wanted to be. You would really follow me ... even with the way I have acted all this time?”

“ Absolutely . I too have dated, as you call it, and have felt something for others, but never found that one person I wanted to keep, until you.” When a tired yawn escapes her lips, I adjust the covers, clear away the tray, and pull her close. Her head settles on my chest as my arm encircles her. “ Rest Little Suit , we have eternity to figure it all out; we don’t have to do it all in one rising.”

“ You won’t leave me?” she whispers.

“ Never , and that is a promise.”

It does not take long for her breaths to even out and I send out a prayer thanking the Lord of Light for giving me this moment in time. For sending her to me, for seeing her through the poison in her system, and for allowing me the opportunity to truly make her mine, forever. The comfort of having her in my arms and the quiet of the room settle my troubled thoughts and I end up drifting into a peaceful sleep.

The Destroyer , aka Destiny turns the monitors off in the room, allowing them some privacy. Her data system is rereading all the words spoken between the two organics, her many processors storing the information for later use as each one seems to be teaching her something new. The needs and wants of the organics at one time puzzled her, but now it simply makes her wish for the same. If SAGE and SCOUT can have a piece of that happiness, then she sees no reason why she cannot either. As soon as her knowledge becomes greater, she will approach the one who has encouraged her all along to be more than a simple metal ship with no thoughts or emotions of her own. ANDI . If someone as complex as Master Rafe can find happiness, then there is hope for all in this world.

Chapter Fifteen

LEX

The moment I see Rafe's female's scans returning to normal, I excuse myself to give them some privacy.

My heart and mind could physically feel the pain the human female was projecting. Making me realize quickly that the ordeal with Rafe and his mate is something I never want to experience again. I don't know if I could have held up as strongly as Rafe has in the same circumstances. I have never been one to run from any situation, but the helplessness I felt as we watched that little female struggle tore me apart inside.

"Medic LeX , Master Rafe , and his mate have both eaten and are now resting. I have set the room to private."

"Thank you, Destiny ."

Giving myself a moment to catch my breath, I am glad I don't have to go back into that room. Slowly , I begin cleaning and reorganizing the neglected items I've used in the past few risings. I know I need to check on ViN and his youngling as well, but at the moment, I am simply trying to enjoy the quiet. This is something it seems my mate and I both crave deeply in our shared existence, peace, and silence.

Once everything is back in place and I have logged all the things that need to be replaced when we dock, I walk over to my own mate, noticing immediately that her

coloring has changed even more and how her scales now match my own. It's the same as if she had been born a LeXorkon , and her body recognized mine as a potential partner.

I wish there was a way to know ahead of time her reaction to this very noticeable change in her appearance. She is the same, but different at the same time. The holo pad sitting on the stand next to her bed flickers off and on. The story I was reading to her reminding me there is still much to be told, but I wonder if I can reach her any another way. Turning the scanners on, I lower myself down in my chair and close my eyes. My mind silently seeks her out, only for nothing to happen. I am just about to admit defeat when suddenly I find myself in another place, but this time it is not like before.

My mate is sitting in a large chair with a youngling in her arms, humming a song as she stares down at it with a soft smile on her face. Looking around, I find that there are several more younglings in square containers all around her; this must be a nursery. Confused , I try to walk closer, but something holds me back. It is like I am standing outside her body, looking in. It also takes me a moment to realize she is dressed differently. Her hair is pulled back tightly instead of its usual loose curls, and she is wearing spectacles. Rylie hands the baby to another woman who has just come in, and after a brief conversation, she exits the room. I turn to follow her when an alarm goes off and I see her turn back for the nursery she just exited. Suddenly , all the younglings start to fuss, and I can tell this is not normal.

Rylie rushes over, hitting the door, but it's locked from the inside. She starts motioning to the female on the other side who I can tell is terrified and unprepared for what is happening in the now sealed room. I cannot hear their words; it is like I am watching a silent holo pad reenactment. That is when it dawns on me, she is either dreaming or reliving this.

Then she turns from this room, running down the long hall. I follow her. She yells at

others dressed the same as she is, and I notice they all take off in different directions. Rylie starts slamming and locking doors as she goes. Suddenly , I hear the cries of younglings all around me. Several humans venture out to see what is going on and she motions for them to return to their rooms. I can tell she is frantic as the cries down the long hall only get louder.

Flashes of time start to speed by, and I watch as humans come and go. Several desperate parents try multiple ways to break down the door of the nursery, but the structure holds strong. Even though I feel like something is keeping me separated from all I am witnessing, I am still able to lean in closer to the younglings. Many now have marks all over their skin, and I can feel the heat coming off their small bodies. The poor things have all become infected with something that is spreading quickly throughout this building. The medical center's attempt at containing the disease is futile as it seems to be attacking all the younglings at once.

Despite the exhaustion and illness evident in her trembling frame, the woman in the nursery cradles the crying babies close, her every moment devoted to the little ones under her care. Her strength and dedication bring tears to my eyes, as her complete focus has been on the younglings this entire time. Suddenly , another one lets out a particularly loud cry, then everything seems to go eerily silent.

It feels like time folds in on itself, and I watch as several of the nurses also become sick with whatever ailment infected all the younglings. Risings come and go, and the rooms keep getting quieter until there is only one left in Rylie's arms. I now realize that no matter how or what she tried to do, this disease has done the unthinkable. I watch my mate collapse when this little one goes quiet as well. She has not left this place the entire time; her commitment to the nurses and the families in this facility has become her entire focus even as her own health is fading rapidly.

In the middle of this horror, I hear thumps against the outer locked doors. Loud , angry words can be heard all around me, but I cannot make them out clearly.

When my mate's eyes roll back in her head and she collapses onto the floor, there is no one left to help. I try my best to go to her, but it's like an invisible wall is holding me back. My fists bang against the obstacle separating me from her, only to stop when I see someone, or something enter the hall covered from head to toe in what appears to be a contamination suit.

They check all the younglings first, then I watch helplessly as they finally make their way to Rylie . Horrified , I scream out her name when it looks like they are just going to leave her lying there. Abruptly , I hear my voice echo throughout the valley where her mind now resides.

“ LeX ?”

I hear her soft voice in my mind as I look around frantically for her, only to find her sitting under the tree, twirling a yellow flower in her hand. I don't know how I got here, but I find myself grabbing her up in my arms. Holding her slightly away from me, my hands run over her slim form. “ You are all right, you are all right.” I just keep saying those words over and over until her small hand touches my face.

“ Hey , are you ok? I can finally see you ... WOW ! The gods got creative when they formed you didn't they? Look at all that hair, I'm envious.”

Her words barely sink into my mind as all I can see are her labored breaths as she lay on that floor alone, only moments from death. What happened? Should I ask her? The need to know more only stirs up more questions in my mind, but would the memory cause her more harm than good?

“ Shush LeX , take a deep breath, I'm fine. You scared me when you suddenly appeared in the field screaming my name.”

“ I saw something horrible, and I could not get to you. But you are here now and in

my arms ... that is all that matters. Wait , did you say you can see me now?"

“ I can, and I didn’t realize we were the same. For some reason, I thought we were different, but I don’t know why. Look , we have the same scales and everything. Where do you go when you leave me? I feel like I’m always looking for you.”

“ To another place that needs me. I wish you would come with me ... It would make me so happy.”

She looks confused for a moment before a smile forms on her face. I trace the scales along her hairline as she looks up at me so trustingly. “ You made this place for me didn’t you, so that I would have a safe place to be when others need you? You are just teasing me about leaving.”

I know not what to say; do I tell her or act this out? Lord of Light I have never been so confused. Tired of thinking, I pull her into me slowly, giving her plenty of time to push me away. But she shocks me once again by raising up on her toes, meeting me halfway. Her lips are softer than anything I could have ever imagined. Her breath mingling with my own makes my scales flutter, and just as I start to deepen the kiss, I find myself sitting next to the bed again.

It takes a moment for me to realize what just occurred, and then all I want to do is sling this scanner off my head. “ FRACK !” I yell out, before getting up to pace the room once again. I do not know what is worse, being able to hold her in my dreams or not at all. Either way, my shaft is standing at attention again. Embarrassed by my lack of control, I button up my lab coat the rest of the way down to hide it.

“ Destiny , can you see if ANDI , or SCOUT are available for council?"

Before I can turn around, ANDI is floating in front of me. “ Medic LeX , how may I be of assistance?"

“ I know you told me that you only had limited information about Rylie , but I think I may have seen something that happened to her that probably put her on the path that led her here. Do you not have records of patients or anything distinctive that might have happened at that medical center she worked at before the Scientific Center ?”

“ Give me a moment and let me see if I can pull anything up. ... Medic LeX , there are some discrepancies in the download. If you could give me something more identifiable, I may be able to find additional information through another channel.”

“ I believe she quit her job like you said because something specific happened. I saw a moment in her life where she was taking care of a group of younglings. They got really sick and even though I cannot confirm it, the outcome did not look positive.”

“ Ahhh yes, ... Let me provide you with some history of what was going on at the time the Earth decided it had enough. As you know, with every race, there is always a set of scientists somewhere, trying to save the world. This is simply one of those cases. A few believed the reason the Earth was reacting the way she was is because of its overpopulation. Several facilities released viruses, and while some attacked older individuals, the worst one concentrated on the young. Thousands of younglings were affected and, if my records are correct, Mistress Rylie’s hospital experienced one of the first outbreaks.

Very few little ones survived in or out of the womb. Rylie was lucky not to have perished herself. I can provide you with more detailed information now that we have narrowed it down to a specific amount of time. Just giving an educated guess on the matter you asked about, I would say the loss was too much for her to bear and when the Scientific Center offered her a way to help save others of her race, she probably found a new purpose.”

“ Wait , ANDI . Could she still be infected with this disease and our scans not show it? We have a youngling that has been right in this room with her.”

“ Medic LeX , I have found no trace of it in her system or in any of the others I am now carrying to their new world. However , I will log this as something they might need to be vaccinated for in the future. Now , I am not saying that it didn’t do some sort of permanent damage to her, but I believe if it had, your blood and essence would have already reversed it.

Mistress Rylie was at the top in her field, a renowned surgeon in pediatrics. She spent her entire life saving children’s lives. There were numerous certificates logged along with her files at the hospital. If she is willing to continue on this path once she escapes her coma, that knowledge will be greatly needed for all the new younglings, especially those of mixed races. Many will face viruses and things that were not an issue on Earth , and I believe between Mistress Rylie and Mistress Qwin , we will have the upper hand on those issues as they evolve. The Lord of Light always provides us with what we need.”

“ Thank you, ANDI . You have been a great help as always. The information you were able to acquire in all your years on Earth has now become priceless.”

“ I am glad to be of service, Medic LeX . We are nearing their new planet, and I will temporarily be out of range for the rest of the rotation. Destiny and I both seem to be streaking through the stars on opposite sides of this solar system. If my calculations are correct, you should be able to see Darverius and Falcor within the next rising. Safe travels Medic LeX and take care of my Little Space Particle .” With a bow, he disappears.

Even though all I want to do is reach back out to Rylie , I turn away from her bed and head for the main communicator. I need to make sure that SCOUT has notified them of our incoming medical needs. Quicker than I thought, my big brother’s massive face appears on the screen. “ SoL , you big lug, how are you?”

“ Good rising, LeX . Life is treating me well, how has your trip been? SCOUT

recently updated me on all that has occurred while you have been gone. You guys were being held in the hand of the Lord of Light while in that Nebula .”

“ We are blessed to be returning, that’s for sure. How is your lovely mate? I do not see her in her usual location. Has she finally figured out there are other chairs in the command center more comfortable than your lap?” Alana’s beautiful face appears on the screen.

“ Nope LeX , I’m still here! Of course, you would comm right when I step out for a few. You are still just as pretty as ever. One of these days I’m going to dye my hair that exact same color.”

Growling playfully behind her, SoL has me smiling as she loves to tease him. “ Alana , you are beautiful just the way you are, and it feels as if I have been away from you all forever. Simply being able to comm you is such a relief. Did SCOUT tell you guys that we are in need of the med chamber?”

“ He did, but we didn’t realize you were so close until earlier this rising. The Destroyer is making some serious time as she heads our way.”

“ This ship is remarkable, and a true asset to our fleet for sure. Her thick hull and integrated system saved all our lives many times over. And in the meantime, she has become quite smitten with our ANDI .”

Alana and SoL’s laughter lightens my heart and gives me hope that one day I will be holding my own mate in a similar way, discussing things with others.

“ Brother , the Explorer has been drydocked for several lunar rotations after a mechanical flaw in her main thruster almost cost us the ship and her crew. Luckily , she was able to detect the problem and shut down before it caused any true harm, but we had to tow her back to Falcor .”

“ Is the medical chamber functioning, SoL ? Ember cannot be brought out of stasis until her body is healed fully. The youngling did a number on her insides.” Alana instantly butts in.

“ Youngling ? What are you talking about LeX ? No one told me about a little one. SoL did you know about this?”

The look I see on SoL is a male caught. “ Alana , it must have slipped my mind.”

“ What the hell ever, SoL LeX , I’m so extremely grateful you all are returning safely.” I become worried when she wipes a stray tear off her face. “ I’m sorry LeX , we’ll talk more when you get here.” She pushes herself off SoL’s lap and I watch from this side of the screen as his eyes follow her out the command center’s door.

“ SoL forgive me, but I am at a loss as to what just happened.”

“ It’s an ongoing argument. She wants a youngling.”

“ I do not see the problem. You are the favorite Unka after all, so we all know how you love the younglings. I figured you would have a whole slew of them running around Falcor by now.”

“ Have you seen how large I am?”

“ Hard to miss, SoL .”

“ Then you see the problem. She is so small, and I will not take the chance of losing her. I would rather argue until the end of time than be the cause of why she is no longer with me. All you have to do is look at Ember and the condition she is in to understand my worries are sound. I cannot and will not put her through that no matter how much she begs me. That’s the reason I didn’t tell her. I knew what her reaction

was going to be.”

“ Ember’s case as well as every one of our mate’s circumstances is different SoL . Alana’s body changed; she is more like you than you realize. There are so many ways we can help her through pregnancy. Even if the child must be taken early, we have the means for both of them to survive. You cannot base your and Alana’s size differences as the main decision factor. I understand your fears, but you both would make fabulous parents.”

“ SCOUT also has tried to reassure me. Especially when she didn’t talk to me for rotations after she found out that Zura is also pregnant. The only thing that has made that slightly better is knowing Zura will be carrying the youngling for quite a while. With my mixed heritage, I have no idea the amount of time Alana would be pregnant. There are just too many unanswered questions, and I am not willing to sacrifice her health or life.”

“ I am assuming you have spoken these words to her?”

“ Many times.”

“ Let me speak to her when we arrive, and I will see if we can answer some of the questions bothering you both. All I ask is that you be open-minded. If this is something she wants passionately, and you don’t at least try, she may never forgive you SoL , and you could lose her either way, big brother. I know you are itching to go after her, but before you go, will the med chamber be functional when we dock?”

“ Yes , I had the maintenance bots reroute the main wiring to be separate from the rest of the Explorer and they finished it early this rising. We will be awaiting your arrival to help transfer Ember from the Destroyer to the Explorer . How is ViN under the circumstances? I can’t wait to tease him about this.”

“ He was managing fine last rising, but I have not spoken to him yet this one. You know he is not one to lounge around if he thinks there is a problem, so that fact that he is not in medical as we speak is a good sign. He needs to sustain the youngling as long as possible, and if my calculations are correct, that may not be as long as I originally thought. Ember carried her almost to term; that little human there is one strong soul. None of us had any idea the amount of pain she was hiding until we took the youngling. I will discuss this more with you when we dock as we have much to catch up on. Go on and sweet talk your mate, SoL . Strength and honor, brother.”

SoL nods his head, and the screen goes blank, as I just sit here wondering, what now?

Chapter Sixteen

MANDY

This is the first time that I've woken up that I didn't feel like I was staring out at the world through someone else's eyes. Rafe is sleeping next to me peacefully, and I take this time to simply look at him. Standing , he is easily over six feet tall, with a powerful, muscular build that exudes strength and agility. His body is lean and sinewy, with well-defined muscles that ripple beneath smooth, bronze-colored skin. But it's his face that is so striking; almond-shaped eyes and a chiseled jawline with high cheekbones give him a ruggedly handsome and alluring quality. He is the alien version of the Marlboro man. He is sexy as shit, and I believe he knows it. Lord knows he is cocky enough.

Maybe those drugs messed with my mind more than I realized. Especially when I know I should have come-to screaming and completely terrified of the alien male lying next to me, and all the crap I have seen since waking from my drug fueled sleep. But instead, my mind is calm and my heartbeat steady. Fear is the last thing I think of when I look at Rafe's face. It's scary how attracted I am to him. I have no idea why he has put up with me. I was mean, violent, unreasonable, and an all-around pain in the ass, but his attention and care never wavered.

He has been kinder to me than I deserve or have ever experienced before. What I really want to do is trace those muscles with my tongue, but I have made him uncomfortable enough since the moment I stepped out of that pod and into his arms. What I can recall of that moment is fuzzy, and I'm glad that I can't remember fully how badly I humiliated myself with him and the others.

I have been attracted to other guys, but if I could, I would crawl inside of Rafe just to get closer. Everything about him lures me in, his smell, the sound of his voice, his size. The way he walks with a confident poise to his gait, emitting an aura of primal strength and magnetism that is just irresistible. And the way he watches me; it's like he doesn't miss anything. Many times, I have caught myself looking away as his eyes gleam with intelligence and curiosity, instead of the anger and mistrust I have grown used to out of many others.

I believe I am way out of my league here and reaching a little too high where Rafe is concerned. There is no way a guy like him could really want a backwater, holler girl with no education, or any idea what to do with herself now. Even though he sounded sincere before, it's just hard to believe. Hell , I would have run for the hills if the tables had been turned. Just shows who the better person here is. As I start to ease out of the bed, his eyes open.

“ Where are you rushing off to?”

“ Would you believe me if I said I needed to pee?”

“ Possibly , but I can see the wheels in your mind spinning around; you're running.”

“ I am, and I'm not. Those wheels spinning in my head tell me you're just being nice, and I should let you off the hook so you can carry on with your life. I know you said you want more, Rafe , but you gotta realize how odd that sounds from my point of view. I mean, I'm me, and well ... look at you. You could have your choice of girls from any race, color, or personality. Why would you pick me? Am I like a charity case, or pet project?”

When he rolls his eyes in a very human way, my words stop dead.

“ Mandy , it's nice to know you have multiple versions of yourself naturally, when

here I thought it was just the drugs talking. You are seeking reassurance, and I don't blame you. I believe I would be acting the same in your circumstances. You have arisen to a world that makes little sense to you. I hope that you want to believe my emotions and words are true, but you're too scared to expect more. All that proves is that I have not done a very good job of convincing you of or confirming my feelings for you. So , I am going to make this simple so that there is no more confusion on your end. You are my MATE ! The one being in all the universes that was made for me."

" Umm , what?"

" Sweet Little Suet , you are not making this easy on me. What you should have done is thrown yourself into my outstretched arms and declared your every lasting devotion."

" Are you for real right now? I'm sorry if I'm blowing what could or should be a possible heart to heart moment, but are you serious? I'm not good at reading between the lines, and I don't know if you're joking or playing around."

With a swiftness that is shocking, he moves me on top of him. He gently gathers my long hair to the side as I raise myself on my elbows, looking down at him, carefully avoiding any movement against his erection where my legs are positioned. With a soft touch, he draws me closer, his hand cradling my head.

" Do I scare you?"

" No ."

" Are you attracted to me?"

" Yes ."

“ Then what is holding you back? I do not want to hear about anything like worthiness, embarrassment, different species, or any of that foolishness. You are literally lying on top of me. I can feel the heat of your core and smell the soft sexy musk of your arousal and still you hesitate. Tell me why?”

“ I’m scared.”

“ You just said you were not.”

“ Not of you, but of what you could do to me if I let you in.”

“ If you let me in this delicious little body of yours you will be screaming, but not in horror, I can assure you.”

“ It’s not my body I’m worried about, Rafe . Those wounds can heal. It’s the ones that mark your heart that never truly leave, and I know if I let you in ... no pain would ever compare before or after.”

His dark eyes stare up at me like he is looking for reassurance, then he does something, and I feel myself melt all around him. He smiles. It’s the first time I think I have seen him do this. Instantly , he looks younger, like the darkness of his soul has been released in this single moment.

“ Then you better make sure I remain close, because my Little Suet , I am pretty sure I have already captured the one thing you are trying so hard to protect.”

“ What’s that?”

“ Your heart.”

The moment he says those words I almost push back, but he’s right. Even though I

have fought him tooth and nail, I never once doubted him. His constant care and dedication to me was ... is slowly weaving its way deeper inside of me. All my life I've craved the attention and want of another and even though I hate how it came to be, I can't stop the smile that forms on my face.

“ Are you always this arrogant and sure of yourself?”

“ No , and yes. But no other opinion matters to me, only yours. I am here Mandy ; I am willing to ride this path with you until the Lord of Light takes us. Will you walk the unknown hand in hand with me? Will you fulfill a need I didn't know was missing or needed until you crawled up into my arms? I want to wake up every rising and see your face only to wonder which one of the Mandy's I am going to get that rotation? I am laying my heart bare here and the choice is yours. If you want me to get up and leave you alone, I will. It will destroy me, but I will not and do not want to ever disregard your concerns.”

“ What if I said I want you to make love to me and let's see where this goes? What would be your answer, then?”

“ You just made me the happiest male alive!”

His dominance sends a thrill down my spine, and yet there is a tenderness and possibly a silent promise of what he has and will continue do too and for me. If I allow myself to take this chance ... If I do? Then his words mean he is as much mine, as he says I'm his.

He growls playfully as his hand snakes up my side and across the back of my neck, tangling his long fingers in my hair. I almost can't keep track of the various places his lips land across my face as his mouth tenderly kisses me. Never have I felt so wanted, as his lips trail down my jawline in a whisper soft caress, only to hesitate at my neck as he bites me gently. The slight sting of his teeth makes me shiver and causes

pleasure to dart from that spot down my spine. Each additional touch of his lips creates a tidal wave of sensation throughout my system. I'm so thoroughly distracted by his masterful lips and seductive kisses that I miss him slipping the gown I have on up my body until I'm forced to raise my head to allow the material to be removed completely. The sensation of the cool air surrounding us makes me shiver in response. Pushing away from his firm chest, I bite my lip as I watch his eyes roam over my naked form. It's like he's a kid on Christmas that just unwrapped the gift he's asked for every year.

“ You are so beautiful.”

“ You act like you're just seeing me for the first time.”

“ I am. You were not mine before.” My resulting laughter is cut short when, with a quick twist, I find myself underneath his much larger form. The arrogant ass has a smirk on his face as I devour every muscle, eating up the beauty that makes him ... all mine. My eyes don't miss a single thing as he rips it off all the way, revealing his upper body to me in all its masculine glory. I pout with disappointment when he doesn't immediately reach for the clasp to take his pants off.

With a low rumble, he eases himself downward slowly, only stopping when he reaches my breast. Cupping one gently, the callouses on his hand tease my tender skin as he lowers his lips to the other one. His mouth is a hot brand that is a shocking contrast to the cool air as he wraps an arm around me and pulls me closer to him. The moment his lips touch my skin, they seem to light a fire in me and with each flick of his tongue; it stokes my internal fire higher and higher.

To my dismay, he leaves my aching breasts and doesn't go back to them even when I act like I'm disappointed. He starts kissing his way down my stomach, not missing a piece of skin and worshipping me like I'm sacred. Blazing a path down past my navel, his rough hands are gentle yet strong where he's positioned them on my thighs. The

closer he gets to the heated center of my body, the tighter they get. I spread my legs wider, opening myself up completely as his hot breath pauses right above my wet folds.

“ I want ... no, I need to taste you.” His black eyes look desperate, and I can feel a slight tremble in his hands as he holds himself back.

“ Yes ” ... I have to push the words out of my mouth as my heart hammers against my ribs, my chest rising and falling in time with my rapid pants.

Rafe lowers his head, his tongue flicking out and tasting me like I'm his favorite dessert, which makes me cry out. My hands desperately grip his short hair as he licks and sucks, his tongue delving into my needy slit, exploring every fold with an almost fanatical attention to detail. It's as if he wants to explore every single inch of my snatch. When he finds my clit, he sucks it into his mouth, which causes my hips to buck against his face at the abrupt assault on my sensitive little button.

My hips jar him enough that he reaches up and lays one of his heavy arms across my pelvis, pinning me in place as his other hand grabs a handful of one ass cheek, pulling my throbbing flesh closer to the merciless attentions of his mouth. Rafe feasts upon me like a starving man at an all you can eat buffet. His tongue invades my folds and then he changes it up and teases my clit with his teeth. The back and forth sensations are driving me to a fever pitch, and I can feel my orgasm building deep within me.

My body is moving on its own as I ride his face, chasing a pleasure that's become blatantly apparent only he can give me. Without warning, my climax hits, my body convulses, and my cries echoes throughout the room. Soon , his mouth becomes too much, and I try to wriggle away from the onslaught of bliss he's forcing me to feel, but Rafe is insistent on coaxing every last tremor from me that he can.

At last, he finally raises his head when it's obvious that I'm coming down from a

truly tremendous orgasm. A self-satisfied, yet heart-warming smile is what greets me when he sees how limp and sated my body is for him. His lips glisten with my release and his dark eyes are roaming my naked form hungrily. When I feel him start to back away, I reach out for him. “ Oh , we aren’t done yet.” I slide my hand up, cupping his strong jaw. “ If what you’ve said is true, then let’s finish this.”

“ There is no going back, Mandy . Any second guessing or indecision will no longer matter the moment I make you mine.”

I know my eyes get big because this time when he smiles; I see a hint of fangs.

“ Do not worry, you will want my bite often.”

I reach between us, my fingers fumbling with the odd clasp on the pants he’s wearing. The irreverent jackass just leans back, watching me with amusement filled eyes as I struggle to get to the prize in his pants. He doesn’t even offer to assist or help in any way, even though there is no missing the massive bulge trying to break free of this dang-blamed, difficult to remove clothing When I finally manage to find the magical clasp and his pants open, I can’t do anything but stare at the hard, throbbing cock that springs up and out of his trousers. Heavens above it’s huge, but what did I expect? Everything about Rafe is larger than life ... the only thing he has in common with the few guys I’ve been with ... is its location. He reaches down, confidently stroking it from base to tip. His colossal hands slowly stop at each ring ... rings that only get larger the further down you go. Doubt flickers in my mind for just a second.

“ Now where is my temptress of a few days ago? She would have attacked me just to get a closer look. Do not worry my little mate, I will make sure you crave me just the way I do you before this rising is over.”

“ Big words ... prove it.”

“ Challenge accepted.”

Pushing my legs wider to accommodate the bulk of his frame, he guides himself toward my weeping entrance. He notches the thick head at the opening of my body and slowly begins to impale me on his pulsating length, being careful to stretch my much smaller body, inch by substantial inch. I would be lying if I didn't say it's slightly painful, but the pain only heightens my pleasure as his hands and lips play with the rest of my body, easing my mind into accepting his invasion. The underlying pressure of him being inside me is intoxicating, enough so that I'm almost drunk on the feeling of being full to the point of bursting.

I gasp when I feel the last and thickest of his rings pop inside me. He moves his head up and down my neck slowly, softly nipping at my fragile skin until my body starts to unconsciously move against him.

“ That's it my Little Suet , take what you need from me.”

He pulls his pelvis back, sliding his rock-hard shaft out of me before slowly pushing back into my aching depths. I can feel the edge of every one of his rings slipping past my folds as he gradually starts thrusting in and out of me. Each snap of his hips is a deliberately intimate motion, as if he's claiming every inch of me, body, and soul.

Wrapping my legs around his waist, I try to pull him even closer when a puff of his hot breath on my neck reminds me of the fangs, I caught a glimpse of earlier.

“ So tight, so perfect.” are the fervent words I hear before his razor-sharp fangs sink deep, slicing through my delicate skin in one smooth motion. I scream out in pain and pleasure as his massive hands grasp my upper body, pinning me against him as each thrust becomes deeper and harder.

His teeth and mouth tug at the skin where he's latched on, and I feel more than see as

he maneuvers his hips so each thrust hits my clit just right. I swear I see a burst of light behind my closed eyes as I chase my next orgasm, that is just frustratingly out of reach. “ More , give me more Rafe .”

He trembles under my hands as his body moves faster, his thrusts becoming more intense and less controlled. That’s when it hits me. I realize this is more than just simple sex or even making love. It’s about the connection ... this is all us.

Not only is he bringing me physical pleasure, it’s also an emotional connection, a yearning for more than either of us have ever experienced before. I want ... no I need all of him. Rafe’s rhythm becomes relentless, and I find myself hanging on for the ride, my breasts bouncing with every pistoning snap of his hips against my pelvis. Every time his large body drives into me, it steals my breath and sends waves of desire through my body as my inner muscles clench around him.

My hands explore his body, tracing the hard lines and the muscles that cover him from head to toe. The ferocity of his movements against me are pushing me toward the edge again. I can feel my body becoming feverish the more I feel him lose control, seeking his release within the depths of my channel. One final hard pull on my neck has pleasure exploding everywhere inside me. As I cry out his name, my vision a rainbow of colors, I ride this wave of ecstasy and with one final thrust, Rafe finds his own release. He rips his teeth from my neck as a snarl leaves his mouth and his hips pull the last ounce of pleasure from our bodies.

He collapses on me, and I pull him close when he starts to roll over. I can feel his heart pounding in his chest, only to realize mine now matches his. When my mind finally clears, my first thought is ... WOW !

Rafe flips us over so we resume our initial position where I’m sprawled on top of him. Gently resting my head on his chest, I feel his cock finally soften and slip from my body. We both ignore the copious amounts of seed that leaks out of me with his

withdrawal, as his soft lips kiss the top of my head. His body leans a bit as he reaches down and somehow manages to grab the edge of the blanket to cover us up.

“ You still here with me?”

“ If this has been a dream, just leave me here.”

His laughter is the last thing I hear before drifting off to sleep.

Chapter Seventeen

LEX

This rising has passed quickly as it seems like the med bay doors are constantly revolving. Already I have assisted two crew members with burns, and one minor injury that needed a few sutures. Everyone gets distracted and injuries double when we are close to docking. Rafe and Mandy are still asleep according to the sensors in the room and hopefully getting some well-needed rest after the ordeal they have both been through.

I have just spent a moment standing over my mate, running my fingers through her curls that now have small turquoise highlights throughout them, when Destiny's voice comes across the speakers.

“ Attention all personnel, we will be docking in half a tic. Please wait until the tunnels are fully extended and the seals are green before accessing them. For those of you who are leaving us, I hope your next adventure will be as stimulating as this one has been. As for my main crew, I have been informed we will be docked for a lunar rotation before heading to our next location, so enjoy your down time.”

I can feel the ship slowing down as the vibrations in the floor under my feet lessen. With a sigh, I program the med bots in to notify me if Rylie moves or rouses, as I know I have to be the one to oversee the transfer of Ember to the med chamber.

Heading down the hall, I take the closest lift to ViN and Ember's chambers. Just as I am exiting, I hear a giggle behind me as the other lift on this floor opens and out

walks Rafe with Mandy in his arms. He is smiling down at her until he sees me. “ LeX , do you require any assistance? If not, I must report to the control center to help bring the Destroyer into dock.”

“ Thank you Rafe , but the med bots should be able to get the stasis chamber down to the main tunnels effortlessly. It does my heart good to see both of you with smiles on your faces. How are you feeling, Mandy ?”

“ Much better! Thank you for all you’ve done for me ... LeX ? Right ?”

“ Yes , and it was my pleasure. You two better get going, you know EvO is not the most patient male.”

Rafe nods his head before entering their private chambers. I am just about to announce my arrival at ViN’s , when his door suddenly opens. His eyes are bright red as small puffs of smoke leave his nostrils.

“ Brother , are you well?”

“ I am not sure, but we will deal with me and the little reign of terror hooked to my side once Ember is safe inside the medical chamber.” I see his entire body tighten up just as a growl leaves his throat.

“ Is it the youngling? You should have commed me immediately when you started feeling any discomfort from her. Lord of Light , she has doubled in size; when did this occur?”

“ She has become heavier the last few risings and this one ... it’s like she is beating against my side. Every strike of her hands and feet have become a constant, searing pain. The outer covering feels different as well. Each time I lay my hand against her, the skin seems tender and overly sensitive.”

“ We need to get you to the med bay so I can check her vitals.”

“ Once Ember is taken care of.”

We both move out of the way as Ember’s stasis chamber is pushed through the door toward the cargo lift. ViN actually stops to grab the wall a few times as we follow behind. Never have I ever witnessed a moment of weakness from my brother, and I swear it looks like he is ready to collapse at any moment. But each time I reach out to help him, he refuses to let me touch him.

“ Don’t LeX , my skin will burn you! That is why I am trying my best not to brush up against anyone. My youngling is playing havoc with my control right now.”

The cargo lift opens to the lower docking area, and I am shocked to see EvO and Qwin waiting on us, as he always remains in the control room during docking. He must have seen my confusion. “ Rafe is at the helm bringing us in. ViN , are you well?”

“ I have seen better risings brother.” ViN bends over, grasping the youngling’s pouch in his large hand. “ Come on little one, let’s get your mother secured and then we can play all you want.”

The ship coming to a halt feels odd under my feet, and it has no more than stopped when I hear large steps headed our way. Distracted for a moment by the movement on ViN’s side, I suddenly find myself engulfed from behind in a huge set of arms that squeeze the breath out of me.

“ LeX , little brother, it’s good to see you.” Before I can respond I am set down only to laugh when EvO is embraced in the same way. SoL’s massive frame makes the rest of us look like younglings in his arms. A small hand on my arm has me turning only to find Alana standing there with a huge smile on her face. “ You know how he is

LeX . SoL practically jumped through the tunnel to get to you guys. Give me a hug, it's so good to see you all."

I bend down embracing her small frame. " Hey , don't be stingy with those hugs, what about the rest of us?" Releasing Alana , we both laugh as Luna approaches with open arms. Reaching out, I pull her in close; she's taller than Alana , so I don't have to stoop.

" I have missed you two terribly. If you guys weren't so smitten with your own mates, I'd be tempted to steal you both away."

" Keep your paws to yourself youngling." I hear Tordan's deep voice right behind me before his large, cybernetic hand lands on my shoulder, turning me to face him. Just as I am reaching out to shake his hand, he pulls me close in a fierce hug.

" Does this old heart well to see you have all returned in one piece. We can continue the greetings after we get the Ember safely transferred into the med chamber. The females have planned a dinner for later this rising, and many will be in attendance as your return has them all worked up."

" I look forward to it Tordan ." All of us turn, walking behind the stasis chamber holding Ember's delicate form. The outer doors of the Explore stand open as the med bots move the carrier inside the ship. Twice , I have noticed ViN gripping his side in pain, but his focus is solely on his mate.

Tordan walks past me, checking the status of the med chamber. " It's ready so you can transfer her at any time."

We all step back as both chambers open and the med bots gently move Ember from one to the other. When the main med chamber closes and all the lights turn green, I let out a breath I had no idea I was holding. Qwin walks up to its side peering down at

Ember , a single tear flowing down her cheek. Alana and Luna quickly join her as they all stand there silently supporting each other. The sound of a loud thud has me turning, only to find ViN down on one knee grasping his side, a groan leaving his lips.

SoL has him up in his arms before I can react. “ Put me down you massive male, or I’ll end up burning you accidentally.”

I turn looking over at Ember , but torn on what I should do. “ LeX , you go on with ViN . EvO and I will stay here with his mate in case there are any issues.”

“ Thank you, Tordan . SoL , we need to get him to the med bay. I have a feeling the little one wants out.”

I almost run to keep up with SoL as he practically sprints down the hall. When he starts to turn for Falcor , I motion him to go back into the Destroyer instead. Thankfully , he does not question me because in this type of situation, I need to work in an environment I am familiar with. I will not have time to hunt for the things I need.

A loud groan comes out of ViN and I see SoL flinch, so I know this is getting bad quickly. Never have I been so glad to see my med bay doors slide open. My eyes catch a glimpse of my mate still lying peacefully on the bed as we run through the doors.

“ SoL lay him down, but do not go anywhere. I may need you to help me hold him.”

ViN sits up panting, grasping the bar on the side of the med bed.

“ Talk to me ViN , what are you feeling?”

“ Little claws shredding my side, heat like I have never felt before searing my nerves like lightning bolts dancing along my nervous system. She is pissed off about something, LeX .”

SoL’s eyes are enormous, and I can see a large red mark on his inner arm where he was holding ViN against him. The last time I witnessed this look on SoL’s face was when Keida fell off SeeSee when she was little and scraped her knee. I can remember him racing to her the moment the first tear formed in her eyes. His large hands were shaking as he held her for me to treat her very minor wounds. I don’t know who was more upset, Keida , or SoL , as I think she spent more time comforting him than he did her.

Grabbing a tube of burn relief out of the cabinet, I throw it at SoL , hitting him right in the chest as he stares down at ViN , his eyes huge with worry. “ SoL ! Snap out of it and put that on your arm.” His eyes never leave the mass on ViN’s side, and I don’t know who is more shocked with SoL’s next words, me, or ViN .

“ You must help her LeX , I can see her struggling to get out. I could feel her little breaths when she was between us. She is running out of room and it’s smothering her.”

“ Big brother, I have no idea how you know that, but since these fracking scanners are worthless, I am going to take your word for it. ViN , I need you to lay on your other side and try to control your heat so that I can touch you safely.”

Just as I am about to touch the outer layer encasing the youngling, a small hand on my arm stops me. “ LeX my love, why didn’t you wake me? You know procedures like this are much easier if we work together.”

Standing beside me like she has been there my entire life ... is my mate Rylie . Her bright, beautiful, blue eyes stare up at me like she has known me forever. She pushes

against me slightly and I actually move out of her way only to react when she starts to reach for the ViN's side. "Don't ! He will burn you." ViN's eyes are as large as mine and I shrug my shoulders when he mouths ... "What the frack"? SoL just stands there looking confused as none of us know what to do or say. Two seconds ago, she was unresponsive, lying in bed but you would never know that now. SoL glances over at her coloring and then at mine, then shrugs his shoulders completely accepting her as mine simply due to our markings. Her words quickly pull my attention back to her.

"No , he won't LeX ! The little one knows we are here to help her, so she has settled down, giving dad a break so he can catch his breath." I am still so dumbfounded I'm just standing here mute.

I look down at ViN and he nods his head that she is right.

"Now ViN , I want you to lay down all the way on your side. SoL sweetie, I need you to go stand at his head and put your hands on this shoulder to keep him still, just in case he jerks. We don't want to cause either of them any more harm than necessary. LeX love, we're going to need two scalpels and Destiny , can you roll the infant bed with all the necessary items into this room, please?"

"Confirmed , Mistress Rylie ."

I am still standing there in a daze as she works all around me. Moving me one way then another as she prepares ViN for what's to come. I am so confused I don't know how to react. I take a moment to reach out and touch her face only to be rewarded with a small smile.

"LeX , are you feeling all right? You look like you've seen a ghost. I don't think I've ever seen you so pale."

“ You’re here...”

“ I would’ve been here sooner if you hadn’t let me sleep for so long. If I didn’t hear the little one crying, I would still be asleep. And I had the craziest dream, but remind me to tell you about it later.”

“ You heard her crying?”

“ LeX , my love ... we have spoken about this many times. Are you sure you’re all right? You know the little ones always seem to reach out to me before they’re born.”

A loud grunt coming from ViN turns all eyes back to him and I see SoL push him down as he fights against the pain his body is experiencing. Rylie instantly starts issuing orders and I find myself following each direction like we have done this a million times together before.

“ SoL , hold him tight. I’m going to start maneuvering the youngling into position so we don’t accidentally cut her as we free her from this casing. ViN , this will be painful, but I am scared to give you anything until we have her out. Once I have her free, LeX will administer something to help with the over stimulation on your side.”

I cringe when she touches the hard outer shell, expecting the heat to scald her fingers as she feels around the area, and relieved when she doesn’t appear to be hurt.

“ SoL , it seems like you were right. She is out of room, the exo-womb won’t grow any larger, and she is done being cooped up in there. LeX , I need you to come here next to me; we are going to have to cut into this at the same time.”

ViN reaches out, grabbing her wrist gently. “ Wait , is she too early?”

“ No , ViN . She is more than ready to come into the world. You just focus on staying

calm and let us do the rest. This will happen quickly once we get the sack open.”

The moment I am next to her, Rylie takes my scalpel, showing me exactly where she wants me to cut. “ On three, you need to cut along this line. I’m going to open this side. If this works the way I imagine, the cocoon will open on its own, allowing us to take her out unharmed. You will have to use quite a bit of force, though LeX .”

Nodding my head, I watch SoL get a good grip on ViN , who suddenly seems to be holding his breath. “ One , two ... three.” We both run the sharp scalpels down the fine lines along the outer edge and just as I am almost at the bottom, the casing opens like a blooming flower as ViN screams out in pain. SoL sways slightly on his feet as Rylie reaches in, carefully pulling the youngling out. For a moment, I am more concerned SoL is going to hit the floor than the pained sounds coming from ViN . Rylie holds the youngling gently while I cut the umbilical cord and other links attaching her to ViN .

“ SoL , I need you to come here. LeX , go ahead and give ViN something for the pain, and we need to get that growth off his side before it closes back.” For such a large male, SoL sure can move fast as he is suddenly towering over Rylie’s slight form.

“ Here , I need you to clean all this ‘stuff’ off her as quickly as you can. Don’t look at me like you’re terrified, you’ve handled little ones more than most. Keida was always in your arms; you can do this.” SoL doesn’t say a thing, simply holds his arms out for Rylie to place the youngling, and she disappears into his massive hands as he walks over to the area Destiny has set up for the care of the youngling.

Rylie turns back to ViN whose eyes have not left his youngling. “ Ok ViN , we have to get this off you. As long as it’s attached to your side, it’s stealing your nutrients, and you are going to need all your energy for that little bundle of joy over there.” The moment she says that the youngling lets out its first loud cry and I feel tears form in

my eyes.

ViN starts to lift himself off the bed only to stop when my hand lands on his chest. “She is fine, there is not a safer child anywhere in the world at this moment. SoL knows better than even I on how to clean her up and swaddle her. Let’s get this done so you can hold your daughter.”

While I have had ViN distracted, Rylie has been making several small cuts along the edge of the shell, slowly pulling it loose as she goes. As it starts to fall off, I slide a tray under it. Rylie’s small fingers work expertly as she cuts and sews each detachment as she goes. Finally , it releases, and I lift it and the tray out of the way.

In the meantime, I can hear SoL softly talking to the youngling on the other side of the room. The moment Rylie closes up the last bleeding tentacle, I administer a pain shot into ViN’s hip, instantly seeing his body relax.

“ ViN , your side is raw, but I am not sure what to administer for this type of wound. I am hoping your natural healing qualities will kick in and take over, but if not, we will address it later this rising.”

“ Frack , that sucked! I will never look at pregnant females the same way again. Lord of Light , the constant discomfort, worry, and the pain was overwhelming. SoL , don’t make me get up, I want my daughter! ”

“ That’s right, show me that pretty smile. Unka SoL has lost his heart again! You are too pretty to belong to grouchy over there. I think I will just take you home with me. Would you like that? I can already see all the new toys you’re going to want in my mind. Wait until you meet your cousin Keida , oh she will love you and your fiery little heart.”

“ SoL !!!”

“ I’m coming, just talking to my girl over here.” He comes strolling over with a huge smile on his face, gently rocking the youngling that none of us can see because he is so tall. ViN holds out his arms, laying relaxed in the bed thanks to the meds I just gave him. As I watch, SoL gently kisses her head before handing her over.

“ Now you have to hold her head up and cup your arms like this.”

“ SoL !”

“ I am not going to give her to you if you can’t hold her properly.”

Rylie actually covers her mouth to stop from laughing, and I must bite my lip as I watch these two massive males bicker over the proper way to hold a youngling. When ViN finally gets her settled to suit SoL , we all stand there watching as he uncovers her gently, looking her over. Counting all her fingers and toes as her large, blue eyes gaze around, more aware than a little one only born a few tics before should be.

Rylie bends down, stroking the top of her head gently. “ ViN , we will give you a little time with her. Once she falls asleep, we’ll need to scan her to make sure she’s healthy and that we didn’t hurt her during that odd birthing. Do you have a name picked out?”

“ Ami Lynn ... that’s what Ember wanted to call her and as long as my mate is happy, I have no objections.” Suddenly , ViN looks up at me and I know what he is going to ask.

“ Your mate is healing well and if all remains on course, she will be with you within the rising. Those med chambers are priceless when it comes to the human anatomy.”

The youngling must have felt his worry, because she reaches up through her blanket

to touch his face and I watch as my brother falls irrevocably in love. The moment that child touched him willingly, she became the center of his world.

Rylie reaches over, taking my hand in hers, then motions for SoL to follow as she leads us out of the med bay. Suddenly , SoL's large frame blocks the outer med bay doors as he turns to look at us.

“ Well , you two, I do not think I have ever been terrified and ecstatic in the same moment, but that was an amazing thing to witness. I have the urge to return to my mate and make a little one of those for my very own now that I have held Ami in my arms. LeX , swear to me that if I allow myself to dream of a little one, you and your mate will do all you can to take care of my Alana !

Rylie grasps his arms. “ I may not know you well SoL , but in my heart, I know you would be a wonderful father. Let me reassure you, we would and will do anything and everything to make sure Alana and the child flourished.”

SoL bends down and kisses the top of Rylie's head, then we watch as he walks out of the room.

Rylie turns her radiant smile on me before leaning up to kiss me on the cheek and I swear I just stand here, not participating because I have no idea how to act or what to say.

“ How exciting! Delivering the next generation never gets boring in our world does it, Love ? Ughh , I feel like I've been in these clothes forever. Let's go get cleaned up and grab something to eat before we are needed again.”

“ The mates are throwing a dinner for everyone later, if you want to go?”

“ Sounds great. I haven't seen everyone in forever it seems, but we should come back

and check on ViN before we go. We're leaving before ensuring Ami can take any formula. It's a shame her mother wasn't able to carry her to term so that she could have had her milk, but hopefully we can find something that agrees with her system. Destiny dear, can you have one of the med bots prepare a bottle for ViN ? And you might want to play some instructional videos in his room. Even though I'm sure he will deny that he needs help, changing a diaper is not as easy as it looks."

"I will see that it is done, Mistress Rylie ."

Rylie's small hand grasps mine as she pulls me along behind her, and I follow obediently as she talks excitedly about the procedure. The entire time we walk to my rooms, I have a smile plastered on my face. I don't want to show any concern, but as amazed and excited as I am that she is awake and apparently in love with me ... what now?

Chapter Eighteen

RYLIE

The lift opens and I walk up to our room only for the door not to open. I run my hand over the scanner once again, then look over at LeX who is really acting odd.

“ Is the door broken or something?”

“ Umm , I do not think so. Here let me try.”

Of course, the door opens right up. “ Show off, maybe I just didn’t hold my hand right or something.”

“ I am sure that is all it was. Destiny , will you take a look at the scanner? Rylie’s heat signature would not open it.”

“ I apologize Medic LeX , it should be operating properly now.”

“ LeX , love. I know we don’t spend a lot of time in our rooms, but we really should update this place, it still looks like a bachelor’s pad after all these years. Wow , I don’t remember it being this open to the outside. The view is absolutely amazing, isn’t it? We probably had most of the blinds closed when we were in the Nebula , but now that we are back home, I think we should leave it open like this. If we’re going to be here for a few weeks, we should have SAGE look at this entire space. If it was slightly more comfortable, we would spend more time here. We stay in the lab way too much now as it is. You know, I think I’m beginning to get jealous of the glass

containers you are always fiddling with. They get more action from you than I do.” Teasingly , I bump him with my hip as I walk into the bathroom.

“ Will you order us a snack while I get cleaned up? I can’t wait to tell you all about this dream I had. It was so realistic, that must have been the reason I overslept this morning. I can’t believe I fell asleep in the med bay again, and when I woke up, it took me a moment to realize where I was.”

The entire time I’ve been talking, LeX has just stood there watching me and I swear he actually blushes when I start to pull my shirt off as I’m walking into the bathroom ... refreshing chamber. I laugh at myself as I’ve started using all these human words way too often.

Stepping into the ionizer, it oddly takes me a second to figure out how to turn it on. It’s almost like I’ve never seen any of this before. Shrugging it off, I step out once it’s done and walk up to the viewing wall, only to stop dead. Wow , my coloring seems a little off, and this is the first time I’ve ever noticed how human-like my facial features really are. Running my fingers through my shoulder length hair, I shake off this feeling of things not being right as I walk over to our wardrobe, only to find there are only three outfits hanging on my side.

“ LeX where are all my clothes?” I swear I feel like I’m living someone else’s life here lately . Grabbing the first thing I see, it’s a bright blue jumpsuit practically the same color as LeX’s hair. Starving , I rush to get dressed, only to discover Lex sitting on our bed, his hands covering his face. Crawling up behind him, I wrap my arms and legs around his waist from behind. “ Hey , what’s going on?”

“ My life has been turned upside down, and I have no idea what to do next.”

“ Oh , mister dramatic, as long as we have each other everything else will be fine. No matter what is going on anywhere ... or everywhere else, you will always have me.

Talk to me, LeX . I hate it when I have no idea what's going on in that beautiful head of yours. I understand you are worried about Ember and the youngling, but the Lord of Light will see us through this. He has never steered us wrong yet."

" Will you take my mind off things and tell me about this dream of yours?"

Lovingly , I lean my head against his back while he plays with my toes like he's never seen them before.

" It was weird LeX . To the point that I swear I'm still having flashbacks from it. I think it's because we've been so focused on finding the humans, that somehow my subconscious flipped on me. That's all I can figure because it was so real, I felt like I was really there. I could smell things and was even experiencing them like I was really living it. I still feel like something or even everything is off, but I can't seem to figure out what.

Okay , here goes, and yes it sounds crazy, but I -was-human ! Literally , I lived an entire life on another world and all of it had to have happened in a matter of hours ... I think ... Lord knows it felt much longer than that while I was in the dream. And an even stranger thing is all these human words I've suddenly started using. I know we studied their race extensively and I've been around Ember and Qwin a lot, but it's like I'm now speaking a whole other language." Suddenly my head starts to hurt, and I rub my temples.

" How peculiar ... now that I think about it, I don't remember actually talking to Ember or Qwin that often. Anyway , I'm getting off the subject. You would not believe what I looked like as a human either. The brain is an amazing thing because I swear you would think I suddenly just got all these scales and then turned yellow overnight. Here I go, rambling and off the subject again. The dream was so detailed I could remember growing up, even certain events. Like how I gained the scar I have on my knee where I wrecked my hover bike as a youngling. I can even recall meeting

you for the first time at med school and all the fooling around we did as we sneaked into each other's dorm rooms.

Or I think it was you anyway; you looked the same but so different. You still had all this luxurious hair, but it was because you were in a band. Why my mind made that up, I have no clue because you sure can't carry a tune even though you often try in the ionizer.

I even relived that horrible plague that occurred on that outer sector planet that was affecting all their young carnivores, but in my dream it was the human's children instead. Even my heart felt heavy there, and I got really sick, but you were there to fix me, as always. I even saw the pods, but they were in a completely different setting than floating around, damaged in space. Near the end, right before I heard ViN's youngling crying, I could smell danger and the dark clouds in the distance were terrifying. Even in another life, I was reaching out to you, always looking for you, but you seemed to be a shadow. Mostly I could only see your reflection, but I could hear your voice and feel your presence all around me.

Never have I been more thankful than to wake up and realize I'd been dreaming the entire time. I wouldn't want to live that nightmare for real, my mind isn't strong enough to handle all of that. The most bizarre thing is, some stuff is still a little fuzzy, like I have been asleep longer than usual. I know all of this sounds crazy and if it was someone else telling me this story, I would suggest they be evaluated."

The longer my story goes on the more tense LeX feels, and I swear it's like he is hiding something. " You did sleep more than usual. I tried to wake you several times, but you looked so peaceful I just let you rest. You must have been more tired than you realized. Other than that odd dream, do you feel all right?"

" You must have only woken me up enough for my mind to drift off somewhere else. Because I can remember you asking me to come with you. We ended up walking

together in a field full of flowers. My goodness, remind me not to eat before I go to bed anymore. I'm still worn out, and I just got up. You know, you sure feel good. Having you all wrapped up in my legs and arms where you can't escape is something I'm enjoying. I was even thinking if we have time before dinner this evening, we might be able to sneak in a quicky." I reach up, my teeth grazing LeX's ear only for him to quickly unwrap himself, practically jumping out of my arms.

"The sustenance should be here soon. I had better get clean up."

Sitting on the bed all sprawled out, I scoot back against the headboard. "Did you order my favorite?"

He looks at me like he's never seen me before. "I just told Destiny to send a tray, I did not ask for anything specific. I will be back in a moment."

"Take your time, I'm just going to spend this rare chance to relax for a little bit. I'm so exhausted this rising if I fall asleep, wake me up so that I have time to get dressed for dinner and find out where Destiny moved all my clothes too. Hey, before you go, what did you do with that book you were reading me earlier? I want to see what happens with Randy and Petal."

"I left that holo pad in the med bay; do you want me to go get it before I get in the Ionizer?"

"Not if you promise to read to me later."

"I promise."

Chapter Nineteen

LEX

Just act normal ... Just act normal ... No matter how many times I say those words it is not working. She acts like she has known me forever and I have no idea what to do.

Whispering , “ SAGE , SAGE , can you hear me?”

A small holo form appears in the viewer in front of me. “ Medic LeX , you called?”

I motion for her to keep her voice down. “ Oh , thank the Lord of Light you heard me. I really need your help.”

“ You know I will do all I can for you. I was pleased to see your mate is no longer comatose.”

“ So , you are aware of the health status my mate has been in up until recently?”

“ Yes , of course, you know SCOUT does not hide anything from me. I would have been here to greet her sooner if I had not been trying to help ANDI with the humans. Some are not adjusting to the radical changes as quickly as others and I have been trying to provide as much comfort as possible for them. Also , I believe there is something serious bothering Kira . However , no matter how many times I offer my council, she will not confide in me. I’m sorry LeX , you didn’t call me here for those issues. What can I help you with?”

“ Rylie thinks she’s always been with me, like born a LeXorkon . Her memories of her life on Earth have somehow merged with mine, and I will be damned, but now I am just as confused. Should I tell her or just let it go? What I mean is, she recalls pieces of things. She just asked me about the book I was reading her while she was in the coma. It’s like her mind has made up its own version of her life.”

“ Oh my, I can see the issue. Are you sure this is what is occurring? She just laid down, should I have SCOUT secretly scan her?”

“ Yes , yes, please!”

“ Give me a moment, he is activating the scan now. In the meantime, what do you feel we need to do to make this world believable to ... for her?”

“ She needs clothes, even spoke about how plain my ... I mean our rooms are. Rylie will need proof of our past together; films, holo pad messages, something. Not to mention, I do not know what to do at this point in our relationship. We have jumped forward in time. In her mind, we have been together for quite some time. That’s not the case with me, since she just got here. I was prepared to court her the way human males do, but she acts as if we have been a couple for orbital rotations. What happens when the others, like Qwin or Ember , who know she was in a coma bring that up? Lord of Light , help me!”

“ Calm down LeX , we can figure this out. First of all, let me send out a notice to all that would be, or have been involved with Rylie , and let them know the current circumstances. I will tell them to act as naturally as possible. This should not be an issue because she never truly interacted with any of them on Earth . Even though Qwin knew her in passing, if she is prepared, I am sure she can wing it when they meet. Thankfully , the staff in the med bay is mostly bots, so that shouldn’t be an issue either.”

SCOUT appears in the viewer a few inches taller than SAGE , instantly wrapping his arms around her holographic waist. “ Medic LeX , the scans show a full physical recovery; there is not even a single trace of the pancreatic sickness that plagued her on Earth . Her mind, well that’s a different story all together as it seems she not only absorbed your essence, but your memories. Now , how they have merged together, I cannot tell you, but simply from observing your interactions, I would say this is irreversible. We had no idea how your blood nor your essence was going to affect her, but I believe this merge is the aftereffect.”

“ Should I tell her that she was once human?”

“ I do not believe I would because that might cause more harm than good. She seems happy, and most of all, she is healthy. If I were you, I would simply make sure to keep her in your good graces. However , a male that has been mated this many rotations would know more intimate things about his mate. So , you need to start really paying attention to her wants and needs. And I have a feeling you may get in trouble for things not entirely your fault in the future because of this. One thing I would caution you is talking about the past too much. If she brings up something, try to change the subject, as there is no reason for her to suffer unnecessarily. SAGE my love, I leave the clothing and decorations up to you.”

And with a nod of his head, SCOUT is gone. Immediately , SAGE refocuses on me. “ Since I have no real knowledge of what clothing she prefers I will fill her closet with a variety. Let me handle the reason most of her clothing was missing from her closet to begin with. I will also take care of the decor in your rooms as well. Go get cleaned up and I’ll have some new garments readily available for you as well by the time you get out.”

SAGE’s image disappears and I turn toward the Ionizer , only to hear voices in the other room.

Chapter Twenty

RYLIE

I was just about to doze off when I heard SAGE's normal bing. "Greetings , Mistress Rylie , you all have been gone for ages! Forgive me for stealing your used garments and emptying your closet. I figured after such a long trip you would be ready for some new designs. Alana and CIP have been working on some very risqué, but flattering ideas I think would look amazing with your coloring."

" Thank you, SAGE . I have missed talking to you and I appreciate the new clothes, since my others were getting quite ragged. If this jumper is one of their new patterns, I simply love it. I will say it was odd walking into the closet only to find three garments in there, though. I felt like a stranger in my own house ... I mean dwelling. Because I had full intentions of seducing LeX , I didn't even take the time to throw on panties or even a bra, but his mind is off somewhere else as usual. The fact that I have coaxed him into reading to me in the evenings is a miracle.

Speaking of LeX , while he isn't in here, do you think you could do something with this room? It's as sterile as the med bay. I was going to ask you before we departed, but things got busy quickly, and we ended up leaving in a hurry right after the Destroyer was cleared for the mission. I would love to have some color in here, and maybe some new furniture. A large chaise lounge where we could snuggle after a hard day would be amazing."

" Rylie , I will get right on the remodel; do you want me to run my ideas by you before I implement them?"

“ Lord , no SAGE ... We all know you’re the best at what you do.”

“ I believe your lunch is on its way and I will have your closet restocked by the time dinner is served. While you are enjoying your reunion with all the others, I will work on this space; I already have some ideas in my head. We will talk again later.” She curtsies, then blinks out as usual. Then the door to our rooms open, and a bot comes rolling in with lunch.

“ Crap , I was going to ask her how Ember was doing,” I whisper out to an empty room.

Picking up the holo pad lying on LeX’s side of the bed, I try to open it several times, but it isn’t responding to my touch. I’m literally shaking it when he walks out of the bathroom, and I stop dead as I watch him button up the shirt he’s put on.

“ It must not be my day because it seems like everything electronic I touch isn’t working. You know you are just as handsome today as you were the first time I saw you. I could just lick every inch of all that yumminess.”

He just rolls his eyes playfully before giving me that unique smile that makes his sharp cheekbones rise, highlighting the multiple scales along his hairline. His tall, lean shape slowly disappears as he finishes closing the shirt before tucking it into a pair of dark pants I don’t remember seeing on him before.

“ Don’t tell me SAGE took all your stuff, too? Are those new? I don’t remember seeing those ...turn around so I can see your butt.”

Awkwardly , he turns slightly, shaking his butt at me.

Confused and suddenly worried, I scoot off the bed and walk over to him. Grabbing him by the arm, I push myself up against his chest, taking his hands and placing them

on the top of my hips. “ Hey , is everything all right between us? You just seem stiff and uncomfortable with me all of a sudden, and I don’t know what I’ve done.”

He moves his hands off my hips to grasp my face as he looks down lovingly at me. “ I am sorry Rylie , please forgive me if I have made you feel that way. I am just having a hard time winding down. We have been working at such a fast pace my mind has not caught up yet. You have done nothing ... you are perfect in my eyes.”

Lifting up on my toes, I pull him closer only to falter when I catch him regarding me so intently. “ What ? Do I have a booger on my face or something? Why are you looking at me like you’ve never seen me before?”

“ I have never seen you this way before ... it’s a new rising. I have not seen that sparkle in those glorious blue eyes of yours or felt the heat of your skin against my hands or got to kiss you for the first time all over again. Things change so fast; I don’t want to take you for granted. You must know that my entire existence is and would be nothing without you.”

“ So , what you’re saying is, you kinda like me?”

“ Yes , just a little bit. Why don’t you lay down and take a quick nap? I will go check on ViN and Ember , then come back to get you before dinner with everyone else.”

“ A nap sounds amazing actually, you don’t mind going by yourself?”

“ Not at all.”

“ Ok , you talked me into it, but you’re not leaving until I get a kiss, mister.”

“ My pleasure.”

LeX's hands become firmer on my face as he leans down. His fingers trace over my jaw line as I pull myself tighter against his chest. My lips part as his thumb brushes over them. Reaching up, I comb my fingers into the thick hair at the nape of his neck. Tingles wash down my back as he closes the gap between our mouths, first with the utmost gentleness, then with the hunger of a starved man. I lose track of time as I try to push myself even closer ... my only rational thought is more .

He doesn't even release my lips as he effortlessly lifts me up into his arms. Walking us over to the bed, my heart races as he kneels down, slowly lowering me to the sleeping platform. Releasing my lips, LeX gently unlocks my arms from around his neck before kissing me on the forehead. "Take a nap, I'll be back in a little bit."

Reaching out for him, he backs away, but not before I can clearly see the effect the kiss also had on his body. "No fair, tease."

"I simply did what I was told ... you only asked for a kiss."

"Remind me to put it in writing next time." Once again, my stomach is full of butterflies, because his kisses seem to always do that to me.

LeX pulls a light cover up over me before tucking one of my wild curls behind my ear. "You are so beautiful."

"Don't try to butter me up now, if all you're going to do is tease a girl and then run off."

"But you know I will always come back."

His comm unit goes off on his arm and he hits the button, not even looking at the message as he sits staring down at me like he has never seen me before. "Do you need anything before I go? I will not be gone long."

“ Nahh , I’m good, but promise to wake me up if you need me.”

“ I will.”

He reaches over, turning the light down over the bed before getting up. For a tic, I think he might change his mind, but he just turns away and I watch as he practically flees the room. Slightly concerned, I decide to try and find a way to talk to him later. Something is wrong, I can just feel it.

Chapter Twenty-One

LEX

Stopping right outside our door, I lean my head against the wall. Most of my life I have dreamed of a mate of my own, only to find myself running from her instead of pulling her to me. Lord of Light , how I want to devour her. Heaven knows I wish I could walk back into that room, strip her clothes off and explore her more thoroughly. But I cannot, it is wrong on so many levels.

I thought I would have to prove my worth, my love, my devotion, but we have jumped straight to the encore, and I feel like this turn of events has cheated us both. Do I worship her? Absolutely ! Do I know without a shadow of a doubt that she is all I will ever need or want, yes. But no one gave her those choices and I feel like I am straddling an abyss.

Part of me says dive in and hope for the best, yet the more rational side says to proceed with caution. I can see the hurt in her eyes when she feels like I am pushing her aside. She has no way of knowing that I am only doing it out of worry for her. What if I say or do something that makes her regress, or even worse ... remember?

Forcing my feet forward, I take the lift down to the dock and head for the Explorer . My thoughts are everywhere but where they should be right now. Just as I step onto the ship, the sound of a small cry jerks my head up and out of my own concerns.

“ ViN , what are you doing here? You should still be in bed resting.”

“ I am sore and slightly uncomfortable brother, but I felt like it was wrong to enjoy Ami without her mother. So , I had the Destroyer have one of the med bots roll me down here in this chair. Thankfully , no one witnessed me in such a weakened state.”

“ May I ?” Holding my arms out, ViN hesitates for a moment before handing the youngling to me. “ Oh my, what a heartbreaker you are going to be; you are quite beautiful little one.” She coos sweetly, a small smile on her face as I bounce her gently. ViN takes a minute to stand up and stretch his arms where he has been holding her for so long.

“ Medic LeX , I did a complete scan of the youngling while you were taking a slight break, and she is in perfect health. She does seem to run slightly warmer than other young humans, but I believe that is normal for her since that has not changed since her birth. Master ViN’s natural healing is coming along nicely as well.”

“ Thank you, Destiny .”

“ My pleasure.”

“ ViN , look at all this hair. I didn’t notice this when she was born, it’s so light it blends right in with her skin. From the initial scans, I thought she would have her mother’s coloring, but it appears she is taking on her own features.”

“ I am pleased that she is so striking. I would not make a very pleasant looking female, so I would have hated to kill anyone who told her she was unattractive.

My sudden laughter makes her jerk, and I swear for a second her eyes turn red. Blinking , they are back to bright blue, and I wonder if my own are playing tricks on me. “ Where is Tordan ?”

“ You just missed him and Luna . They stayed until the med chamber started shutting

down. If this screen is right and that is a countdown, it should be opening any time now.” And sure enough, not a tic later the system beeps and the med chamber’s top starts to slide upwards. ViN immediately has his arms around Ember , lifting her out gently.

“ Frack ViN , give her a moment to awaken.”

“ She will be more at ease in my arms. I will carry her anywhere she needs to go.”

“ What about this one, she can’t exactly get around on her own yet. If you are carrying her mother, what is she going to do?”

“ I will hold them both so that she never feels neglected.”

“ There is no need for that. I will keep her with me while your mate breaks her sleep, ViN .” A huge set of arms comes around me, swiftly snatching little Ami out of my embrace. “ Frack SoL , how did you sneak up on me like that?” He completely ignores me as he talks to Ami lovingly.

“ Look who is happy to see Unka SoL ! That’s right, pretty girl knows who loves her, don’t you? Ohh , what a pretty smile, just for Unka SoL .”

“ Damnit SoL , I just got her and you are already stealing her away.” The big goof just shrugs his shoulders like... try to take her back. While I stand here shaking my head, Alana peeks around his large form.

“ Sorry LeX , it’s my fault. I couldn’t stay away any longer. Gimme , gimme, SoL . I’m determined to be the favorite aunt. OHHH my heavens, you were right, she is stunning! Lord , the boys’ hearts you are gonna break when you get older. She is precious ViN , you guys did so well.”

“ Thank you, I too think she is exceptional.”

“ She better be, after all I went through to get her here!” Ember’s voice is weak, but her smile is huge as she looks over at Alana . “ ViN find us a seat, babe. I want to hold my daughter before she forgets who I am.”

SoL grabs a big lounger, effortlessly maneuvering it into the middle of the floor with one arm, something that would have taken ViN and I both to move together. ViN sits down, settling Ember on his lap and the moment she holds her hands out, Alana bends down giving her Ami .

I stand back, feeling like I am intruding as tears flow from Ember’s eyes as she looks lovingly down at little Ami . Alana pats my arm gently, motioning for me to move, and we all three sneak out of the room to give ViN and Ember some private alone time. Alana is practically jumping with joy.

“ Guys , wasn’t she absolutely precious? I will say I was shocked at how human she appears. If no one was told differently, you would have no idea ViN was even her father.”

“ I completely agree, Alana . Even though getting her here was quite unconventional, she appears to be thriving.”

SoL’s large horns pull Alana closer as he bends down to kiss the top of her head. Her excitement is making all of us smile as she bounces around with a huge smile on her face. His voice is full of love as he animatedly talks about helping with Ami . “ I thought she would be larger as well. When Rylie first handed her to me in the med lab, I was scared I was going to break her accidentally. She is barely a handful; even our Keida was bigger than that when she was born.”

Alana reaches out, touching my arm. “ I can’t wait to hold my own baby in my arms.

Thank you LeX , for finally making SoL see reason when it comes to us having a child of our own.”

“ You two will be wonderful parents and even though it may not occur as quickly as you wish, remember all things happen when they are supposed to. The enjoyable part is all the practice in the interim.

The moment those words are out of my mouth, SoL grabs a giggling Alana up in his arms.

“ Where are you two running off to?”

“ We need practice, doctor’s orders!” Alana waves as SoL’s large footsteps walk down the corridor. I stand there thankful and scared all at the same time. The Lord of Light has blessed our family beyond measure.

My comm unit dings and I head back up to my quarters. Walking in, I notice that the lights are dim, so Rylie must still be resting. Approaching the bed, I just stand there looking down at her, so very thankful that she is here with me even if it is not going as I had planned. For a moment I am terrified that she might not wake up again. But she must have sensed my presence because she suddenly reaches across the bed for the stand beside it, her hand searching for something.

“ Can I help, sleeping Angel ?”

“ I can’t find my glasses.” Just as I step forward, I stop.

She sits up, a frown on her face. “ Sorry , I have no idea why I was looking for something I don’t even wear.” Rubbing her temples, she shakes her head before swinging her legs over the side of the bed.

“ Is your head hurting?”

“ No , I just feel as weird as I’m acting. If this doesn’t stop, I might have you scan me later just to see if I may have picked up a bug or something. What time is it? Why are none of the electronics working in this room? I could have sworn there was a clock on that stand over there. Destiny , have you turned off things in this room for a reason?”

“ Forgive me Mistress Rylie , I will reinstate everything as quickly as possible.” I hear LeX’s comm unit go off and he rapidly types something in. The room immediately comes to life, monitors and holo pads start powering on right afterward.

“ Did she just ask you for permission to turn things on? LeX , aren’t these my rooms as well? Why are my commands not enough to make her comply? And why do you suddenly look guilty?”

“ Ahh , I just asked her to turn everything off when I knew you were going to take a nap. You know the monitors and the holo pads go off and on randomly, and you needed your rest.”

“ Good save, but I don’t believe a word of it. If I didn’t have to get dressed for this dinner, me and you would be having a heart to heart right about now. How is Ember ?”

“ She was doing well. I didn’t do a secondary scan on her because she was consumed with little Ami , but I will in the next few risings.”

“ You know the med chambers are very thorough. I’m sure she’s fully healed, or it wouldn’t have opened.”

Her new scaling catches in the room’s lights as she runs her hands up and down her

arms. “ I need a lotion treatment. I’m itching all over; you would think these scales were new with as sensitive as they are right now.”

“ Maybe when we get back if the world isn’t ending, I can run you a nice hot, soothing bath.”

“ World ending? Let’s hope that’s not on the agenda for today, I’ve already lived through that once. Sorry , that didn’t come out right, ... I swear LeX , I’m tripping over my own words today. Maybe I should apologize to everyone in advance when we get to dinner. At this rate, it’s a guarantee I am going to say something wrong.”

“ Rylie , we have all been under so much stress on this trip. You need to stop pushing yourself and just relax. I know we don’t have much practice with it, but we need to take more down time just for us. So , get up, get dressed, and let’s go enjoy some well-needed family time.”

Chapter Twenty-Two

LEX

When Rylie comes walking out of the refreshing chamber, I almost drop the holo pad I have in my hand. She twirls around, a smile on her face as she walks over to me.

“ What do you think?”

“ You are stunning! Forget it, we are staying here because there is no way I am going to allow any others to see you in that ... garment.”

Her shoulder length, unruly curls are pinned up in a cute twist with only a few random ones flowing around her face. The dress, I believe it's called, hugs her small waistline only to flare out just above her knees. But it's the heart-shaped neckline that accentuates her ample breasts and brings your eyes up to the light blue, greenish scales now outlining her from the top of her head down her arms. Unlike me, her lower extremities have remained untouched by the changes that I inflicted upon her. She must have taken my words literally and I see her smile drop.

“ It's too much, isn't it? It was just so pretty I couldn't resist. I'll go change.”

She turns to head back into the refreshing chamber. Quickly , I reach out, grabbing her arm lightly. “ You absolutely will not, you look amazing. I am just jealous of all the other eyes that will gaze upon you. But as I am not allowed to keep you locked away, I believe I can share you with the others for a short period of time.”

“ Are you sure? I’m not used to wearing anything this revealing.”

“ Forgive me for my words and the fact that they made you feel insecure, Rylie . You are a beautiful female; you should never hide that. Lord of Light knows I am honored to show the world that you are mine. Come , let us go before I get myself in trouble again.”

I am rewarded with a small smile, but I can’t tell if it’s real or forced. This not knowing is unacceptable to me and without telling her the truth, I have no idea how to proceed without these constant missteps. She is quiet the entire time we are in the lift and for once I am grateful to hear voices as we near the dining chamber.

Walking in the door we stop instantly, both of us taking a moment to appreciate all the work that SAGE has put into welcoming us home as the room has been transformed into a huge Nebula . Colors change all around us as large screens play back some of the more intense moments of our trip.

A group seems to have gathered in the corner. Spotting SoL’s large frame, we make our way over only to find Ember sitting on ViN’s lap, holding little Ami . The moment Ember sees us she reaches her hand out for Rylie’s , taking it in her own as she rocks Ami in her other one.

“ Lex , Rylie , thank you both so much for making it possible for me to be here with you all.”

“ Ember , you did all the hard stuff on your own. The amount of pain and discomfort you were in, and never spoke of, just shows your true character.”

“ I knew better than say anything, LeX . ViN would have flipped out and at the time, I knew there was nothing he could do to help me. He had a job to do, and he didn’t need to be distracted, and I knew he would be, so I kept it to myself. Having her here

now was worth it all, though.”

“ How are you feeling?”

“ I’m tired, but other than that I’m fine.”

“ Did you hear that? Momma is tired, so come here to Unka SoL and he will snuggle you while we give your mother a break.”

Ember just laughs as her daughter is snatched out of her arms.

“ Look what I made for you this rising, it’s your first rattle.”

We all stand around watching as SoL shows Ami Lynn how to hold the tiny rattle in her hand, her observant eyes watching him intently. The moment it’s in her hand she waves it back and forth and we all laugh as she hits him on the chin with it several times.

Ember motions for ViN to let her up and I can’t help but grin when he reluctantly does but still doesn’t let her out of arm’s reach as Qwin walks up to hug her. All this time, Ami has been shaking that rattle aggressively and SoL has started pretending to dodge her attempts at hitting his chin, and each time she does get him, she smiles.

“ Papa ViN , I believe we are going to have a little fighter on our hands.”

“ Yes , but let’s wait on the encouragement until she has a little better control.” ViN gently reaches up, stopping her frantic swinging and her cooing stops, and I swear she growls.

The next thing we know, the blanket she is wrapped in is on fire and SoL is slinging it off her in a panic. ViN instantly reaches for his now completely red-scaled daughter

as her fingers spark with tiny flames. The rest of her clothes and her diaper fall to the floor in a fiery ball. Before any of us can move, one of the bots swoops in, removing it from the area. Everyone else seems to be freaking out, but ViN calmly bounces her in his arms.

“ Looks like you did get some things from dear old dad, huh? Calm my sweet one, you can beat on Unka SoL all you want. That’s right, show us those beautiful blue eyes. I am sorry I made you stop, yes ... he is already your favorite.” Bouncing her gently, she starts to fuss again, and Ember reaches up to take her, but hesitates when ViN shakes his head no. “ Shush , my little queen of fire, momma cannot hold you when you are like this, you will hurt her. Do you understand me? I think you do.”

She hiccups a few times, but her cries settle, and we all watch as her body gradually returns to her human state.

SoL seems more upset than anyone else does as ViN expertly handles this new development.

“ Does someone want to tell me what just happened? One moment I am holding a human angel in my arms, and the next she is what appears to be a baby dragon.”

ViN laughs, a rare thing out of my very serious brother. “ Looks like you just explained it to yourself, brother. It seems like when Ami Lynn here becomes angry, she shifts into something similar, if not more intense than I am. I have not heard of a full shift in my lifetime on Vinzel , or anywhere else, but it seems my daughter is about to change all of that.”

Ember is standing next to them, a worried frown on her face. “ ViN , what are we going to do? Babies tend to be upset more than they are calm.”

“ We are going to fireproof her bedding and all her clothes until she can control the

shift. She can already understand us, so it won't be as bad as you are imagining. Frack , when I was a youngling, I burned up everything. It is very common for my kind until we get slightly older.”

Ember just shakes her head, a playful grin on her face as she looks around at all of us. “ Lord of Light help us all when she gets older, and we have a teenage version of ViN to deal with! We're going to need more than a few pieces of fireproof clothing; she's going to be a handful.”

ViN smiles once again, “ That she will love.” Now that Ami is calm again, her tiny legs kick as ViN holds her in his massive hands. “ Destroyer , can you have another blanket, and some garments brought to us for the youngling?”

Before she can respond, ANDI pops up in between all of us. With his over the top, massive hat and small cane in his hand, he bows to all of us. “ If I could have all your attention for a moment. I have been waiting until you gathered in one location to make this introduction.” He holds his hand out and instantly another joins his holographic form. “ I would like to formally introduce ... Destiny . I know several of you were already calling her by this name, but from this moment forward, the Destroyer is no longer her given nor hull name. It has been replaced by the name Destiny , a gift from Commander DaR , and Captain EvO for all she has done to protect her crew.”

Destiny curtsies slightly, and is instantly surrounded by the females, who all seem to be talking at once. ANDI of course, is right in the middle of the group, as he loves the females. EvO walks up beside me.

“ I wanted to let you know that after dinner, Qwin and I are going to be gone for several rotations. There are a few places I want to show her before we are sent back out. Are you staying on board or heading planet side?”

I am not sure since things are odd, to say the least. I plan on staying close to ViN and Ember at least for a few rotations, just in case. After that, we will see.”

ViN’s voice rises over everyone for a moment. “ Hey girls, I hate to break up all the chatter, but this youngling needs some clothing before she pees all over me.”

“ Give me a tic to get them treated Master ViN , and I will have one of the bots bring them out.”

Rylie turns from the others to glance back at me with a large smile on her face. Just as I reach out to pull her into me, Qwin joins EvO and none of us know what to say with Rylie’s next words.

“ Qwin dear, I swear you look so familiar to me. I know how odd that sounds because we have been on this ship together for quite some time now. I don’t know if it’s that outfit or what, but I seem to be having a case of déjà vu.”

“ Crazy girl, you’re imagining things. Do you and LeX have any plans for the next few weeks of downtime?”

“ I don’t know. We haven’t really talked about it.”

Never before have I been so thankful as to witness the dining bots start bringing the food out. I practically pick Rylie up as I turn her around to face the tables.

“ Wow , you hungry big guy?”

“ Yes , plus I know how my brothers eat, and if we do not get a seat quickly, all the food will be gone.”

Thank the Lord of Light , the rest of the meal goes by uneventfully. Everyone who

takes a moment to stop and talk to us has kept the conversations light and simple, so at least there are no more close calls. Destiny and ANDI strolled around the room, making sure everyone is taken care of and just as we finish and are getting up, ANDI stops in front of me.

“ Medic LeX , your father has scheduled a meeting in a few tics. He is trying to catch everyone before they depart the ship.”

“ Thank you, ANDI , I will be right there. You wouldn't mind escorting my beautiful mate to our quarters, would you?”

“ I would be honored. Mistress Rylie , would you like to take a stroll with me? “

“ Oh , ANDI I would be delighted, unless you are needed elsewhere?”

“ I am at your service ma'am. Anyway , you will look good on my arm as we parade around the upper deck.”

“ You don't want to say that too loud, Ms . Destiny might get her feelings hurt.”

“ She knows where my metal heart lies and is willing to share me to a point. Come beautiful one, let us be on our way as I can see the other males heading to the conference room.”

“ I will be along shortly.” Kissing her on the forehead, I watch as she talks animatedly with ANDI as they walk off together.

Rylie

“ ANDI , thank you for escorting me to my rooms. This evening has been a delight even with my muddled thoughts.”

“ It was my honor. I am pleased you are adapting so positively to the changes forced upon you. Things being a little chaotic is normal, considering the circumstances.”

“ Ok , now I’m even more confused. Are you talking about us being back home, or something else?”

“ Oh my, I believe I may have misspoken and opened a can of worms.”

“ That’s enough! Why do I feel like people are walking on eggshells around me? Enough of the cryptic bullshit, what’s going on?”

“ I am not at liberty to tell you straight out, but I would advise you to view some of the past risings on your holo pad; that is all I can tell you right now. But once you have, please call out to me and I will answer any questions you might have.”

“ Are you saying everything I need to know is on that holo pad?”

“ I believe the mental clarification you are searching for is on that device, yes. I just hope I have not caused you more harm than good when this is over and done. If you will excuse me dear, Commander DaR is requesting my presence.”

He leaves me standing in front of our rooms with more questions than answers. So , the first thing I do since the door actually opens this time is head straight for the holo pad that is blinking next to the bed. Not knowing exactly what to look for, I am shocked when it turns on, it’s feed showing back to when the pods were being brought in. Sitting down on the bed, I watch the scenes unfold in front of me. My mind is suddenly a lot clearer.

Chapter Twenty-Three

LEX

I am one of the last to walk into the conference room. Father , Commander ZoD and Tordan are all present on the large holo screens at the front of the room, since they are all in different locations. It seems like everyone is in attendance and the last time this occurred, we were sent out to explore the Nebula . As soon as the soundproof doors close behind me, Father motions for all of us to sit down.

“ I know you all are ready for a well-deserved break, but SCOUT has just brought something to our attention that I believe needs to be addressed immediately. SCOUT , the floor is yours.”

SCOUT appears off to the side where everyone can see him. “ As you are all aware, the Jynrel pirates that took AvX and his mate before Commander DaR could intercept them were bragging that they were told the Korgons had dumped four cryo pods in an unknown area. Up until the Destroyer , excuse me Destiny , returned with the exact signal indicator of all the pods you recovered, I had no way of tracing or finding out if that claim was factual. However , while on your return trip Captain EvO , I believe you were informed of a set of beacons coming from an area where there are no visible planets or anything else in the outer sector of our solar system?”

“ Yes SCOUT , I had Destiny scan the entire area. Even though we could not pinpoint their whereabouts, the alerts were extremely close in nature to the human pods we found in the Nebula .”

“ I have a theory for the reason I believe you could not see or locate them. I think something is blocking our scanners. Some sort of barrier. I have asked the Commanders to reconsider another search in that area once Destiny is restocked. But before we do that Captain EvO , we would like your input.”

“ I have no objections, but I would like to leave my crew intact ... if they want to remain on board that is.”

Father speaks up, “ I have already spoken to ViN and Ember . Even with the youngling, they have agreed to stay on board. So , the ship and its personnel will need to have some training when it comes to her safety and care. Rafe approached me earlier this rising asking if his mate could stay on the ship with him and I granted his request as well. That only leaves you, LeX . Son , are you willing to head back out, and what are your main concerns if you do?”

“ I have no personal objections, but I need to talk to Rylie before giving you my final answer. I have made enough decisions for her already. My one request is a complete restocking of my lab, and a med chamber is critically needed. Given their complexity and difficulty to build, could you ask MeK when the next one will be available so we can adjust our mission timeline?”

“ Son , I will take your request into consideration. There is one other thing I want you all to be aware of. This mission is to be keep a secret at all costs; there are things or individuals in our sector that are working against us. So , information on where you are heading will only be known by a select few. Which once again leaves this ship vulnerable if you get into trouble in an unknown sector. SCOUT is guaranteeing me that we will not lose contact with you this time. But I need you all to be prepared for anything as once again, you will be too far away for us to aid quickly.

Also , Destiny is being equipped with a more advanced cloaking and defense system before she leaves port. Any other concerns you might have, please bring them up at

our next meeting. And I almost forgot, you all must be back before the warrior trials. Keida and Danny will be competing as well as HaL . I want the entire family present, if possible, just in case.”

“ I gather you anticipate problems at the games, Father ?”

“ EvO , I believe it would be the perfect opportunity to seriously hurt several members of our family, yes. Zura’s mother is still missing, and we have not been able to pin down which elder knew about the invasion of the Waldrin on Commander ZoD’s planet. SiN is working behind the scenes, and even though we have an idea of who is taking these steps against our people, we do not have enough proof to move forward. So , trust only the ones currently in this room, watch your wording on all holo messages, and be well. You are all dismissed. Enjoy your next risings. Strength and honor, Sons .”

Chapter Twenty-Four

RYLIE

In the last hour, I believe I have gone through every emotion. Anger , pain, hurt, awe, and now I'm just sitting here, staring at this dark holo pad. Suddenly curious, I walk into the bathroom and strip off the gown I have on, only to stand there in front of the large mirror, my eyes examining the new me.

At first, I feel like I'm looking at a stranger, but once the tears slow down, I realize I'm still me, just slightly different from what I was before. Different is the word that explains it all. Different world, appearance, life, expectations, reality. I really want to be mad at LeX , but instead I just stand here numb. I understand why he did what he did. Would I have done the same? I'm not sure. He must have felt something more for me than any of the others; to have taken the risks he did to save my life. Did he know this would happen? I don't think so, but would he have still made the same choices if he'd known the outcome?

All I'm doing is creating more questions for things I'm not sure I want to know the answers to. Running my fingers down my arms, I trace the line of delicate scales that end right above a mark on the inside of my wrist. The symbols and swirls mark me in some way. The small scales seem to only be on the upper part of my body. It's like someone quit drawing on me halfway through. I'm slightly smaller than I used to be, so I must have lost weight while in that pod. Once again, so many more questions.

Wiping another tear off my face, I stare back into my familiar blue eyes. I might look different on the outside, but I'm still in here.

Sighing wearily, I'm so caught up in categorizing all my differences I don't hear LeX come in until his head pops into the bathroom before instantly turning away since I'm standing here naked.

“ Sorry , I didn't mean to barge in on you.”

Normally , I would've been embarrassed, but his actions make more sense now. However , I wonder how far I can push him. I need to see who he really is; the gentleman he appears to be, or a man who simply saw an easy victim. My mind says he's honorable, but isn't it human nature to want proof?

Strolling out of the bathroom naked as the day I was born, I stand in what I'm hoping is a sexy pose against the doorway. My arm stretches up against the frame as I kick my hip out. Until he hears my voice, his back is to me. “ Doctor , I believe I might be in need of an inspection.” The moment those words come out of my mouth he turns around, his eyes looking everywhere but straight at me when he realizes I've not gotten dressed.

“ Rylie , it is cold in here, so you might want to put something on. Here , let me wrap this blanket around you.”

LeX grabs the light cover off the top of the bed and walks to me. His eyes stay above my head as he wraps the blanket around me, pulling the front closed. I pull my arm free, placing my hand in the middle of his chest, and pushing him backward into the only chair in the room until the back of his knees hit, and he falls into it.

Before he can say another word, I scramble up on his lap straddling his hips, and I have to bite my lip to keep from smiling as he suddenly looks terrified. He can't figure out what to do with his hands at first. When I grind down on him, he gently pushes my hips away from his very prominent hard-on. When one of my boobs falls out, he quickly pulls the blanket up over my shoulder before placing his hands back

on the arms of the chair.

Opening the blanket and letting it fall to my hips, I watch as he grips the chair tightly as I casually rub my naked chest against his shirt. Slowly , I start unbuttoning the front, my fingers tracing the dark scales that line his collarbone when he grips my wrist.

“ Rylie , stop. We need to talk.”

“ Now why would we want to do that when we could be doing this instead?” Fighting against every insecurity and moral I’ve ever had, I keep pushing. I have to know what he’s willing to tell me, because if he doesn’t tell me the truth now on his own, I believe my fragile state will shatter.

His bright yellow eyes stare up at me and just as I lower my lips to his, he moves his head to the side so I end up kissing his cheek instead. “ What is this game? Are you playing hard to get, LeX ?”

“ I wish that was the case, ... Rylie I must tell you something, and I am terrified because at this moment with you naked and writhing on my lap, I have never been happier, nor more frightened. Although I am afraid of your reaction to the truth, I do not want to jeopardize what we could have because of my secrets. Rylie , before we begin I ask for your forgiveness for the things I have done. No , ... I beg you for it.”

The entire time he has been talking to me, he has slowly covered me back up with the blanket.

“ Oh LeX , it can’t be that bad, can it? Wait a minute, are you cheating on me?”

“ What ? No , never!”

“ What makes you act like you could never do that? You’re a man, after all!”

“ He grabs my arms forcefully, making me look at him. Rylie , you are my world. My mate, the one and only female who could make my body come alive. That proof is pressed hard against your feminine heat as we speak. You are now the reason I take a new breath each rising. No one and nothing is more beautiful to me than you. Not only would I never, but I cannot cheat on you mentally or physically.”

His words are intense, and I can see the truth written all over his face. All my life I’ve looked, ... no dreamed of someone who would complete me and here he is. Who knew I had to lose everything, including my own identity, to find him?

“ Rylie , I did something to you. I took choices away that should have been yours to make. I forced changes and a bond upon you that you will probably never forgive me for.”

“ I know, LeX .”

“ No , let me finish while I still can.” His eyes well up with tears, and I know right then and there I have to stop this. There’s no reason for either of us to hurt any longer. Cupping his cheeks in my hands, I make him look at me.

“ LeX , I know everything.”

“ Explain everything, so that I know we are having the same conversation.”

“ I know you tore my pod apart with your bare hands in order to get me out before I drowned. I know you spent rotations without sleep or food researching ways to save me. How you reached out to every known source, even subjecting the other survivors to testing to see if there was a way to cure me. I saw your tears, felt the tremors in your voice when you read or talked to me. As you injected me with your blood and

very essence, I saw the horror on your face when my body began to change. I also recall the small smile on your face when you put this mark on my wrist that matches your own. Even the wonder in your eyes when I suddenly appeared by your side when you needed me the most with Ember . How you've tried to act like everything was normal after I came-to, thinking I'd dreamed about being a human. Is that the right conversation?"

"How ?"

"Full access granted by you for the holo pad."

"You probably hate me now." He looks away from me and I can see his heart breaking.

"I've never sat naked on anyone I hated. My mind might be slightly confused, but I'm pretty sure of that. Am I upset? Yeah ! But what was the alternative? I could have laid there in that coma for years, slowly wasting away and never knowing the life I was missing on the other side of my own dreams if you hadn't proceeded."

"Rylie , I had no idea my blood would change your looks when I gave it to you."

"I know that LeX . I read the scans even though you tried to hide them in a secret file. You were as shocked as I was when I realized this is not what I always looked like. Did you like my human form more than now?"

"No , you are the same to me. I could not care less what form or color you are as long as you are MINE . You were beautiful then and stunning now. I would be lying if I did not say I love that your scales and markings match my own. And I may sound slightly prehistoric when I say I like that it is obvious to others that you are mine. But I think the biggest question is, how do you feel about it?"

“ Scared and optimistic at the same time. My mind has somehow merged our lives, so some things are still fuzzy. This is the first time I can recall having no idea what to do next.”

“ You have options, and I will not interfere if you decide you do not want to remain with me or on this ship. But know if you leave me, I will find a way to follow you. If it takes me until my very last rotation, I will prove my love for you. I promise to always be honest and forthright from now on and never make another decision without discussing it with you first.

In the meeting, Father requested that the original crew remain on the ship when it departs once again, but I won't go without you. If you decide this is not something you want to do, that is fine. I will make other arrangements until we find a place you are happy.”

“ LeX , I have no idea what I want or what my future holds, so right now, I'm simply following your lead. I have always loved the stars and now's my chance to see them from the other side.”

“ No matter how long it takes Rylie I will win your trust and love, I vow it.”

“ I believe I'm a half in love with you already LeX . You forget, I was in your head too, and every time you came to me while I was in that world, we merged even more. I know you, the real you and not the confident doctor you try to show everyone else. Your heart and oath to care for others is in direct conflict with the training that was forced upon you as a child, simply because of who your father was. I saw how you feared ViN and EvO would turn away from you when you announced wanting to walk another path in life. I also saw the bright smile on your face when you saw your father and all your brothers standing in the back of the room at your graduation from med school. You work harder than most because you feel like you have to prove that your skills are needed as much as their weapons.

What I think you're missing is how much they call on you for advice and help when they're at their weakest. Men of your brothers' caliber wouldn't allow just anyone to treat or care for them when at their worst. You are a good man LeX , and I'm proud to be marked as yours. This is new to both of us, and we're going to fumble around for a while, but that's ok. I reckon the next question is ... what's next?"

LeX has rearranged the blanket so that he can rub the top of my bare legs. " What is next? What now? What have I missed? ... Those words have flowed through my thoughts so often I think I should make them into a poem or song. The real question is, what would you like to do? Of course, I am not talking about this late in the rising, but we are free to go and see whatever we want for several coming up."

" I have no clue, but damn, I'm alive and I've stepped into another world. If this is a dream, it's a good one! Even though I have no money and no way of making any right now, what's cheap to do around here?"

" Are you telling me you are worried about credits?"

" If that's money, then yeah."

" You see that mark on your arm?"

" Yeah , I was going to ask you about that."

" It's the House of DaR mark."

" And ?"

" It not only shows others that you are a member and protected by the most powerful family in this solar system, but you never have to worry about credits again."

Leaning in closer I ask, “ So what you’re saying is there are perks to being your girl?”

His hands find my naked waist, holding me still because I hadn’t realized I was still squirming all over his lap. “ Do you have any idea how hard it is to concentrate with you straddling me like this? The smell of your arousal, the feel of you under my hands, my mind knowing only a thin covering is separating me from tasting you, is pure torture. But leading back to that statement, only members of the immediate family are granted this mark, with the added benefit of showing the world that you are my mate. That somewhere, the Lord of Light decided I was worthy of a female of my own. You will never worry about a roof over your head or sustenance in your belly. It is an honor to take care of you.”

“ Wow , that’s a lot to take in and you’re right, it’s late so no exploring this evening, but you still promised to do something.”

“ I did?”

“ Yep , if I recall correctly, you said you would read to me.”

“ As much as it pains me to say this, you will have to get dressed if you want me to do that because my willpower only goes so far. I will run down to the med bay and grab the holo pad, then be right back.”

Chapter Twenty-Five

LEX

I have not been gone a tic when I come back to find my rooms in shambles. Maintenance and cargo bots are swarming in and out of my door, carrying multiple items each way. The sound of laughter has me sliding past a particularly large box only to find SAGE and Rylie talking animatedly.

“ Medic LeX , we will be done here shortly. What do you think of the changes so far?”

Looking around, I do not even recognize the place. “ How did you do this so quickly, SAGE ?”

“ Rotations of practice, to be honest, and a huge file on decorating doesn’t hurt either. Mistress Rylie gave me permission and free rein to make the changes, and I think it will turn out quite beautifully when the bots get finished.”

Rylie is walking around with a small smile on her face as her fingers trace each new piece.

My ... our rooms have now been separated into comfortable sitting and eating areas. The one chair I have used for rotations is now gone, replaced by a huge lounger covered in multiple colored pillows, and thin throws. The sleeping platform has been moved to another wall that faces the outer viewers of Destiny’s hull, so that you feel like you are sleeping under the stars.

“ SAGE , I do believe you have missed your calling. It is spectacular, but my approval is not needed, you should ask for Rylie’s .”

“ Mistress Rylie , is there anything you would like to add or change? We cannot leave these types of decisions to the males, or we would never have an ounce of color in our lives.”

“ I love it SAGE , I swear it was like you were in my head. A hobby of mine back home was helping others decorate.”

“ Well , now that you have shared your thoughts, and I know you also enjoy the refreshing of old spaces, would you permit me to request your help on some future projects? A fresh eye is always appreciated.”

“ I would love to SAGE ! Please call on me in the future anytime you’d like to toss around some ideas.”

SAGE literally jumps up and down while clapping her hands. “ Ohh , I am so excited. Destiny has two lower floors that need a complete overhaul and while I know you have just returned, may I call on you ... let’s say, in three rotations for a walk through?”

“ Absolutely SAGE , and thanks for including me.”

Smiling , I watch them talk like they are old friends. When the last maintenance bot leaves the room, everything is clean, and the room smells fresh, like a new start.

“ Well , I will leave you two to enjoy the rest of this evening.” SAGE throws a kiss at Rylie and then pops out. Both of us just stand there looking around at the place until Rylie starts laughing.

“ Damn , now that is service with a smile! Look at this whole area LeX , you would never know we’re even in the same rooms.”

“ SAGE is very thorough no matter what project she is working on, and I think that new lounge has our names all over it.” Shaking the holo pad back and forth, I kick off my shoes as Rylie grabs one of the light coverings off the back, then motions me forward.

“ Come on, let’s snuggle. I can’t wait to hear what’s next.”

My heart practically leaps in my chest when I sit down, and she throws the blanket over us both before curling up on my side. Draping my arm over her shoulder, I pull her close, kissing the top of her head before turning the holo reader on picking up right where I had left off.

“ Did I tell you that Ragon came in and took a look at my wing this morning? He thinks it will be a couple more days before it comes loose. He told me to just rest and to enjoy my time with the humans.”

“ Is he some sort of doctor for you guys?”

“ No , he is the oldest of his kind and he is the Dragonfly King . Ragon is the most powerful of them all against our enemies. Most of the dragonflies you see in the wildflower fields are his children, but he is the wisest of them all. It will be a very sad spring the year his spirit isn’t reborn. Tagon is the next oldest in his line. He listens closely to his father’s wisdom because he’s his heir and knows he will have to lead us when Ragon is gone.”

“ How do you know they’re his children?”

“ Well , they all have the same mark on their bodies. It’s no different from the one I

have on my arm.” She reaches her hand out to me and turns her wrist over where I see a birthmark on the underside.

“ Is it ok if I touch your arm? I will be gentle, I promise.”

She nods her head yes. I put a single finger under her arm, and I pull myself closer. On the inside of her wrist is a birthmark. “ My sister has worn pendants like this for years now. Is this a life tree?”

“ It’s the mark of my Spirit Mother .”

I gently lay her arm back down and scoot back. “ It’s beautiful, and the dragonflies all have the same markings?”

“ Only the protectors have the mark.”

“ Wow , your world is absolutely amazing. We could probably talk for days, and I would still be fascinated.”

“ And I have always felt that way about your world with all your freedoms. Like you can go wherever you choose, travel to faraway lands, have a family, a job you choose, and a purpose. Humans have the free will to make their own decisions. You make your destinies and futures. Whether it’s good or bad, you have choices. Fairies are born with a purpose and nothing more.” Petal looks away from me quickly, but not before I see the tears in her eyes.

“ Do you want more, Petal ?”

I was just flipping the page on the holo pad when Rylie’s breathing evens out and I realize she has fallen asleep. Turning the reader off, I contemplate moving both of us to the bed, but technically we have never truly slept together yet. So instead, I pull the

covers over both of us more securely and close my eyes, simply enjoying holding her next to me. Even though my thoughts are troubled because I have no idea how to move forward, sleep still finds me quickly.

Chapter Twenty-Six

LEX

A small giggle has me opening my eyes only to realize my arm is asleep where I was holding Rylie against me all darkness. “What are you so happy about this rising?”

“I was trying to cover up the evidence of me drooling all over you through the night, but I believe it’s in vain. Shame on you for being so comfortable.”

“I can see this being all my fault.” I reach down, tickling her playfully as she tries to scoot off the lounge. Laughing, Rylie gently slaps at my hands.

“Quit, before I pee on myself, crazy man.”

Her laughter can be heard all the way into the refreshing chamber before she shuts the door. Stretching, I take a moment to think of what we could do this rising. What would she enjoy seeing? Falcor has several nice dining areas, and his observatory is quite impressive, maybe I will start there.

“If you are getting dressed, throw on something comfortable; I want to show you a few things.”

While she is in there, I head into the closet hoping to get changed out of these wrinkled garments quickly while she freshens up. I am in the process of re-braiding my hair when she strolls into the closet, wrapped only in a towel.

“ Define comfortable?”

“ We will be walking a bit, then I plan on feeding you. Falcor is the massive star cruiser we have drydocked with and I thought you might want to explore some.”

“ Sounds like a date?”

“ It is whatever you want it to be. Tempting as you are in that towel, I am going to make myself walk out of this closet and allow you a moment to prepare yourself while I still can. You have no idea how tempting, nor how hard it is for me to concentrate when you appear before me like that.”

“ Maybe that’s the whole reason I keep doing it. You need your world a little shook up every now and then.”

“ Let me reassure you, you have mastered that. Now stop ... what did you call it ... teasing. Yes , stop this teasing so that I can walk around and show you off to others.”

“ Maybe I enjoy teasing you; what would you do if I slid this towel up a little?”

“ Rylie , I am doing my best to be honorable, and you are pushing all my buttons.”

She walks up to me slowly so I can see all the mischievousness in her smile. “ So , are you telling me that showing a little bit of skin pushes your buttons, hmm?”

“ You even being in the same space has practically kept me semi-hard for rotations. If you do not want to be spread out on the floor with my face buried between your legs, you will behave.”

What I was not prepared for was her dropping the towel. Rubbing a hand over my face, I force myself to stand still. “ Frack , Rylie , you are more than I deserve. My

hands are not worthy of touching you.”

“ Let me decide that. I need more than your words LeX . I need all of you and you’re holding back from me. If we’re going to make this work, you need to understand I’m a very physical person. I crave hugs, kisses, and your full attention. I’ve always considered myself high maintenance when it comes to relationships and most men can’t handle that. So , it was easier to be alone rather than settling. I don’t want your money or your status. I couldn’t care less who you are with others, it’s who you are with me that matters most. Despite my mind being a jumbled mess, I stand before you, offering everything, knowing exactly what I want. The choice is now yours, if you want me to get dressed, I will ...”

Lowering myself to my knees, I find her glorious breasts before my eyes. It is obvious that my hesitation is hurting her no matter what she says. Leaning forward, I give her plenty of chances to change her mind. My hands skim along her sides gently as I watch the scales on her arms raise slightly, rattling enough for me to hear the effect I’m having on her. Steadily and slowly, I trace her curves, memorizing every inch of her as I go as I pull her to the floor. Small whimpers leave her lips as I continue to arouse her further. Releasing her nipple from the hot confines of my mouth, I look up at her.

“ Are you comfortable? If not, you must let me know because I intend on being here for some time. I hunger for you deeply.”

Humor gleams in her eyes as she wriggles a bit, making her beautiful breasts jiggle with each motion. The impish grin that spreads across her face at my tortured groan tells me she is thoroughly enjoying this thing she calls “teasing.”

“ Oh yes, I’m very comfortable. Carry on with what you were doing.”

Inhaling the delightful aroma of her arousal, I lean forward and move down to reach

the alluring heaven between her thighs. Using both hands, I spread her legs wide to make room for the width of my shoulders. I want to be as close to her as I can possibly get. My mouth begins to water the closer I get to her honeyed depths. The first touch of my tongue against her distended pearl makes us both moan.

I smile to myself when I feel both of her little hands come up and tangle in my long hair, holding me to her so I cannot get away.

Silly little female, as if I would ever want to leave you.

With that thought in mind, I dive back into her delicious slit, using my tongue to ravage her pleasure button without mercy. Alternating long, hard licks with tiny teasing flicks using only the tip of my tongue, it doesn't take long before Rylie is writhing against my mouth, panting. Glancing up, the sight she presents forces a low growl from deep in my chest.

Her eyes are shut, and her soft mouth is parted as her breaths come in short, sharp little puffs. Leaning back into her, I redouble my efforts, swirling my tongue around her nub as I slide two fingers into her weeping core. Curling them in a "come to me" motion, I find the hidden spot within her and stroke the textured flesh. The added stimulation is just what she needs because her inner walls start fluttering around my fingers as her cries of pleasure fill the air and her hands yank my face tighter against her flesh.

Soothing her little bud, I slowly bring her down until her muscles go lax and her thighs release their death grip on my head. Leaning back, I look up at her from where I kneel before her and smile at what I see. Her legs are splayed around me, her chest heaving as she tries to catch her breath. The expression on her face can only be described as intense satisfaction and pride fills me as I watch her gather her composure. Eventually her eyes open and fill with warmth as she gazes down at me.

“ Well , that definitely took the edge off. You said something about food?”

Chuckling , I shake my head at her rapid change of topic. My Rylie is always full of surprises. Getting to my feet, I help her up, holding her steady until her legs stop shaking. I must hide my smirk from her, so I do not get reprimanded for being too smug. But I must not have hidden it well enough because she sticks her tongue out at me before heading deeper into the garment area as my entire body shakes with laughter.

Walking out of the wardrobe, I look around, and that’s when it hits me. My entire world has been turned on its end all because of the changes she has brought to my life; the laughter, the smiles, the chaos, and I could not be happier.

“ Well , hello good looking, you available the rest of the day?”

Turning , my heart feels full, and I feel complete at the sight of her standing before me. The backlight highlights her pale skin and turquoise scales, which sparkle as she twirls, showing off her long legs in the playful dress.

“ Is this alright? I had such a hard time choosing. SAGE has given me so many options, I have no idea what to pick next.”

“ You look stunning, every moment more so in my eyes.”

“ You are such a sweet talker, but keep it up, I like it. Are these sandals warm enough or should I put flats on?”

“ Your apparel is appropriate, however if you find you need something else, SAGE is always a shout away.”

“ Ok then, I’m ready when you are.”

It just so happens that the moment our outer door slides open, Rafe and Mandy were walking by. His booming voice echoes around us.

“ Where are you two headed? I figured you would be hiding for a few risings.”

“ I thought Rylie might enjoy some of the sights on Falcor .”

“ We must have been of like minds, as that is the way we are headed as well. Mind some company?”

I glance down at Rylie , “ Sounds good to me.”

The next thing I know, all four of us are cramming into the closest lift. The females are chattering like they have known each other for risings. Rafe shakes his head, a small, confident smile on his face. The moment the lift opens the girls walk out in front of us. Rylie tucks her arm into mine as she and Mandy chat back and forth.

Looking above both their heads, Rafe’s eyes catch my own. “ I hear father gave you permission to keep Mandy on board?”

“ He did. I was slightly worried at first that he was not going to allow it, but it is like his entire view on the matter changed when I told him how much I had come to love her. It probably helped that I had waited to ask her if that was what she wanted as well while he was live on the holo screen. When she said nothing would make her happier, it took every ounce of my willpower not to shout at the heavens. She has completed me LeX , like a piece of a puzzle I didn’t know I was missing.”

Rafe’s words make me reflect on my own feelings, especially when he pulls Mandy close kissing the top of her head, and Rylie looks up at me smiling. Blessings happen in so many ways, some large and instantly noticeable, others smaller but more effective in the end.

We find ourselves walking through the door of Falcor's observatory, and even I stop in awe. "Wow , LeX . I had no idea when you said observatory what you were talking about. I can't imagine how long this took to create. The trees have to be touching the ceiling, and it smells amazing in here. Oh my god, there are birds?"

"Actually , Falcor harbors several wild animals in this area. Most were brought here accidentally, in shipping crates, or as contraband, but he has made a safe home for all. I know there are a few avian species as well as Uana's and some small canines who call this home. Luna has personally planted most of the flowering fauna herself and she said, and I quote, ' this place needs some color .'"

" That planet with the rings looks so close you could practically reach out and touch it."

" That is one of the three moons circling Darverius , called Sybrus Two . As beautiful as it looks from here, its atmosphere is deadly. My father sends most of his trainees there for conditioning. If you can survive that moon you can survive anywhere."

" I take it you know this from experience?"

" Yes , not a trip I ever want to go on again, nor would I recommend it, even though several of my brothers thrive in locations like that. GoR's planet is practically frozen for most of the year, so he thought the place was paradise and I couldn't wait to finish the task laid out for us."

We were walking casually through the well-lined paths when Mandy comes running back around the corner. " Rylie come look over here, I think these are Canna's ."

Motioning us forward, we both quickly find the tall plant Mandy is pointing at. " Look , and that's not the only thing, there are Impatiens , Petunias , and Zinnias ."

“ LeX where did these come from?”

“ I am not sure. Falcor ? The females have a question about some of the plants.”

“ Greetings and welcome to my observatory. To answer your questions, these plants are native to your Earth . Mistress Luna and General Tordan have been working diligently on locating the rare and delicate seedlings. Once on board, we have integrated them into this area for your pleasure.”

Rylie reaches out, gently touching one of the blooms. “ I figured all was lost, but this gives me such hope. Things never truly die, do they LeX ? One way or another, a small piece is always left behind and, if cared for properly, it will flourish once again.”

Instantly , my arms are filled with a tiny female. “ It’s the same with me isn’t it, LeX ? I was locked in my own world, but because of your gentle coaxing, I slowly emerged out of my comfort zone, only to bloom in your arms.”

“ Hopefully , you always see me in such light.”

She reaches up, grabbing my braid and pulling my head down gently, her lips seeking mine just as I am pulling her closer. “ Oh , get a room you two, no fornicating in the gardens, unless ... Come here my little morsel.”

When Mandy starts laughing, Rylie pulls away with a small smile on her face. She glances over at Rafe who now has Mandy pinned to the wall, his hands slowly sneaking up her shirt. Giggling like two younglings, I motion for Rylie to come with me as we sneak out of the observatory. Once the door shuts behind us, I am just getting ready to ask her what she wants to do next when I hear her stomach growl.

“ Forgive me mate, I should have fed us before we left our rooms. I forget you need

to eat slightly more than I do.”

“ Why is that? I mean shouldn’t that be the other way around? You’re bigger.”

“ I think my system has simply become accustomed to being in a constant state of hunger, as I tend to forget to eat often.”

“ Sounds like I need to add making you eat regularly to my list of things to do. Maybe make it my mission to fluff you up a little. Though I believe as your doctor, I might need to do a closer inspection. Because from here, it’s looks as if there’s not an extra ounce on your frame.”

“ My mother’s people are built smaller and without my father’s bulkiness. I can hold my own simply because my size makes me quicker, but if another with the mass of SoL is up against me, my odds would not be favorable. But you are welcome to explore me at your next convenience.”

“ I will remember that later when you try to run from me again. Now feed me before I collapse.”

Grabbing a lift, we head up to the top floor of Falcor where he hosts diverse groups of shops and dining of many different varieties, as he employs all species.

“ Where do you want to eat?”

“ Ok , let’s get this straight right now. You pick and I will find something.”

“ Well , that does not seem fair.”

“ Maybe not, but I am trying to eliminate the biggest issue of every couple, no matter what planet, race, or species. Let’s try this, I’m a woman and simply incapable of

picking my own food.”

“ That seems irrational to me; you are a highly intelligent individual. Why would I believe those words?”

“ Because the moment you ask me what I want, I become a blank slate with no idea how to proceed, so now nothing sounds good. So , to stop all this nonsense before it starts, lead on and I will follow. Anyway , how will I know what I like or don’t like here? You don’t have a favorite pizza or burger joint onboard, do ya?”

“ I do not believe so, no.”

“ Then let’s come back to this discussion at a later time, when I have more knowledge to bring to the table.”

Slightly confused, I head into one of my favorite spots and a dining bot greets us as we walk in. “ Medic LeX , are there only the two of you dining this rising?”

“ No , there will be four.” Rafe’s boisterous voice booms behind us. Turning , I must stop myself from growling when I see Rafe and Mandy strolling up. Rylie rubs my arm when she feels me tense up. How am I supposed to court her properly if we are always surrounded by others? Instead of letting it bother me further, we all walk into the Belvedere . I picked this establishment for the view above and below us as the majority of the tables sit upon a clear floor.

When Rylie hesitates to walk forward, I stop. Rafe walks around us, picking Mandy up with one arm as he strolls behind the dining bot that is showing us to our table.

“ Wow LeX , is this safe? I mean, I love looking at the stars and all, but this is a little intimidating.”

“ Would you prefer we dine somewhere else? I thought the unobstructed view would please you.”

“ No , and it does. I don’t want to seem like a big baby, but I never dreamed I would be walking in space if you catch my meaning.”

Holding my hand out, I wait patiently for her to come to me on her own. “ When you are lost or unsure just look at me, Rylie . I will always be there to guide you.” I watch as so many emotions flow across her beautiful face before I see her determination push her steps forward. Her small hand is swallowed by my own as I lead her slowly to where Rafe and Mandy are sitting waiting on us. She only relaxes when seated, but her gaze is scanning everywhere all at once.

Mandy reaches over, grabbing Rylie’s hand in her own. She is so excited she is practically bouncing in her seat. “ Isn’t this the freakiest, coolest thing ever Rylie ?”

“ I do prefer solid ground under my feet, but yes, you’re right, the view is stunning. I never dreamed anything like this was possible.”

A floating menu pops up in the air in front of us and I see Rylie hesitate as I know the dishes are all unfamiliar. “ Would you like me to order for you?”

“ Please .”

“ Is there anything in particular you do not like?”

“ Liver ?”

“ You have had to digest a body organ that was only designed to remove toxins? I can guarantee nothing of the sort is on this menu. What is Keida’s famous word ... Yes , ‘yuck’!”

I quickly order a sampler for her to choose from, and as the menus disappear, soft music fills the room. Without thinking, I hold my hand out. “ Would you care to dance?”

“ You dance?”

“ I do.”

“ I’m not sure if I do, but if you’re willing to sacrifice your toes, I would love to try.”

Before she can change her mind, I lift her out of the chair, guiding her onto a raised platform that leads a little further out. Our surroundings are so clear it looks as if we are floating in space itself. Rafe whistles loudly and I see a soft blush grace Rylie’s cheeks.

Rylie starts to raise her arms up around my neck, but I take her hands and place them where I want them as I lead her through a few intricate steps. As she becomes more confident, I add in a few more. Dipping her quickly, her pale curls swing around her smiling face as I lift her back up and it’s plain to see her pure joy.

“ Where in the world did you learn to dance like this?”

“ On the dance floor of course, that is where all the females are. Since physically I could not have a deeper relationship with anyone who was not my mate, this was the next best option. I thought the other males were stupid standing against the wall because they were scared to look foolish. Everyone knows you always want to be where the girls are, since they are always having the most fun. Males are in too much competition.”

“ I would normally argue it’s the females that are the competitors, but I’m so happy at this moment. I don’t care what the rest of the world is doing.”

“ Your happiness is all that matters to me, Rylie .”

“ I believe you LeX , and those are big words. May we always share this happiness, and I pray I never become a disappointment to you. I don’t think my heart has ever felt this light.”

“ You and me both, my love.” I have just spun her around when I see our food being delivered to the table. Picking her up playfully, I kiss her forehead before putting her back on her feet as I lead her off the dance floor. Rylie’s flushed cheeks and large smile only get bigger when Mandy starts whistling.

“ Whoohoo , you two were tearing it up out there. I tried to get grumpy butt out there, but he says he only dances in private. However , he promised he would make it up to me later if I didn’t make him go out there in front of everyone.”

“ Looks like you have backed yourself into a corner, Rafe , as I have never witnessed you dancing a day in your existence.”

“ I can dance, maybe not as fluidly as you do. I do not think it is natural for a male’s hips to move that way.”

“ Did you just admit out loud that you were staring at my ass?”

The moment those words come out of my mouth, Mandy has to cover her own to keep from spitting out her drink. The rest of the meal continues on the same; smiles, and familiar teasing make for a pleasant evening especially as it seems the darkness crept up on us quickly.

Rafe throws down his napkin, then rubs his belly like he is an older male. “ Well , this has proven to be a fun and enlightening get together. Hopefully , we will be able to continue this ritual on Destiny ... Although , it’s going to take a bit for me to get

used to her name change. LeX , you and Rylie are staying onboard, right?”

“ We have not discussed it enough to make that final decision yet, but I will let you know. I have promised Rylie that wherever she goes, so will I .”

“ I understand, but I mean the reasoning is simple. We will be on the ship as well, what more motivation could one need?”

Laughing , we all get up, leaving at the same time and heading back to Destiny and our assigned chambers that happen to be right next door to each other. Once again, the females chatter on as the lift accelerates only to stop when it opens to our floor.

Mandy reaches out, grabbing Rylie in a quick hug. “ I hope you guys decide to stay on the ship because it would be great to have a friend nearby. I don’t know if you’ve gotten to talk to Qwin much, but she’s great, too.”

“ LeX said we have a few days before we have to give our answer, but I promise to let you know first.”

Rafe grabs my arm in a warrior’s shake before seizing his mate and throwing her over his shoulder. Laughing , Mandy waves at us while hanging upside down as they disappear into their rooms.

Waving my hand over our door’s sensor, we walk in together and my eyes drift over to the closet. I will never look at that place the same again as I can still taste her on my lips.

Grabbing her mirthfully, I spin her around a few times admiring her long legs as well as her laughter. Quickly , I have her backed up against the wall her beautiful blue eyes sparkling as she gazes up at me and I realize my whole future is standing before me.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

RYLIE

What is the old saying, ‘when life gives you lemons you make lemonade’? Things have happened so fast that I feel like I’m walking behind myself, watching as I interact with all the others around me. The instant I opened my eyes, I should have been terrified. Instead, life took off and now I’m playing catchup.

I stand here against the wall, staring up at LeX and all his beautiful coloring. His odd features would have been terrifying on Earth, but here he seems like a bright star. Never in my life have I ever felt so at ease with another, and that doesn’t say much about my life before this moment. I can’t stop myself from running my fingers through the loose locks of bright, turquoise hair that frame his face now that he has left it out of the braid.

“It should be against the laws of nature that a man of any species can have prettier hair than a woman.” His soft laughter tugs at my heartstrings.

“It will not take long for yours to match mine in length. I love how my colors mix so easily among your own unruly curls. I swear I can see the wheels moving in your mind, what is going on in there?”

“As soon as I figure it out, I promise I’ll share it with you. Right now, I’m still trying to figure out what was and is at the same time. Too bad our minds don’t come with an off switch.”

“ Oh , I think I can find a few ways to distract you.”

“ Bold words.” Reaching up, my hands move to the top button of his shirt, my fingers trembling slightly as I undo the first one. His bright yellow eyes are locked on mine, saying everything I’ve ever wanted to hear without saying a word, his gaze full of intensity. He doesn’t move to stop me, but I can tell I’m affecting him because his chest is rising and falling faster with each breath he takes.

With unsteady fingers, I push the last button through and run my hands up his bare chest. Once his torso is revealed, I finish opening my present by pushing his shirt off his shoulders, leaving it hanging from where it’s tucked into the tight pants he has on. LeX’s muscles twitch as I trace every peak and valley they have carved on his skin. Several faint scars along with missing scales trail down his side and when I look up, a question in my eyes, his only response is a nonchalant shrug. Making myself a mental note to revisit this conversation later, I walk my fingers along the band of the pants he has on.

I stop at the closure that’s stretched tightly from the throbbing pressure of his hardened shaft. “ It looks like someone wants me?”

“ You know I do, but not until you are ready Rylie .”

Taking a deep breath, I flick the clasp loose, which causes an instant reaction from LeX . He grabs me by my hips, picking me up so that my legs wrap around his waist as he heads for one of our new couches. Easing himself down, he sits and arranges my legs on either side of him, ensuring I’m comfortable. Feeling overly bold and frisky, I tease him by running my hands down my sides before slowly gathering the hem of my dress and whipping it off over the top of my head, ruffling my hair as I do. Sitting mostly naked before him, I feel the delicate scales on my arms twitch as his eyes devour me, the intensity of his gaze like a physical caress.

Reaching between us, I unfasten the rest of the latches holding his pants on one by

one, touching the turgid flesh with the tips of my fingers with each release. Instead of helping me get his trousers off, he leans back against the couch while simultaneously running his hands up and down my sides, teasing me in return by brushing the sides of my breasts with each stroke.

The front of his pants open all the way and there it is. That marvelous thing I've been grinding myself on the entire time we've been on the couch. Releasing my sides, he lifts his hips just enough to slide his final piece of clothing off and kicks them onto the floor. The only thing separating us now is a small piece of lace.

Running the tip of my finger down the length of him, I smile when it jerks, and a sharp breath leaves his lips as I investigate the small, soft scales running along its base. Leaning closer, I realize the tiny scales are vibrating softly with each stroke of my hand. I can't help but smile when I see how hard he is trying to control himself.

“ Rylie have a little mercy on me, I have never felt this before. I have a feeling it is going to be over before it begins.”

“ Oh , yea of little faith, never deny your release LeX . Playtime doesn't have any certain time frames attached to it. I'm sure you will never leave me wanting.”

“ You are going to kill me.”

“ What a way to go, huh? Close your eyes my love and let that iron control of yours lose for a change.”

Leaning forward, I lick the side of his neck before kissing my way down his chest. Grasping one of his nipples with my lips, I gently, yet playfully tongue it before moving across the wide expanse of his chest to the other one. His hands are gripping my hips so tightly, I know I'll have bruises later and it makes me smile deep inside. Because it is me making him lose control. Since my mouth is occupied, I reach for his throbbing shaft and stroke him in a deliberately slow rhythm that makes his breath

hitch.

Lifting myself up to shimmy out of my panties, my breasts sway just in front of LeX's mouth and he latches onto one of my nipples. I let out a lurid moan at the sensation of his lips and teeth surrounding the sensitive tip. Easing myself back down, I grab his long length in my hand, rubbing the mushroom shaped head back and forth through my dripping center, ensuring he is thoroughly coated before slowly lowering myself onto him. His thick head catches on my entrance, and I have to force myself not to tense up at the feeling of being impaled. Focusing on relaxing my body, I continue lowering myself until my hips meet his. When I am full to bursting, I reach up to kiss him while our bodies adjust to the feel of each other.

LeX's entire body is trembling beneath me as our tongues tangle together. He pulls me to him so hard, our teeth actually hit, and I can't help but smile when I feel him trying to hold himself still inside me. I raise my hips up then back down gently at first, but before long he takes over, testing positions and speed before finally finding an angle that makes both of us gasp in pleasure. The intensity builds with every vigorous thrust and the brush of his scales has me reaching for more of what only he can give me.

Pulling me close, I feel his lips on my shoulder as his hands and hips work together in tandem. He is lifting me up and down, my body no longer capable of keeping up with the rhythm we both need. I can feel the tension coiling in him as he drives into me harder and faster, using my body to chase his pleasure. "Let go LeX, I'll catch you."

My gasped words fade into a scream as my climax sneaks up on me. His hips buck as I clench around him, his grip tightening before I feel the heat of his release deep inside my core. Laying against his damp chest, my body is lax as I try to get my breathing under control, and I can't help but smile when LeX laughs.

"Frack we are going to do that again and again." Kissing the top of my head he hugs me tight, and I take a deep breath, realizing this is the first time in my life I have ever

truly belonged with someone. LeX grabs a blanket off the back of the couch, curling it around us as we lay there wrapped up in each other's arms. His long fingers slowly scratch my back as I relax against him.

“ I should probably get you cleaned up. I believe I have made quite the mess.”

“ I don't mind and I'm comfortable; just a little longer.” I must have fallen asleep because the next thing I know, LeX is lifting me up and walking both of us toward the bedroom, startling me. “ What's wrong?”

“ Nothing . I am sorry I had to wake you, but ViN commed. Ember wants to stop by in a little bit.”

“ Is the baby alright?”

“ I am sure she is. If something like that was wrong, ViN would not have given us a warning, he would have simply barged in. Speaking of that ... Destiny , I need you to revoke all others' entrance into our private quarters unless it's an emergency.”

“ Acknowledged , Medic LeX .”

My legs are still slightly asleep when he stands me in front of him inside the ionizer. For once, I'm grateful for its quick cleaning system. Leaning my head against LeX's chest, I just stand there until it beeps.

“ Are you alright down there?”

“ Ask me in ten minutes.”

“ Come on, we need to go get dressed.”

In a daze, I walk into the closet, grabbing another jumper off the hanger. I have just

gotten it sealed up on the side when I hear the door buzzer go off. LeX kisses my forehead, “ Take your time.”

Shaking my head, it takes me a moment to find the matching sandals. Combing my hair out, I still feel like I’m a mess, but that’s what company gets when they show up with little to no warning. When I finally make it out of the closet, LeX and ViN are standing off to the side talking quietly together while Ember walks around the room, holding the little one. The moment she sees me, I’m greeted with one of her beautiful smiles.

“ Hi . Sorry for the interruption, but ViN didn’t want to take off without talking to LeX first.”

“ Where are you guys going?”

“ Planetside . I haven’t met very many of his brothers and he wants to introduce me to XuL , his wife Brittany , and their daughter Keida , who also happens to be the first grandchild in this entire family. I’m hoping that Brittany can put my mind at ease some, since Keida is also half human.”

“ May I hold her?”

“ Oh yeah, absolutely. This is the only time she’s content. Every time I put her down, she throws a fit and right now that’s not a good thing. I can’t tell you how many small burns I have on my arms and chest.”

“ Maybe she’s not the only one who needs fireproof clothing. It seems like that’s something you need to be wearing too. Remind me before you head out to give you something you can put on the burns. The stuff is amazing, and it will help heal them in half the time.” Glancing down at the little bundle in my arms, I’m amazed at how intelligent she appears as she looks between me and her mother. “ Hello beautiful, you don’t mean to hurt mommy, do you? No ... you just want snuggles because being

by yourself is scary, and the world is just too big unless you're in someone's arms, isn't that right?" I swear she nods her head at me, and Ember and I both just look at each other.

"Ember, come here while Rylie has Ami so that LeX can treat that last burn you got."

She looks up at me and I nod for her to go on. Bouncing Ami, I walk through the room headed for the viewer. "Ohh, look at all the pretty colors." Her little eyes dart around as we both stand there gazing out at the huge world surrounding us and I realize the words I'd just said to her are also true for me. I feel the safest in LeX's arms.

LeX walks up to me putting his arm around my waist, a smile on his face. His steady strength makes me realize what a blessing it is to be here right now. I had to lose it all to really find a place where I belonged. Little Ami coos when a flash of light streaks by the window and we both laugh at her reaction.

"Ok, give her back now." ViN reaches out for her, his massive frame practically swallowing the baby as he gathers her close. "Brother, Rylie we will see you both in a few risings."

We watch them walk out the door, and then LeX pulls me around to face him, his fingers sliding down my cheek. "I do not feel like sharing you anymore this rising. Do you object to us staying in the rest of this rotation?"

"Let me think ... Are you planning on seducing me?"

"It could be on the list of things to do."

"How about we get snacks and snuggle while you read to me some more? I have to know how the story of Randy and Petal ends."

“ Why is that?”

“ Because he loves the little fairy, and I have to know if it has a happily ever after or not.”

“ You mean he loves her like I do you.”

“ Or it might be ... the way I love you.”

“ In that case, let us go find out together, my Love .”

THE END