



# Slavic (The Brigands of Ruk #1)

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**Category:** Fantasy

**Description:** Ruby

This is just not my freaking year! Curious? Pull up a chair and let's talk.

First, I get a call from my baby sister and my whole world is turned upside-down. Now we are on the run from people we don't have the funds to outwit. We were safe for a quick minute and then the world and everything we've ever known took a trip into the unbelievable. You think this is the worst of it? Nope! Apparently, the universe was bored and decided to create something far more interesting for its own amusement. It seems like my story isn't over yet, even though that might have been easier for me to accept. Finding ourselves displaced in a time and space where we don't belong, and just as we believe all hope is gone. In stomps, the biggest, snarliest, ugliest thing I've ever seen. He reaches down and picks me up like I'm a precious piece of glass. He is a monster, a beast, a growling monstrosity that looks at me like I am a living, breathing, dream. Once in his arms, I realize I am no longer lost or alone. I've finally found what I was always searching for ... him.

Slavic

It seems like the gods are not done interfering with my life yet. We intercept a bug ship, anticipating a good fight and full cargo hold, only for me to find HER, my beloved. Laying weak, and practically fading away in my arms, she is a creature I never envisioned, but her very existence is a cruel mockery of my failures. I don't deserve her, but now that I've held her in my arms ... that is where she will remain.

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

**Total Pages (Source):** 28

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 4:16 am*

## Chapter One

### RUBY

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

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

‘ How did I miss the signs?’, I think to myself as we continue this small talk like we’re strangers instead of sisters. She’s my baby sister, and even though I haven’t been around her much since she got married to that asshole, I still talk to her regularly enough that I should’ve noticed things like how much weight she’s lost. Or the fact that she has to set the phone down on a stand because her hands are trembling so badly. Not to mention the dark rings under her eyes and that fake smile spreading across her face right now.

Now that I’m making myself look closely, it’s easy to see the fear in her features as Rowan glances behind her as we FaceTime on the phone. Tuesdays seem to be the only time I ever hear from her. It’s like that’s the only day she’s allowed to call me or something. She moves slightly out of frame, and I catch a glimpse of him across the room. I knew that sneaky bastard was somewhere close and the look on his face shows his disapproval of our conversation. Gritting my teeth, it takes everything I have to contain my anger while we’re on the phone, because I know he’s watching or listening to everything she says.

I want to ask her so many things, but something holds me back. Reflecting on the past few years, I wonder how I could've been so blind.

My sister's a strong woman, so surely if she were in some sort of trouble, she'd find a way to tell me. My eyes are seeing what my heart doesn't want to believe, so maybe it's time for me to visit for a few days.

The nice thing about my lifestyle is I have no true roots anywhere. Waitressing is a quick way to obtain cash and then move on if you want. I left home right after high school, much to our mother's disapproval. I was determined to be and see more than the small town where we had been raised.

In the beginning, I just wanted out of that house and away from all the things everyone expected from me. I was tired of mom's constant breakdowns and for once, I simply wanted to take care of myself and my wants. Days after I graduated, I jumped on a Greyhound bus going to the furthest point it would take me. I found myself a quick waitressing job in a local bar and life started. That's been six-plus years now, and I still haven't found what my soul is searching for.

Rowan was always the good girl when we were kids and she hated being in trouble. The thought of rebelling never entered her mind, but I've done enough of that for the both of us. She was in her second year of college, taking a class on political science when she went to the capital to do a paper on some of the officials in our state.

She was easy prey, her innocence shining bright and with one look, that bastard latched on, taking advantage of her age and her limited knowledge of men. Promising her a life of leisure and luxury neither of us could ever imagine, I can't really blame her for wanting it. After all, it's the same thing I was wandering around looking for, too. He was a good twenty years older than her, but nothing we said would make Rowan see past his fake charm. Mom and I both tried our best to talk her out of being his arm candy, but all she saw was the opportunity to become something more than

who she was born to.

The very first time I met him, I knew he was a dick, especially with those roaming eyes of his. He had become very talented at hiding his flaws from all the others around him. At first, my sister was all smiles and giggles as he paraded her around draped in jewels, wearing pretty dresses. For months, they were all over the front of the tabloids. No matter how many times I asked her if everything was alright, she promised me she was fine, and that she was living the dream.

However, this was not his first rodeo, and he was smarter than us from the very start. He easily found multiple ways to keep her away from us by doing little things in the beginning. Like taking her on surprise vacations when we were supposed to visit or having to leave town abruptly due to his job. He was always dragging her away, stating he simply couldn't go without her. Anything to isolate her from her family, Robert made sure that she was dependent on him for everything.

When she didn't go back to school after summer break, I voiced my concerns again. Rowan reassured me that she was merely taking a break and would go back the following year. Only another year came and went, and she never did.

Then we lost mom to a sudden heart attack, and life just happened. I damn near disappeared trying to escape the pain and guilt of not being there at the end for mom and started bouncing from place to place. I was so wrapped up in myself that I seldom even checked in on Rowan much.

One morning, I woke up in a run-down apartment with a stranger sleeping next to me. When I got up, gathering all my clothes that were laying around, I glanced up in a mirror and saw my mother's face staring back at me.

For some unknown reason, it really hit me hard that I was the only person to blame for all my bad decisions. I didn't want to go down the same path as my mother, who

found herself raising two young daughters alone, because their father left them without a second glance. I was going to have to change my life, but so far, I hadn't been successful.

Now the only person I have left in the world is in trouble, I only have three hundred dollars to my name and there's nowhere to go that his goons can't find us.

“Sis , are you listening to me?”

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

She gets up slowly, taking the phone with her and walking over toward the counter to get a glass of water. Unbeknownst to him, I can see her clearly through a mirror in the background on the other side of the room. When I see the bruises on the backs of her legs, I've got to close my eyes and count to ten. These are not the kind of bruises you get from bumping into something. The fingerprints on her skin are plainly visible. What kind of hell is she living in?

Rowan must have seen something in my face because hers turns to terror. Before she has time to remake that fake smile she had been sporting this entire phone call, I start to blurt out.

“Rowan ? What the fu ...”

Her eyes get huge and she shakes her head slightly. This time when she glances behind her, I notice another bruise on her neck. Ok , enough of this shit! Someone is going to answer for those, and I have a nice nine-millimeter that has a bullet with his name on it. Putting on my own fake smile, I decide to act this out.

“Hey Sis , I was thinking of stopping by on Thursday . I'll be traveling that way to pick up some uniforms in the next city over from ya. I'm sure the boss wouldn't care

if I swung by on my way back.”

Instantly , she starts trying to dissuade me from coming. “ Ohh , Thursday won’t work at all for me, Ruby . I’m sorry, I would love to see you too. Robert has a few of his colleagues coming over that evening and you know my main job here is to be a good hostess.”

I can tell by the sound of her voice that the word hostess means something else entirely. “ Hey , I’m a waitress, so hosting is what I do best. I don’t care to help you out.”

For a split second, I see the old fire in my sister’s eyes before she once again hides it. She’s doing her best to keep me from coming there. “ Absolutely not!” She stops talking by clearing her throat. “ Sorry , didn’t mean to snap at you, but Robert is so picky about how he wants things done. You would probably be in the way more than anything else.”

I want to scream at the phone and demand to see her, but suddenly he is hovering over her. She puts her hand over the speaker so that I can’t hear what they are saying, but I see her shoulders slouch before she nods. Turning back to the phone, she has that fake smile back in place. “ Sis , I’ve got to go, Robert needs me. Call me Thursday , and I’ll see if any of our plans have changed. I love you, go have fun.”

“ Rowan , I love you too.”

The phone clicks off, but not before I see the devastation on her face of what’s to come as he grabs her by the hair. I know she deliberately turned the phone so that I could see this firsthand. I have never felt so helpless in my life. Tears form in my eyes as I try to figure out how to get her the hell out of there as quickly as possible. Then it hits me, she said Thursday twice, and now I wonder if she meant something else by that. Ugh , I hate second guessing everything.

I'm so mad I'm seeing red. Financially , I know I can't beat him. Because of that, where in this world can I take her to get her away from him? Those thoughts no sooner cross my mind than a picture on an old phone book, lying in a stack of magazines I intended to read one day, catches my attention.

The words across the front are highlighted. When you are scared with nowhere to go, call Janet . I wonder if this number is still active? Late already , I write the number down quickly on an old receipt in my purse and head out for my next shift. The moment I get to work, I pick up a double so that I can get some extra cash in my pocket.

I smile distractedly to myself when I deliver drinks to the wrong table. My mind is not here, it's working on cataloging all the things I need to get ready before I can break Rowan out of that pretty prison she lives in. If I can manage to get her out of there, I know I'll have to ditch my car. That'll be the first thing he tries to track.

The part that scares me the most is time; it's not something I think she has much of. As teenagers, we had a safe word, Boudreaux . If we were on a date and a guy was making us feel uncomfortable, all we had to do was call and say that word and the other would come immediately. Does she doubt I'll come if she calls and says that one word, because of how long I've been gone? It's frustrating, and I'd love to speak with her one-on-one, but he keeps everything under surveillance.

Even after a double shift, sleep eludes me and my brain won't shut off all night. Swinging my legs out of bed, my body goes through the routine of getting ready for work automatically. It's Wednesday and I'm already scheduled for a double, so at least I won't need to pick up an evening shift. On autopilot, I don't even remember getting to work. For the most part, I've managed not to screw up any orders as the day wears on. We're in the middle of a changeover when a large group comes in the door. Being the only waitress in that section, they take up all of my attention for the next few hours. But they were well worth the effort when I see the large tip they left.

Once I have their tables cleaned up, I take a second to look at my phone that I'd felt buzz a few times earlier.

My heart hits my throat when I see the words Boudreaux and Thursday , both of which are from an unknown number. I don't say a word to a soul as I untie my apron and make my way toward the back. Grabbing my bag, I open the server's door and head down the alley to my small apartment. Once inside, I pull a worn-out piece of luggage from under the bed. Then I start throwing things in that I can't live without. It only takes me a couple minutes to get the essentials and as I open the door to leave, I glance back to make sure I haven't forgotten anything. Rushing back in, I yank a picture off the wall of me and Rowan standing with mom when we were little.

I don't even waste the time locking the door. Deep down, I know I'll never be back here again. Whoever discovers all this second-hand stuff is welcome to it. Rolling my luggage down the hall, in my head I plan the quickest route to Rowan's from here. With a grin, I pat the dash as my old faithful Civic starts right up. A silent prayer escapes my lips as I lift the console, my hand searching for the reassuring weight of my pistol and hoping it won't come to that. My sister needs me, and NOTHING will stop me from getting her out of that house, one way or another.

Even though my heart tells me to floor it to get there as quickly as possible, my mind reminds me that Rowan said Thursday for a reason. So , I make myself slow down. The last thing Rowan needs is for me to get pulled over for speeding with a loaded weapon in the car.

Five hours later, I stop at a rest area for a few hours of sleep. A loud truck flying by in the early morning hours has me jerking straight up out of my seat. Running my fingers through my hair, I shake the grogginess off, start my car back up and head down the road. Stopping at the first gas station I come upon, I grab a coffee and a stale donut. I gas up before getting back on the road. Looking down at the time on my phone, if nothing happens, I should get there late this evening.



## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 4:16 am*

### Chapter Two

#### RUBY

It's later in the evening when I finally pull up a block from sis's house. Okay , I'm here, what's next? Picking up my phone, I tap the locator app we've always both had on our phones, and it shows that she's in the back of the house. Now the tricky part is how to get past the security. The last thing I want to do is go through the front door and announce to everyone that I'm here.

Suddenly , their gate opens, and I duck down so that the headlights don't shine on me sitting in the car. The nice thing about the old Civic is there is nothing special about her, so we blend in. Peeking , I watch as the car slowly passes by, but the windows are so dark I can't see who's inside. Unfortunately , I don't know enough about the senator to recognize what he normally drives.

Noticing the gate was still open, I waited a few minutes before sitting up. I start to get out of the car, because if I can sneak in, there's no doubt I can get her out. I no more than reach to open my car door, when someone unexpectedly walks out between a set of shrubs close to where I'm parked. It takes me a moment to realize that it's Rowan ; her face is hidden by a hooded sweatshirt and a small bag is slung across her shoulder. I quickly open the passenger door from the inside as she nears. The second her butt hits the seat, I take off.

“ Drive normally Ruby . None of them know I've snuck out yet. I told Robert's buddy Mark that I needed to use the bathroom. He will be looking for me when I don't return in a few minutes. Especially since I'm the unpaid entertainment for the

evening. The moment Robert finds out they can't find me, he'll rush right back to the house, setting his dogs free to find us."

"How did you know I was out here?"

"After I sent you that text yesterday, I started tracking you. Then I started preparing the best I could to finally get the hell out of there. Robert seldom leaves me alone with his friends, since he enjoys watching too much. Yesterday, I overheard him telling Mark that he'd be leaving for an hour or two today, and that he'd be free to play with me all he wanted. I stashed these clothes in the back of the commode and then hid this bag in the toilet paper holder next to it. I knew I'd only have a small window of time to get out of there once Robert left the house. If you hadn't gotten here when you did, I was just going to walk around until you got closer. I never should have waited this long, sis. All this time I was scared to involve you, but I had to get out of there."

"What aren't you telling me, Rowan?"

"A lot, ... but it's not something I'm ready to talk about yet. I need to work through this nightmare on my own. I've made a mess out of my life Ruby, and now I've dragged you into an impossible situation. One that might possibly get both of us buried in a shallow grave if we don't play our cards right. I just knew I was only a few more punches away from a nervous breakdown. The safe place I'd created in my mind to escape the things he was doing and allowing others to do to me, was no longer enough. My grip on reality was slipping, and I knew you were my only escape.

We'll need to ditch this car as soon as possible. Thankfully, I don't think you'll be the first person he suspects, but it won't take long to connect the dots." Rowan picks up my phone. "Is there anything on here you can't live without; contacts, passwords, bank info?"

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

She rolls her window down and tosses both of our phones out at the same time. Then she seems to take a deep breath before pulling off her hood. I can't help but gasp at the sight of the extensive bruising on her face and neck. The second I go to open my mouth, she puts her hand up.

“ Please Ruby , not yet. I promise I'll tell you in time, but right now, I need you to be the big sister and just get us the hell out of here.”

She pulls her hood back up before looking away from me. Her entire body seems to be trembling and for a second, I almost pull over. I'm not sure who needs the hug more, her or me and I have to blink the tears away, “ I will kill him.”

“ You couldn't even get close enough to try ... he's untouchable, Ruby . If there'd been a way, I would've already taken it. I've been imprisoned in that pretty cage for years, with no clear path on how to get free. But you just took his favorite toy away, and he will be on the warpath to get me back. You need to understand what I'm willing to do, to him or anyone else who tries to force me back. Do you understand what I'm saying, Ruby ?”

“ Loud and clear, sis! As long as we're together and there's breath left in my body, he'll never touch you again. I have an idea where we can go, but I need to find a way to get us there with what little cash I have. The car can be traced, a bus is too open, and the moment we bought tickets, he'd know where we're headed. An Amtrack would give us some privacy, but I don't know what we'd do once we got off.”

Rowan opens the bag she threw on the floor when she got in and unzips it. “ Is this enough?”

The entire bottom of it is lined with stacks of cash. “ That’s sure gonna help, baby sister.” Rowan doesn’t say much after that. She settles down in the passenger seat, her head turned away from me, looking out the window. As I head north and out of town, glancing over I can see her reflection in the window. Tears flow down her cheeks, but she doesn’t make a sound and that bothers me. I wonder how long it took her to teach herself to cry silently.

I’m just passing through the small town of Waverly when I see her glance back quickly. Immediately , I check my rearview mirror, looking to see if I can recognize anyone behind us. “ What is it?”

“ Turn around ... there’s an older SUV for sale back there.”

At the next red light, I swing the Civic around. We’ve no more than pulled up in front of it when an older man with an armed forces hat comes walking out of the house. “ Rowan , stay in the car. The last thing we need to do is explain those bruises of yours. How much can I safely spend this for? I have like five hundred on me, but that’s it.”

“ Ruby , I have almost seventy thousand dollars stashed in there. Let’s just say its severance pay for all the times he sold me in the last few years.”

I bite down hard on my lip to keep from screaming, but I make myself get out of the car with a smile. “ Hi there, saw your car here as we were passing by. What are you asking for it? Is there anything wrong with it mechanically?”

“ Asking four thousand. It’s a solid little ride I would trust to take me anywhere. It was my daughter’s, and she used it to get back and forth to school because it was easy on gas. She just got a big promotion and doesn’t need it any longer.”

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

He looks over at my sister who has the window rolled down a little so that she can hear us, but her face is turned slightly away. “ Don’t you want to test drive it first?”

“ I’ll take your word for it.”

“ Many wouldn’t, but it seems you girls are in a hurry. Are you in some sorta trouble, Miss ? Nothing wrong with asking for help if you are.”

“ Nahh , were good, Sir . Simply wondering about the car and if you’re going to take our deal or not?” I was getting ready to turn and head back to the car when his words stopped me.

“ Cash , huh?”

“ Yeah , I have it with me.”

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

“ I’ll meet you back here in a minute, then.” He just nods his head and walks back toward the house. By the time I get to the car, Rowan is handing me the cash out the window.

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

“ I’ll be there as quick as I can, Rowan .” I watch as she climbs over the console and into the driver’s seat. She starts the car, and I see her check for traffic before pulling out. My first thought is ‘ I wonder how long it’s been since she’s been behind the wheel?’ Someone clearing their throat has me turning around.

“ Here you go young lady, two sets of keys and the title. I filled it up right before sitting it out here, so she has a full tank of gas as well. Are you sure I can’t offer you girls anything else? Maybe a safe place to stay for a few days? In the armed forces, I saw many things, and scared eyes are always easy to spot if you know the signs.”

“ I ... we appreciate it. I would love to tell you that your instincts are failing you, but I won’t. However , if you’re ever asked, please act like you’ve never seen me or my sister. I would tell you more, but the less you know the better. Here’s the money.” He shakes his head and starts to hand the money back to me, but I refuse it. “ Keep it, where we’re headed, we won’t need it. Thank you for your concern, and it’s nice to know some people are still willing to help.”

Hitting the button to unlock the SUV , I climb in. It’s a little plain on the inside, but it’s clean and smells good. Turning the key, it starts right up and I’m happy to see there are no lights lit up on the dashboard. The older guy is still standing in his driveway, so I wave as I pull off. Within a few minutes, I’m circling around the back of Walmart looking for my Civic .

The moment Rowan spots me, she pops the trunk and gets out of the car. Parking behind her, I catch sight of the lever for the back hatch as I get out. While it’s opening, I walk over and grab the few bags I had in the trunk. Rowan throws her little bag in and then goes back to close my lid, kneeling down behind the car with a dime in her hand.

“ What are you doing?”

“ Taking this license plate off.” I watch her turn the bolts with a dime, slightly impressed that she would even think to do that. Once she gets the tag off, she brings it over to the back of the SUV . Securing it to the back bumper, we both get in and I look over at the little car that had never failed me for a second before driving off.

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

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

“ On the way here, I noticed a gas station up ahead. I’m gonna pull in and get us some snacks and a burner phone. Instead of driving in no particular direction, I need to make a few calls.” Rowan reaches down for that bag again, pulling out an old flip phone.

“ Wow , that is a magic bag, isn’t it?” Teasing her, I was hoping to see a glimpse of my sister in the shadows of her eyes.

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

“ Well , then dial this number and then give me the phone.” I pull the receipt out of my pocket and give it to her. The moment it starts ringing she hands it back. I’m about to hang up when an older woman’s voice comes on the line.

“ Hello ?”

“ Is this Janet ?”

“ Depends on who’s asking and where you got this number?”

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

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

“ Yes ma’am, I do.”

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

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

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

“ Thank you, Janet .”

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



## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 4:16 am*

### Chapter Three

#### RUBY

The hours and the miles seem to go by in a daze. Several times I've tried to get Rowan to talk to me, but it's like she's only a shell of who she was. The little sister I remember who was quick to smile, with a huge heart, has been replaced by this quiet, withdrawn woman beside me.

I don't know who to be mad at. Myself, for not getting her out of there sooner, those bastards for doing this to her, or even Rowan for staying as long as she did? The girl I grew up with wouldn't have let anyone mistreat or abuse her. Especially to the point where she felt like she had no other options. What the hell was he holding over her head? The one thing I've learned is that looking back never pushes you forward. Me hounding her won't fix the problems we're facing now.

My mind and body are tired, mainly because I'd driven all night to get to Rowan's, and it's been nonstop since. I rub my eyes as the headlights from the other cars coming our way are giving me a headache. Their lights are beginning to blur together the further we drive. When I know I can't go any further without a break, I drive through a McDonald's grabbing some fries and a frappe, hoping the cold drink and the caffeine will keep me going just a little longer. Passing a road sign, I glance over at the map. We should be coming up on the hotel Janet was telling us about.

Rowan is sound asleep and has been for the past couple of hours. If she hadn't been, I swear I would've screamed for victory when I saw the exit coming up next. Hesitantly, I pull off the interstate, following the signs showing all the hotels at this

exit. JJ's is off the main drag; it's older, but it looks clean. Thankfully , it doesn't seem to be very busy. It's late, but there is still a light on in the front office. Reaching over, I gently shake Rowan . “ Hey , wake up, we're at the hotel. I'll be right back.” She just nods her head.

A bell rings when I open the door, and an older woman gets up from an easy chair behind the counter. Before I can say a word, she says, “ Are you Ruby ?”

“ Depends .”

“ My name is Edith . You can relax child, Janet told me you were coming, and that you were driving in from Ohio . You made good time; I didn't expect you for another hour.”

“ We ... I drove straight through.”

“ I'm sure you are all tuckered out, so let's get you settled in for the night and hopefully things will look better in the morning. Here's your key, and the room is around back, in the corner. It's the only one without a number on the door. Make sure to back your car into the parking space. If anyone is tracking you, they will hesitate getting those tag numbers, if they have to get out of their vehicle to see them. The room has two separate beds. I've also left some extra clothes and you're welcome to anything that fits. There are sandwiches and drinks stocked in the fridge as well. The bathroom has a bunch of complimentary toiletries, so use what you need.”

“ How much for the night?”

“ We'll discuss that in the morning when I bring you breakfast at eight. No need to worry about all that nonsense tonight, you have enough on your plate already.”

“ Thank you for your kindness, Ma'am .”

“ We all need a helping hand now and then, youngin.”

She shoos me out the door and I head straight for the SUV . When I get in, Rowan looks up at me like she’s expecting trouble. “ Looks like we have a room in the back.” Once again, she just nods, and this kinda aggravates me. I think I’d feel better if she showed some kind of emotion.

Pulling around, I find a spot in the corner between two other cars. Hopping out, I pop the hatch to get one of my smaller bags. Rowan opens her door but just stands there like she doesn’t know what to do. “ Here Sis , take this room key and find the door with no number on it while I get a few things out of the car.” I see her hesitate to walk away from me. “ Hold up, I’ll come with you.” The relief on her face is instantaneous.

Dragging my bag behind me, the wheels squeak lightly. We walk down the sidewalk in front of the rooms, quickly finding one with no number tucked away in the corner. Rowan looks up at me and I motion for her to swipe the card. The moment she does, the light turns green, and I push my way through the doorway, thankful for what I see inside.

The room is spacious and decorated in calming colors of light blue and yellow. Two full size beds with matching comforters take up the majority of the space, but there are other doorways on each side of them. I throw my bag down on one of the beds as Rowan locks the door behind us. I start exploring the rest of the space and the doorway to the right has a small kitchenette and a sitting room with a TV on the wall. The opening to the left, has me gasping.

In the middle of the oversized bathroom sits a huge, claw-foot tub. Two vanities line the far wall, and the other holds a walk-in shower. Rowan walks in behind me and I see her eyeing the bathtub. “ Hey , I’m going to take a quick shower and when I get done, you can go ahead and take a nice long bath. Edith said we’re welcome to use

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

I swear I have to bite my lip to keep from stomping my foot when Rowan nods her head again, but the last thing she needs is me showing my ass. She has experienced enough of that. After being with her these last few hours, I'm glad we're headed somewhere she can get some help, because I'm not qualified.

My temper is short and I have little to no patience for the "poor me syndrome". I feel a little guilty at my harsh thoughts toward my sister. She's my sister, so I love her, but her downtrodden demeanor is really starting to get on my nerves. Why won't she react to something? Anything ! Thankfully , I have never been in her shoes, so I can't say how I would be acting if this situation had been reversed.

Sighing heavily, I watch as she silently leaves the bathroom, closing the door softly behind her as she goes, leaving me to have some much-needed time alone. The guilt presses down on me harder. I shouldn't be looking for an escape from Rowan , but then again, she chose to marry Robert . She's the one who put herself in this position, despite the fact that no woman deserves to be treated like she's been.

If only she had listened to me when I warned her about him!

But .

There's no use crying over spilled milk. Not at this stage of the game.

Roughly , I jerk my clothes off, leaving them in a heap on the floor, and step over to

the walk-in shower. The knobs are simple and in no time, steaming hot water is shooting out of the showerhead.

A sigh of relief escapes me as I ease under the spray, letting the hot water wash away some of the tension from my body the last several days has caused. Knowing that Rowan is waiting on me, I don't stand there idle for long. There are a variety of products in the shower caddy hanging from the showerhead, so I choose a shampoo and body wash at random. I don't care what I smell like, as long as I'm clean.

Finishing up, I step out and dry off with one of the towels on the rack next to the shower door and hurriedly dress. Grabbing my dirty clothes, I exit the bathroom only to find Rowan still sitting on the edge of the bed, staring into space.

It's as if she's lost in a world all her own. Pity and anger war within me. I try to clear both from my voice and speak as softly as I can to get her attention.

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

This time she doesn't even nod, she just gets up, slides past me into the bathroom, and closes the door behind her. The click of the lock is a bit of a slap in the face, but I do my best to not let it get to me. This isn't about me; this is about her.

I must have fallen asleep on the couch because her opening the bathroom door has me jerking up. Her eyes are red and it's easy to tell she's been crying even through all those bruises. Her face is so swollen right now that I can't tell if her nose is broken or not. Turning off the TV , I head into the bedroom, watching her out the corner of my eye as she turns the bed down. Flipping the light off, I crawl into the same bed as her, pulling her close like I did when we were kids. Rowan's body is tense, and even with me humming the song mom used to sing to us when we were little, it takes her forever to drift off to sleep.

Quiet tears flow down my cheeks. I don't know how to protect her or take this pain away. The night is passing quickly, and I need to get some rest, but my mind won't shut off. When I finally drift to sleep, my dreams are haunted by Rowan's voice calling for me in the distance, and no matter where I turn, I can't find her.

A knock on the door has both of us jerking out of our tortured dreams. My heart's beating fast in my chest when I hear a voice on the other side of the door.

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

“ Damn , I must have overslept,” I whisper to myself. “ Hell , I don't even remember the alarm going off ... Sorry , Edith ! Give me a second and I'll get the door.” Glancing over at Rowan , I can tell that she's awake, but her eyes are huge and unfocused. “ Hey , look at me. It's ok. I'll check the door before I let her in.”

Stumbling over the blankets I must have thrown on the floor throughout the night, I look out the peephole. Only to find the same older woman that had talked to me last night, standing there patiently.

“ Ruby , I can leave this here if it's a bad time.”

Sliding all the locks off, I ease the door open.

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

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

She smiles, “ You do need to be cautious, dear. You should know that I’ve been watching all the local news channels, and they haven’t reported either of you missing yet. That’s a good thing because it gives us more time to get you to safety. Let’s settle in the kitchen and talk for a bit.” I wave her in, taking the heavy tray from her the second she’s through the door. Edith turns once I have the tray in hand and locks the door herself.

I can hear the sink running in the bathroom, so Rowan must have gotten up while we were talking. “ Ruby , we’ll wait until your sister joins us, that way I’m not telling you guys this twice.” Rowan must have heard us because moments later she comes walking in, once again wearing that same oversized sweatshirt. She is hiding more than those bruises on her face from me, and I know it.

My first thought is that she might be pregnant, but until she opens up to me, I’m not going to force the issue. Hopefully , once we get settled somewhere, she’ll tell me what’s happened to her while I’ve been galivanting all over the country.

Edith glances over at Rowan and then back to me. I shake my head when Rowan doesn’t make eye contact as she sits down at the table. She walks over, standing next to Rowan . “ May I have a look, dear?”

Rowan’s eyes meet mine before she glances up at Edith .

“ I won’t touch anything but your face. We need to see if anything is broken, honey.”

Rowan pulls her hood back down and closes her eyes as she tilts her head up toward Edith . I watch her flinch when Edith first touches her jaw. Gently she runs her fingers along the yellow and black bruises covering her small cheekbones. Now that the swelling is going down, I can see that her lip is split in multiple places, and there is a cut above her eyebrow.

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

I’ve never wanted to hurt anyone as badly as I do that bastard right this minute.

Edith pats Rowan on the shoulder, then starts passing out the plates, motioning for us to eat. “ Go ahead girls, eat up before your eggs get cold. Your ears still work while your fingers feed the body. Janet wanted me to give you the directions to where she’s going to meet up with you. I’ve already spoken to her on the phone, so she knows what you’re driving, and is preparing a room for both of you now.

“ The truck stop is on a main road, so it’s not hard to find, but I’ve written detailed instructions down on this piece of paper for you to make it easier. I understand more than you realize what you’ve been through and what you’ll be facing in the future.” She reaches over, patting Rowan’s arm softly, but she doesn’t even react, just plays with the food on her plate.

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

At first, Rowan is just picking at her food, but after those words, she straightens up and to my happiness finishes her plate of scrambled eggs and bacon. She still hasn’t looked up, but I’ll take anything I can get right now.

“ Edith , you have been so kind to us, and we’ll be forever grateful for all your help.



What do we owe you for the room and this wonderful breakfast?"

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

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

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 4:16 am*

### Chapter Four

#### RUBY

I wave at Edith as we pull out, heading south. Not having my phone to use for GPS is odd, but I figure they still wouldn't make maps if they didn't work. After I clear the small town and we're back on the highway, I look over at Rowan who is once again staring out the window.

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

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

“ What the hell are you talking about?”

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

He isn't going to divorce me, Ruby . It would cause a scandal and he won't do anything to hurt his career. Robert isn't going to stop until I'm back, and this time he'll make it feel like I was in a funhouse before. I won't survive even a night if I go back, but maybe that would be best for all of us. I've not only ruined my own life by my stupid bad decisions, but now yours too.”

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

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

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

As sad as this sounds, that house of horrors had become comfortable, your version of normal. Now you’re out here struggling to figure out which way to go and what’s next. You knew the moment I saw those bruises in that mirror, let alone when you said our safe word, that I was coming. And don’t think for one moment I didn’t come there willingly. You didn’t drag me there, Rowan . I reckon the only way I can make you see this differently is by asking ... if this situation had been reversed, would you have done the same for me?”

“ You know I would have.”

“ Then let’s do this because that dick can’t touch us if we stick together. We’ll rest

and get you healed up, and then we'll figure out our next steps. But at some point, we're going to discuss the 'why's' of you waiting so long, and the 'what' trigger it took for you to finally say enough is enough. For now, enjoy these moments of peace. You escaped baby sister, and the hardest part is already behind you. Together we'll find our purpose in this world, I promise ya."

I don't bother her anymore as I reach over and turn the radio up. The miles pass by in a blur as I head down the highway. Luckily, we don't need to stop anywhere to eat since Edith packed us a light lunch to bring along.

Janet was right about not being able to miss the truck stop. There were signs that said it was coming up for miles in advance. Pulling in, I take my time maneuvering through all the vehicles coming in and out of the lot. Parking out front, I take a few minutes to look around, but before I can get out of the car, a woman approaches.

She motions for me to roll the window down. "Ruby and Rowan?"

"Yes, Ma'am, that's us."

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

She doesn't wait for me to answer, just turns away and walks back into the building. Putting the SUV in reverse, I head around the building as she asked. It's hard to trust a stranger like this, but she's the best option we have right now. "Rowan, do you want me to go in alone, or are you coming with me?"

"If it's okay, I would prefer to stay in the car instead."

"I won't be long."

When I get out, I hear her lock the doors. Hesitantly , I walk inside, my eyes searching for any familiar faces. It takes me a moment to spot Janet sitting in a corner booth by herself. There is nothing notable about her that you would notice at first glance, but I can see how watchful her gaze is. The moment I slide in, she motions for the waitress. “ How do you take your coffee?”

“ More cream than coffee, please.” Janet doesn’t say another word until the server walks away.

“ I see your sister decided to stay in the car?”

“ She did. I’m not sure what you need from us, and I’m completely out of my element here, but we need help desperately. Even if it’s just for a few days until we can figure out what to do next.”

“ Take a breath, honey. Which one are you, Rowan , or Ruby ?”

“ I’m Ruby .”

“ Well Ruby , I’ve been watching the news. So far, neither of you have been mentioned, but that doesn’t mean anything. I need to know who to watch out for. I have several other girls who are also under my care that I can’t or won’t endanger for anyone. Just who was your sister messed up with?”

“ She’s married to Senator Robert Dean McAllen . They’ve been together for several years. Rowan was young and an easy target, with little family besides me after mom died. He was older and knew how to use all that fake charm to get what he wanted. Once he had that piece of paper saying she was his, in name at least, he apparently believed that it gave him the right to abuse her as he pleased. I didn’t know any of this was happening until a few days ago. She did a great job keeping it from me.”

“ They usually do. I’m sure when she finally opens up to you, her story will be even worse than what you’ve imagined. Those types of men thrive on control. They have a way of convincing you that your only worth is what they allow, and somehow their abuse is all your fault. I’ll put out some feelers to see if he has any mercenaries on your tail. He’ll probably want to get his wife back quickly to safeguard his reputation.

I don’t think I need to tell you that if she goes back, she won’t make it long. It’s easy for them to act heartbroken when the little wife unexpectedly has a bad accident. I should be able to get the two of you to the safe house before anyone knows or sees anything. Worst case scenario, we might have to move you guys a few times later on.

Ruby , you do realize that this is your life now, at least for a while? There’s no way you can go back to what, where, or who you were before. The moment he realizes she’s gone, he’ll be looking just as hard for you, if only so he can use you against her.”

“ Janet , I knew the moment I saw the bruises on her body, that things were going to get really hard before they got any better. Rowan is all I have left in this world, and I’ll be damned if I ever let that fucker hurt her again.”

The waitress drops my coffee off and I take a sip, trying to calm my nerves. I feel like every eye in the place is on us while Janet sits there on the other side of the table, calmly sipping her own drink.

“ Take a deep breath, Ruby . You’re no longer alone, fighting a battle you don’t have any clue how to win. I’m going to get up, go pay our bill, and then meet you out back. I’m driving a brown, average looking minivan. Stay here, drink your coffee, and take a moment for yourself to get your thoughts together. Once you’re outside, we’ll get your stuff transferred over into the van and be on our way. I’m gonna leave your car here for a few days. There’s a camera on the outside of the building over that particular spot, and I can watch to see if anyone comes this far.”

I nod my head and she gets up, patting my shoulder gently as she walks past. Closing my eyes, I try to calm my mind, but I'm too wound up. Setting my coffee back down on the table, I dig out the few dollar bills I have in my pocket and throw them on the table.

When I get outside, I'm actually shocked to see that Rowan is out of the car, helping Janet load the van with the few items we had in the back. Once the SUV is empty, I lean down using Rowan's trusty dime that I've kept in my pocket and take my old tag off the car. Rowan is already in the back seat of the van when I come around to get in the passenger side.

"Janet, we swapped my car for this one a few states back. Do you think it could be returned to its owner? We didn't steal it, but the man knew we were in trouble."

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

I glance at Rowan who has stretched out in the back seat with a blanket wrapped around her. Janet turns the radio on to an old seventies station and I kick my shoes off and lean back, enjoying the big seats in the van.

My eyes glance over toward Janet several times, wondering what happened in her life? She's older, probably early fifties. Her straight, dirty blond hair is turning gray around her temples, and sunspots mar the skin on her hands and arms. However, her weary blue eyes show the horrors she has witnessed firsthand. I see her glance in the review mirror at Rowan in the back, and then she turns, giving me a sad smile. There's no missing the age lines around her mouth and eyes, and I'm sure she was quite pretty when she was younger. But something took the light out of her eyes, and I swear I'm seeing that same dullness in my own sister's eyes now.

Shaking my head, I turn and look out the window at the passing scenery. The only

sound in the van is the low music coming from the speakers. After traveling about an hour, the view changes from tall, lush, green trees to a dry desert area. The houses are getting further and further apart with each passing mile, and I look over at Janet when we start to slow down.

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

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

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

“ How ?”

“ You'll see.”



### Chapter Five

#### RUBY

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

To say I’m shocked when I remove mine is an understatement. I never dreamed Janet was going to bring us to a place this unique. “ Wow , Janet , this is sweet. How in the world did you find it?”

“ My husband built it, actually. Days after it was done, I lost him to a drunk driver.” My face must have shown my shock. “ What ? Did you think that I’d been mistreated and that’s why I’m helping you and the others?”

“ Yes , I’m sorry, I simply assumed.” I stumble over the words.

“ No need to apologize, child. You’re right to an extent because our daughter was killed by an abusive man. We tried and tried to get her away from him, but like all the others, she was scared and felt like there was no escaping him. After we lost her, this place became a labor of love for me and the hubby. At the time, we both felt like we’d failed her in so many ways. It’s taken me years to come to grips with the fact that we didn’t. Sometimes things happen that are completely out of our control, and it’s only natural to wonder if we could’ve done more. If anything, those horrible things had to occur in order for me to be able to help others in the same, if not worse situations than she’d been in.”

“ I’d be lying if I said it was easy for me to move on. Losing both of them made it

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

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

The area is getting dark as dusk settles, and all I can see around us is the glow of pale lights behind a massive set of glass doors in front of this underground cave-house. I grab a couple of the bags out of the back of the van while Rowan stands there looking around in a daze. I'm not sure what is going on with her, but it's like she's in shock. Her body is here, but her mind isn't, and her eyes seem unfocused.

When I see Janet holding the door open for us, I grab Rowan's hand, pulling her along with me as we walk through the door. I don't know why I'm surprised to see quite a few girls sitting around, but I am. Several are playing cards and others, some type of dice game. Another is sitting on a couch with a book in her hand. They all look up at the same time when we come through the door. Janet motions to us standing behind her.

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

I hear a few ‘ welcomes’ as we follow Janet down a long hallway where there are several doors located on each side. She stops at the one on the end, then motions for us to go in. The room is larger than I would have expected, with two twin beds and a separate bath.

“ This will be yours while you’re with us. The bathroom is stocked and there’s also a small refrigerator in the corner with drinks inside. Get settled and some sleep. There’ll be plenty of time to figure out the rest later.” She doesn’t wait for either of us to say anything, simply shuts the door behind her as she leaves.

I throw my bag on the twin bed, running my hand over the smoothed rock wall next to it. “ Wow , Rowan , I don’t believe I’ve ever seen anything like this place. You would think it would smell like dirt or even be damp on the inside, but it’s not at all. This is sweet.”

Rowan is still just standing by the door, statue still, she hasn’t moved. Frowning , I walk over, pulling the hood off her head slowly while trying not to flinch at the shape her beautiful face is in. Waving my hand in front of her vacant eyes, she jerks back. Tears form in my own as I have no idea how to help her. I lean down so that my face is level with hers. “ Hey , talk to me.”

“ I’m scared Ruby .” Her voice is so weak I barely hear her.

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

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

Gently I start to pull her in for a hug, but she stiffens up, so I don’t force it. Instead , I

kiss her cheek and leave her standing there. Opening my bag, I grab my favorite pajamas that I've had for so many years, they're full of holes. I head into the bathroom that's small and plain, but it has everything we need in it.

Trying to destress my body, I lean my head against the cold tiles. Making myself take a couple of deep breaths, the hot water beats down on me from the shower head above. I reluctantly get out after staying in way too long. Wrapping a towel around myself, I glance out into the darkened bedroom, not shocked to find Rowan already in bed. The hood of that damn sweatshirt is pulled completely up over her head, like a shield.

Even though I'm worn out, I take a moment to brush out my long, dark red curls. They instantly start frizzing because I've not been conditioning it right these last few days. I make a mental note to myself to bring my leave-in conditioner and stuff into the bathroom tomorrow, then turn off the light.

Flipping the bathroom light off makes the room get scary dark. Not a fan, I flip the light back on, leaving the door cracked so that I can still see a little. Tip-toeing across the room, I stop to look down at Rowan's small form curled up in the twin bed before heading toward mine. Pulling the blankets down, I slide into the soft, sweet-smelling sheets, then roll onto my side, so that I am facing Rowan .

My mind is busy, but blank all at the same time. Knowing I need to sleep, I feel like I've no sooner closed my eyes than something wakes me up. The hairs on my arms stand up the moment I realize the room is pitch black again. Listening , the room is eerily quiet at first, then there's an odd sound, like something is sliding around on the floor near the bed.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 4:16 am*

### Chapter Six

RUBY.

Instantly terrified, my heart is beating out of my chest. I have no idea why, but all my senses are telling me to run. The first thing that crosses my mind is, ‘ How did her husband find us so quickly?’ That’s until I hear a hissing sound. Pulling my legs up, I lean over the side of the bed, but without the light on, I can’t see anything. ‘ Maybe Rowan turned it off ?’

Suddenly , an odd smell has me gagging, and a silent scream catches in my throat when a set of blood-red eyes flash right before mine. Jerking back, I’m grabbed from behind, a large hand grasping my face before covering my nose with some sort of cloth. Smothering , I kick out, fighting against the substantial body struggling to hold on to me from behind, only to feel my body start to go slack. I’m so focused on trying to escape and making my sluggish body move that I’m not necessarily paying attention to who or what has ahold of me.

Rowan’s frightened eyes find mine just as a bright light flashes. I can’t comprehend what I’m seeing at first. Something out of a horror story is holding her in its massively large, scaly arms. The last thing I see before everything fades away is her reaching for me.

I don’t know what wakes me up again, maybe the groaning all around me, or the screams. Alarmed , I sit straight up. “ Rowan !”

A small hand covers my mouth from behind. I reach up, ready to fight when someone

whispers, “ Be quiet you idiot! The last thing you want is to get their attention. Nod your head if you understand me.”

The moment I move my head, she lets go. When I feel her move away from me, I’m on my feet, swaying unsteadily. “ Take it easy, you’re going to have rubber legs for a few hours.”

“ My sister?” I whisper.

“ With all those bruises, I wasn’t sure if you two were related or not when they brought you in together. She hasn’t woken up yet, but it shouldn’t be much longer.”

My eyes search the crowd for Rowan . Thankfully , I find her laying only a few feet away from me. Moving toward her, I almost step on another girl that is laying at my feet, curled up in a ball, whimpering.

“ Where the hell are we?”

“ Not sure you’re ready for that answer, as I’m still in denial myself.”

“ Who are you? How long have you been here?”

“ Keep -your-voice-down! Their hearing is extremely sensitive. If you want to keep your head, whatever you do, don’t scream ... EVER ! My name is Sherry , and I was one of the first brought into these luxury accommodations.” She motions around at the metal walls surrounding us. “ I’m also the last of that group still in here. They’ve taken all the others and so far, none have come back. What’s your name?”

“ Ruby .”

“ Where are you from?”

“ Ohio , but we were in Texas last.”

“ I was taken from Arizona . Seems like they’re hopping from state to state, grabbing a few of us in each one.”

“ Do you have any idea where we’re at? The air feels heavy, and it’s hot as hell in here.”

“ Once your mind wakes up some, you’ll notice the vibration under your feet. I think we’re on some sort of ship. They brought you in a little while ago, and that seems to be the trend every twelve hours or so.”

“ How would you know that?”

“ I had my watch on when they took me. I think I’ve been here three days, but I’m not sure how long I was asleep. Seems like each group is different. Some wake up quickly, and others lay there so long you’re not sure if they’ll get up or not.”

Rubbing my eyes, I take a second to look around now that things are getting clearer. I can see we’re in a cage of some sort, and there are girls laying everywhere, wherever “here” is.

Several of them seem to be waking up, and I can tell I’m not the only one who’s confused. Stepping over the girl next to me, I bend down, shaking Rowan’s shoulder gently. I can tell her breathing is labored when she turns my way.

“ What ?” she whispers sleepily.

I motion for her to be quiet and that wakes her up immediately. Pulling her close, I ask, “ Do you remember anything?” She looks dazed and confused for a moment.

“ What ? ... No , the last thing I recall was you walking into the bathroom to take a shower. Wait a minute, ... there was something holding you and then a really bright flash.” Her breath catches and I can tell she’s about to panic.

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

Before I can say anything else, everyone near us starts waking up. Tears and whimpers can be heard all around, and even though I know this is bad, I’m glad I have Rowan with me. Having her here is keeping me from losing my shit. That is, until the first piercing scream echoes throughout the room.

Instantly , girls are running everywhere in front of me. I’m not sure who helps who up, me or Rowan , but to keep from getting trampled we both move with the group. The whole time we make sure to keep a tight grip on each other in the midst of all this screaming. One of the girls falls, and it takes me a second to realize she’s actually passed out.

Confused by what’s causing them all to panic, I try to see around them, only to disbelieve my own eyes. Standing at what appears to be the door to this cage is ... NO , there’s no such thing! My mind must be messing with me because these things are make-believe ... snake-men aren’t real!

A slender hand on my arm pulls me and Rowan toward the back of the room. “ Come with me, they always grab the ones closest to the door.”

I feel Rowan tensing up and I put my hand over her mouth before she can scream. “ Don’t make a sound,” I whisper as we move slowly away from all the others.



“ Ruby ?”

“ Yeah , Sis .?”

“ Are you seeing what I am?”

“ I think so.”

“ There’s no such thing!”, Rowan practically whimpers out.

The screaming gets so intense, I have to hold my hands over my ears, especially when it opens the door and ... slides in. Massive fangs flash and a noise that I swear sounds like laughter comes out of that gigantic mouth. It’s a fucking snake, a Naga . A character you would read about in a damn Sci -fi book. One thing is very apparent; it’s part something, but it’s nothing like the stories say. Its upper part doesn’t resemble a handsome human male at all, it’s a damn snake with arms and a smooshed-up face.

It has to duck down to clear the door, and watching its massive tail push it through the entrance has stolen my voice. It’s easily eight feet tall, as it towers over all of us. The multiple scales on its body are reflecting the colors around it, making for the perfect camouflage.

One of the girls tries to run out of the cell, and it grabs her around the waist, throwing her back into the crowd. I actually yelp when its mouth opens, snarling down at her, its fangs dripping onto the floor below, sizzling it on contact. It grabs a stick off the harness around its torso and it doesn’t take long to figure out you do not want it to touch you with that thing. The smell of burning flesh and the agonizing cries of the girls in front of me has me placing Rowan behind me as it motions for all of us to walk forward.

I can tell it's talking, but all I'm hearing is a series of long hisses. When the girls in the front don't start moving quickly, he ... it grabs them, pushing them out the door to what appears to be others of his kind.

The screaming abruptly stops to nothing but sniffing after a few girls get burned with the fire stick. Sherry does her best to stay in the shadows and I figure that's how she's managed to remain in here for this long. But when she steps back into the corner, it slides past us, grabbing her roughly before pushing her out the doorway.

Rowan has her head buried in my hair, where she is standing behind me. I can feel her tears dripping onto my skin as I pull her flush up against me. As much as I hate to, I follow along, not giving those things a reason to notice us. The moment I walk past it I pull Rowan over to the other side, away from him.

At this point, Rowan hasn't said a word, simply cries quietly every time I move her one way or another. 'God, how did this happen?' This is a damn nightmare I can't seem to wake from. We were in a sealed cave, for heaven's sake. How did something like this get in and were we the only ones taken?

As much as I want to, I can't fall apart. Rowan was already in a fragile state, so if she flips out on me now, I'm not sure what the consequences will be. Being forced forward, we're all lined up against the wall of a long, dark hallway. Several of those snake creatures grab a few girls at a time, taking them through an opening that automatically shuts back the moment they're through.

One of the girls near the front must have noticed she was next because she turns, trying to make her way back through the line. Out of nowhere, one of them grabs her, and I will say it has its hands full. She fights and screams like a madwoman, but the moment she scratches it across the face, its mouth opens and long, sharp fangs glisten in the pale light for a split second before he bites her on the shoulder. The agonizing scream the girl lets out will haunt my dreams forever. I have to turn away as tears

flow down my face while she weakly continues to fight against the monster holding her, until collapsing completely in its arms.

We all stand here stunned as it turns away from us, taking her limp form through the opening. I don't know if it killed her or what, but the room gets eerily quiet after that, only a few sniffles to be heard now. Rowan is shaking so hard I'm practically holding her up. The monster in the front grabs my arm, yanking me toward him, snarling something in my face and it takes everything I have not to puke since he smells like rotted meat and blood.

He tries to separate me from Rowan , but I refuse to let go of her no matter how hard he pulls against us. Quickly it gives up, shoving both of us out together at the same time.

My eyes see them, but my mind can't comprehend any of it. Nothing I've ever experienced before could have prepared me for this. Without conscious thought, my legs move, propelling us backward. Which is apparently the wrong thing to do because a sharp stab in my side stops me abruptly, a scream of pain escaping my lips as I lunge forward again, ensuring I do not let go of Rowan .

Gazing around, I simply can't believe that any of this is real. What appear to be females, or that's what I think they are anyway, line a look-a-like Miss America runway stage. And those damn snakes are pulling them along like they're escorting them to the Prom or something.

I stand here swaying back and forth, spots forming before my eyes as I feel my mind crumbling under the reality of what is in front of us. Aliens , ... we are surrounded by ALIENS !

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 4:16 am*

### Chapter Seven

#### RUBY

Rowan starts coughing as the smells in this room surround us, and my chest tightens in anxiety. We can't afford for her to have an asthma attack now and there's no telling what kind of triggers there are in this place. We sure as shit don't have her meds, and those damn snakes aren't going to be sympathetic to her medical issues.

The noise of so many 'things' overwhelms my mind as we stand here looking around. There are creatures that could be in a sci-fi movie back home and others that belong in the realm of nightmares. Then there are a few that might even be described as beautiful until you see their faces. Several of the 'things' clamoring around the platform just look hungry.

Several of the girls in front of us are crying, and it takes me a moment to realize what's happening next. The snake guys are grabbing two at a time, no matter the species, and cutting their clothes off and parading them naked down the platform raised in the middle of this huge ass arena.

Now that I've gotten a closer look at it, my initial observation is confirmed. It's a futuristic version of a beauty pageant stage. One of those that is shaped like a 'T' where the stage extends out into the crowd. The shouting of the spectators almost drowns out my thoughts as I watch the females reach the end of the stage.

Most of the females are made to turn this way and that, like they're a prized hog at the county fair, and a loud bell chimes for some. The ones the chime rings for are

escorted forcibly down another hallway and away from the rest of us. Their ear-piercing screams are so loud I can hear them over the crowd every time the door is opened.

A quick glance at the back of the 'stage' shows another small huddle of females with a guard lingering next to them.

' I wonder why they were separated from the others?'

An abrupt noise makes me jerk and I feel Rowan pulling away from me. She's trying to step back from me and the frenzied crowd of aliens in front of us. Grabbing onto her asking, " What are you doing? Don't do anything to make those scaly bastards notice you."

" Ruby , I can't."

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

" Ruby , I'm not like you. My strength and will to live is long gone."

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

“ I won’t let go.”

Her words no longer leave her lips when vicious, rough hands grab both of us. I was so focused on getting Rowan’s agreement, I didn’t realize we were next in line. The snake shoves us so hard, that for once, Rowan is the one to catch me and not the other way around. Another snake grabs hold of us, trying to rip us apart from one another. A snarl of frustration leaves its lips when it realizes that every time it manages to separate us, we grab hold of one another again, refusing to let go.

Putting up more of a fight than any of the other females so far, Rowan and I do everything in our power to stay together, our nails tearing into one another’s skin in a desperate attempt to keep from being split up. Both of us fighting against our captors with everything we have in us.

Tired of our resistance, one of the snakes grabs Rowan by her long hair, wrapping his fist in her tresses. He’s pulling so hard it makes her body tilt backward. Tears fill her eyes from the pain, but she doesn’t stop trying to reach for me. The snake holding her by the hair glances down snarling, only to pause. I can see its eyes roving all over her face, as if it just noticed the bruising still present on her skin. It utters a guttural sound to the snake holding me, getting its attention.

They hiss back and forth, clearly having some sort of conversation, but they’ve stopped trying to pull us apart, so I don’t care what the fuck they’re saying. I can tell the one holding Rowan is not happy about her condition. The one grasping me darts a look out toward the crowd that seems to have gotten louder in the short amount of time since the snakes grabbed us.

Growling , the one holding me yanks me forward and I’m proud when Rowan pulls out of the other’s hold so that she can grab tightly back onto my hand. A bell sounding overhead has both of us looking down the long stage and before either of us can comprehend what they’re doing, we are torn apart. Knives appear in their scaly

hands and even though I knew it was coming, I can't help from fighting back, trying my damndest to stop them from cutting my clothes off. My efforts are futile, though, and earn me several nicks deep enough that I can feel the blood bead as it begins to roll down my body.

The ease with how quickly they remove our clothing tells me that they are pros at this. A few strategic cuts and my clothing lays in tatters at my feet. The small pile is almost unrecognizable from the garments I wore seconds ago. Glancing over at Rowan, I can see that she also has a few streams of blood running down her bruised legs. I frown in concern when I notice that she's hunched over, her body turned away from me slightly. Craning my neck, I try to tell if she's bleeding from some sort of wound, but she shrinks further into herself and away from me.

My mind hasn't even caught up to the fact that I'm naked yet when a scaly hand grabs my arm, shoving me ahead of it. I reach out, grabbing Rowan's hand, again pulling her along with me. Stumbling a little, I walk down the catwalk, my eyes glancing out at the faux darkness that seems to surround us. Lights built into the edge of the stage beat into us, creating the illusion that the arena is dark while showcasing our naked bodies to all the 'things' watching us with hungry eyes.

Rowan whimpers and my head whips around to check on her when the glint of silver catches my eye. When I realize what I'm seeing, I almost trip over my feet. Her body isn't only covered in bruises, but there is a silver fucking chain hanging between her breasts connected with a small delicate looking lock. My eyes dart up to her face only to see that her eyes are glued to the floor as the snake holding her jerks her one way and then another, showing her off to the audience. I squeeze her hand, trying to provide what little comfort I can while simultaneously comforting myself.

Regardless of what's going on around us, we still have each other in this moment.

The snake holding my arm draws me to a stop, growling out something as he tilts my

head back, its long claws digging into the tender flesh of my face. There is a small flying object fluttering around us. It stops along my body in various places, pauses, and then flashes. ‘ It’s ... taking pictures?’ The dark mole on my cheek is the first place it flashes, the bright light so close to my face, it makes me flinch, causing the snake holding me to hiss in annoyance as his claws prick my skin. The resulting warmth flowing down my face tells me he broke the surface this time.

My body is scanned by the camera, which focuses on the tattoo on my hip and then the scars on my knees, remnants of a motorcycle accident some years ago. Suddenly , I realize what the flying thing is doing. It’s categorizing the flaws on my skin. It circles me one more time before a red light goes off and it beeps several times. The snake holding me starts hissing to the other one holding Rowan , as the little camera zooms over to her.

It begins the same process on her battered body, but with far more flashes of light than it did on me. Initially , the bruising and chain attached to her body drew my attention, but flash after flash of that thing has me taking a closer look. Rowan is covered in scars. They’re everywhere and it takes the camera far longer on her than it did on me.

Before we know it, both of us are forced back up the stage, and just as I think they’re going to force us apart, we’re marched past that awful hallway and tossed down with the group of girls along the back wall.

Pulling Rowan close, I scoot back away from them as far as I can. She is shaking so hard I can hear her teeth rattling. That stupid chain catches the light and I reach over, gently touching the lock and immediately noticing how the awful thing is attached to her. Hoops pierce her delicate nipples with the chain connecting them as the small lock holds them together. Her nipples are swollen and inflamed. It has to be terribly uncomfortable, that chain pulling all day, every day on her most sensitive parts. I wish I had a way to get this damn thing off her without hurting her worse.



I refuse to look at where the bottom of the chain leads. My mind can't comprehend what else he might have forced her to have done. Forced her to pierce. Forced her to endure. All for his own fucking pleasure. Instead, I wrap myself around her, rocking her back and forth as she cries silently. No wonder she was refusing to take that sweatshirt off, she didn't want me to know.

‘How do you do something like this to someone you supposedly love?’ What other horrors has she lived through all this time only to have finally eluded it and end up here? As another person gets tossed into our group, a nearby girl accidentally knocks into Rowan, making her jump and snuggle closer to me.

As I lean back against the wall, trying my best to ignore its biting cold, I watch as they parade girl after girl down that runway. The reality of what is happening around us finally sets in. This ... this is a market. We were being thoroughly inspected. Bile rises in my throat as all the clues come together.

**WE ARE BEING SOLD !**

My heart hits my throat as I fight against the terror trying to take over my mind. I don't know how to protect either of us from what's to come. Sooner than I like, I realize that the line of girls is rapidly dwindling. The only two left is the girl that was bitten and Sherry. Just as they are headed out onto the stage, the one holding the unconscious girl simply turns toward us, throwing her against the wall next to me.

Sherry, on the other hand, is shoved down the stage the same way we were. I watch as the little camera thing does its inspection on her, but instead of being put back here with us, she's led down the other hallway.

Her screams of terror are the last thing we all hear before the doors slowly close. A series of bells echo throughout the room. Then within minutes, it becomes eerily quiet as the roaring of the crowd seems to drift away, leaving only us and the few

other girls they have tossed in this corner. The snake guarding us sneers in our direction before slithering off. For the first time, we are all left utterly alone in the darkened corner.

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*Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 4:16 am*

### Chapter Eight

#### RUBY

Huddled all together in our little corner, it's hard to tell how much time has passed since the snakes left. I'm not sure if it's the cold or the situation that has me shaking all over, but I feel like my bones are rattling inside my skin.

At first, I thought the snakes had forgotten about us when the walkway started to sink back into the floor and the lights dimmed. Until an odd ticking sound, like lots of little claws on a hardwood floor, start getting closer. Looking up from where I had my head lying on top of Rowan's , I see something approaching in the shadows.

Squinting , I strain to see what is headed this way in the low light. The snakes only left one light on and it's directly out in front of us. It's the same concept as the stage; it highlights part of our cowering group but blinds us from looking out past the halo of light.

Blinking , I see something moving toward us. If my eyes are not failing me, it looks like hundreds of spiny legs! The second they come into the light, I freeze. Terror fills me as my eyes take in this whole new horror in front of us. It's fucking bugs, Gigantic . Fucking . Bugs ! They look like a praying mantis had a sick love child with a scorpion. Its large upper limbs mimic that of a praying mantis, the segmented limbs sawing in and out like it's anticipating an easy kill. Its head is triangular shaped with two black, multifaceted beady eyes and a bulbous-looking abdomen that ends in a tail topped with a massive stinger.

The biggest one in the front comes closer and I react defensively without thinking. Kicking it, my heel impacts with its steel-like legs causing pain to reverberate all the way up into my hip. Raising up onto its rear set of legs, the bug lets out an ear shattering screech before lowering its head, sniffing the air around us as it slinks closer. A long black, tube-like thing unfurls from where its mouth should be and when it reaches out to touch Rowan , I slap it away, hissing in pain when the slick fluid dripping from its mandibles burns the back of my hand. Glancing down, my skin sloughs off where the fluid touched it. Rearing back, it raises one of its front legs up, stabbing it down into my leg like a human would throw a spear.

Screaming out in agony, I try not to pass out as I hold on to Rowan . Ripped from her arms, I'm lifted high in the air and unceremoniously flung into a cage on some sort of hover platform. I feel something crack in my wrist when I land hard on my side. Grasping one of the bars, I drag myself up, screaming out for my sister as I shakily gain my feet.

“ ROWAN !”

I no sooner get her name out when she's tossed into another cage right in front of me. Scrambling to her feet, she darts over to me, her eyes full of terror.

“ Ruby ! Your leg!”

I let myself slide down to the floor, the cold of the cage beneath me makes me shudder as pain from the wound on my leg almost overwhelms me. “ Shush . There isn't anything we can do about it right now. I think we may have just gotten the shit end of the stick, Sis . The fact that we were left, and these things are what showed up to get us, it doesn't say good things to me.”

We both watch as all the other women are also picked up and tossed into the cages without care. I wince as the girl the snake bit and then tossed against the wall is

scooped up and thrown in. If that woman is alive, it will be a miracle. A morbid part of me hopes that she isn't, so at least one of us is spared whatever is to come.

The platform thingy we are on starts to move and I watch as we are hauled out of the arena area into what looks like a, ... well ... if we were on earth, I would say a shipyard, but these aren't ships that sail on water.

These are spaceships.

I notice the other things around recoil from our little procession. Growls , shrieks, hisses, bared teeth, and more are directed our way. It's like they're scared or disgusted with the bugs. Rowan looks at me before she asks.

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

“ That's exactly what it seems like to me.” Something that appears eerily similar to a werewolf snarls at the bugs, baring freakishly large teeth, before grabbing a smaller, softer version of itself, pushing it behind the mass of its body. Soft yellow eyes peek out from behind the massive snarling beast, locking its gaze with me. What I see shining in its surprisingly pretty eyes is ... pity.

The sound of metal grinding on metal jerks my attention back to the bugs. We've stopped in front of what looks like a docking station attached to the scariest fucking spaceship we've seen since leaving the arena. My eyes dart around, other ships surrounding us in all shapes and sizes, and they look relatively well kept.

This ship ... does not. It looks like it's held together with duct tape and bubble gum. There are even tiny holes in its side, and it's covered in rust. Great , we're about to be loaded onto this bucket of bolts.

I hear several of the girls in the last cages yelling out for help. Nothing or no one even glances our way. It seems this place is no different from any other, it's easier to simply look the other way.

One of the bugs bangs on the side of the ship and a hatch on the bottom creaks open. Then one at a time, we are transferred inside. When the cage tilts sideways, the blood from my leg causes me to slip and without thinking, I grab hold of the first bar I can. Unfortunately, with my now broken wrist, a jolt of intense pain in my arm causes me to lose my grip and slam the side of my face into the cage, splitting my cheek.

Black spots form in front of my eyes as I try to fight to remain awake. The last thing I hear is Rowan calling out my name.

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 4:16 am*

### Chapter Nine

#### RUBY

I wake up with my head laying on a soft surface, and someone gently combing through my hair. Rowan's worried face hovers above mine.

“ How long was I out?”

“ Long enough to scare the shit out of me.” Her voice is raspy and I can tell she is having a hard time breathing.

“ Did I miss anything?”

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

I lose the fight against the tears demanding release as a heavy sob leaves me. “ I've failed you.”

“ Oh , please Ruby , if this is anyone's fault it sure as hells not yours. I'm the reason we were in that place to begin with.” A heavy cough shakes her small form, and even through the tears, I watch her wipe blood from her mouth.

“ How long has that been going on?”

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

Rowan lies down next to me and we curl into each other. My mind drifts off, wondering how this all happened, as my body shivers uncontrollably. What is the old saying, ‘ seeing is believing?’ , but my mind and body are still in denial as I don’t truly want to believe any of this is real. Things like this don’t happen to normal people. I mean you see it on TV and crap. People come up missing all the time, but that was never going to happen to us. Never say never, huh?

Rowan and I both are nobodies, why would any species pick two girls like us? We’re barely even cute, let alone abduction worthy.

I must have dozed off because sudden screams wake me and I jerk up, pulling Rowan with me as I scoot away from the doorway. The bugs are back and this time it seems the louder you scream the more excited they get. The first one they grab is the girl who had been bitten. She moans out pitifully but never opens her eyes as one of them drags her behind it on the floor. Two more are taken before they slam the door closed.

Then time crawls to a stop as we sit here, anticipating their return. Even though there are several other human girls in here with us, we’ve kept to ourselves. No one’s saying a word in case the bugs are listening. Every one of us is locked in our own thoughts as we dread the hell coming our way.

I have no idea how long we’ve been on this ship, but one thing we’ve all suddenly come to realize is the bugs don’t care if we’re alive or dead. Not only do I feel like I’m on the verge of hypothermia, but my mouth is so dry I can no longer make spit. We’ve been here for at least a few days now. The last thing either of us would have eaten was the sandwiches Edith made for us on the trip to Texas , so that’s probably



three, maybe four days now. Between my injuries and the lack of food and water, I'm barely holding my head up. My thoughts are jumbled and I feel like I'm in a fog.

The room smells so bad from all our body waste, that I have to make myself breathe through my mouth. When the bugs came last time, several girls rose up, demanding food and water. We learned quickly after that not to give them a reason to single you out. Because once they drag you out of this cage, you don't return. Now the only time we hear a peep out of anyone is when they come back to take another one of us.

For the most part they have left me and Rowan alone, but I can tell she's getting weaker by the day without her meds. Her breathing is labored, and the wheezing indicates that her lungs are closing up. Rowan is once again asleep, and I run a hand over her long, now matted hair. Picking up the ends, I work my fingers gently through the knots. Her bruises are not healing; if anything, certain ones look worse than they did before. I try to push back the pain of my own battered body. My leg is now almost unresponsive as red infection marks are moving up under my skin. Moving my wrist hurts so bad it makes my eyes water. At some point, I've stopped being hungry. I know that's one of the first signs and now it won't be long until my body fails all together. My mind drifts to so many things I would've loved to have done, but none of that matters now.

The longer we're here, the more confusing it gets. I don't think they took us to be slaves. They seem self-sufficient and almost bored when they come in to get us. Our shrieks seem to entertain them and not in the way you'd think. Screams of fear have them backing away, but screams of anger seem to excite them. Or my body is so damaged I'm simply making up things in my head.

There're only a few of us left now, and we no longer even hear any cries coming from the other parts of the ship. Lost in my thoughts, I don't realize the door has slid open until movement catches my eye. Grabbing Rowan, I pull her close when the one I haven't seen since we were taken comes in.

It opens the cage door, but instead of grabbing the first one there, it walks in. Its long tail twitches back and forth as it looks at each of us. I swear its mandibles click together in glee when it spots me in the back. Fearing a repeat of the last time we met, I grab Rowan with the last of my strength, trying to push her behind me.

I shouldn't have wasted what energy I had left because before I can blink, it's speared me through the shoulder, raising me straight up in the air. Anguish like I've never felt before spreads out through my body as it turns effortlessly, holding me out away from it like I weigh nothing. Just as it clears the doorway, the bug suddenly stops.

"Let her go you prick!", I hear Rowan's garbled voice yell out before she attacks it from behind. I don't have the strength left to tell her to save herself, as warm blood drips down my body.

Before I close my eyes, for what I pray is the last time, I feel the bug holding me jerk, and then the thud of something hitting the ground.

### Chapter Ten

#### RUBY

Unfortunately , I open my eyes again, but this time I find myself in a completely different location. The air in the room is stifling hot and smells like decay. The heat is so intense the walls seem to be dripping in condensed moisture, a huge change from the extreme cold we've been in for days.

When I try to raise up, a rough hand pats my arm. “ Remain still.” The words are broken, but I instantly stop trying to move.

“ Rowan ?”

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

“ Hair like mine?” I'm having to force my dry mouth to make the words.

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

Turning my head, I try to see who is talking to me, only to jerk away when I realize there is a pale green hand lying on my arm. Forcing myself up on my elbows, I glance over at my shoulder, something black now covering the wound I have there and another also wrapped around my wrist.

“ Did you do this?” I whisper out to the unknown person.

“ Yes , I wish I could have done more. Letting you perish would have been a kindness, but it goes against everything I am. Your leg is festering, but I could not reach it as I too am secured to a nest.”

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

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

“ Were you taken also?”

“ I was. I did not know until later that the Velgriddix had found a way to disguise their ships. A distress beacon was sent out, requesting permission to land. They were on the ground before our forces could muster a counterattack. The guards were easily overtaken, and the warnings came too late for the rest of us.

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

“ How can I understand you?”

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

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

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

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

“ Did you just say ... eggs?”

“ You need not know of the specifics.”

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

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

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

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

when ingested, you cannot damage the eggs. Moments after he is done, your body will die.”

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

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

“ I did ask, didn’t I ?”

“ I warned you.”

“ Lord , God ,” I whisper out, falling back against the back of this round, nest-like thing I’m lying in. My first thoughts are how am I going to get us out of here? Then I look down at my body. My wrist is broken on one arm, the other shoulder won’t move, and my leg is numb. I couldn’t fight my way out of a wet paper sack right now. In all the nightmares you could come up with, I never dreamed up this one, and the fact that Rowan is going to experience the same thing makes my heart hurt.

“ How’ve you found a way to accept this?” I ask the voice I can’t see on the other side.

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

“ What’s your name? I’m Ruby .”

“ Kallen , princess of Rukuhks .”

Before I can say another word, the door slides open and in walks the bug. Because of the way this thing is shaped, I can barely see it walk past me, since it's like I'm lying inside of a bowl. Clicking noises and a whimper reach my ears as I struggle to pick myself up off the floor.

Pushing as hard as I can, I finally dig my way up this smelly, leaf-covered nest. Peeking over the side, I watch as the bug walks from girl to girl, or should I say bowl to bowl, stopping at each for a second. Glancing over to where Kallan would be, she motions for me to be quiet.

I know my eyes are huge when they land on her. Long black hair lays messily all around her very large, green shoulders. Bright amber eyes stare back at me, imploring me not to make a noise as my eyes devour her otherworldly appearance. She is nothing like any of the rest of us. She's big, not like fat, but big all around with a muscle mass that would only be seen on a guy back home. The most frightening of all her features are the tusks.

When a loud click comes from across the room, I turn my head slowly, trying not to gain the bug's attention. But I have to put my hand over my mouth when it grabs the girl within its multiple arms that the snake guy had bitten. She moans and whimpers some, but other than that simply lays limp as it maneuvers her in front of him.

I push my fist against my mouth to keep from screaming out, and I still must have made some sort of noise when it forces the girl's mouth open, because Kallen puts her hand on my arm, shaking me slightly.

Seeing it pry the girl's mouth open; I close my eyes and sink back down into the nest. The noise it's making has me gagging as I put my hands over my ears, singing a song in my head and trying to tune everything else out.

Rocking back and forth, I'm completely consumed in this living hell, when suddenly

I feel the entire ship shudder all around us and the lights flicker off. The door slides open, and the room fills with the sound of those things chittering and then silence as they leave the room.

Before I can ask Kallen if she knows what's going on, we're all thrown forward. The chain attached to my leg is the only thing that keeps me from flying across the room. Sirens go off all around us, and red lights start flashing.

“ Kallen , what's happening?”, I scream out over all the noise.

“ Hope .”



### Chapter Eleven

#### SLAVIC

Prowling around the helm, I catch Bikar glancing at me out of the corner of his eye.

“ What has you so riled up this rising, Slavic ?”

“ Something feels off. I can’t pinpoint it, but my spines have been aching since I arose, and the walls feel like they are closing in on me this rising. We have been sitting around brooding far too long. I am in need of some excitement.”

He swings around in his chair. “ Well , this might put you in a better mood. While you were slumbering away last darkness, dreaming about the naughtiness we experienced on that last Pleasure planet, I have been looking for our next victim. Our cargo bay is starting to get bare, and we need extra credits to get fuel on the Navale .

A small ship popped up on my monitors earlier. I didn’t say anything originally because I soon realized it was a Velgriddix ship. I was simply going to maneuver us out of their range, but something told me to hold off a moment. Since then, I have been keeping a close eye on them just in case their swarm ships followed, but it looks like luck may be on our side this rising. They are having thruster issues and if my scanners are correct, they have a full cargo hold.”

“ Can you tell how many of the abominations are on board?”

“ It would be impossible for a cargo ship of that size to hold more than fifteen or

twenty.”

“ Ahh , a couple for each of us to obliterate and then tear into tiny little pieces, one scream at a time. Perfect , a good fight is just what I need to take the edge off! Cloak the ship, head to their coordinates and rouse our brothers.”

Speaking into the comm, Bikar turns with a smile on his lips. “ Awaken one and all, we have a new target on the radar, and Slavic wants all of you on the bridge. So , get your lazy backsides up here with haste.”

Plopping down in my chair, I grin as I hear all the grumbling as he talks to each one of them separately. If we had more time, I would have enjoyed meeting them all at once in the sparing chamber. If for no other reason other than to solely remind them why the gods made me the eldest brother. I take pride in being the oldest and looking out for my brothers, but that doesn’t mean I do not enjoy beating them to a pulp either.

Thankfully , the ship we acquired when we freed ourselves from the mines is capable of holding our massive bodies easily, or our opulent yet rough way of life would make them even crankier. The Zenith , once known as the Vespira , has plenty of space for all six of us to loiter around and not bump into one another unless we want to. It even has a few places to hide when we need our space. My mind drifts for a moment as my hearts are saddened by thoughts of Our Life Giver , Mam . She preached constantly the importance of family, of how much stronger we were together than apart. From the time I was a youngling, she made it known that I had a responsibility to my brothers, and I have done my best to fulfill that role, but there are times when we all need some quiet time alone.

The helm’s door slides open, jerking me out of my dark thoughts, and I watch as everyone takes their usual spot around me. It doesn’t take long until all five are present on the bridge, staring out at the holographic screen Bikar has projected on the

control panel.

Seated in his normal spot, Bikar is working in the comms chair to my right, his fingers flying across the controls on the console. Falon walks up on my left, his massive legs spread to keep his balance as the Zenith moves aggressively one way then another as Bikar dodges the few asteroids in the vastness of the space surrounding us.

Murgul takes up his regular spot, leaning against the wall across the room as he avoids physical contact with any of us. His arms are crossed and he looks bored as usual. I can feel Ruarc's quiet presence as he walks up slightly behind me. My second oldest brother takes his responsibilities as my next in command seriously, maybe even more intensely than I do at times. Glancing around, I snarl when I don't see Einar . Just as I'm about to tell Bikar to comm him again, he stomps into the room.

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

“ I would not have been late Slavic , had someone, I am not mentioning any names here, but I am assuming the culprits were Bikar and Falon , not completely demolished my med-bay. If I had not been wasting my time reorganizing things, again, I would have been here when you first commed”, he barks back at me, frustration heavy in his voice.

“ For future reference, in an emergency situation Slavic , we cannot afford for me to not know where my things are, and you know this. They should know this! ” They all duck their heads when he points a stubby finger at each of them, but their smirks only make me angry.

“ You need to keep them out of my med-bay, Slavic , or I swear I am going to start retaliating”, Einar growls out in a menacing voice.

I sigh wearily. “ You fracking dumbasses, I am not your babysitter. STAY - OUT - OF - THE - MED BAY !” Smacking Bikar upside his head, I reach over and punch Falon , knocking him sideways, the walls practically shaking as I roar out my anger. “ I will not discuss this with you two again. Einar is correct. If something happens to one of you idiots, he needs to be able to find his things so that you do not die. How would any of you explain your death to our Life -giver in the afterlife? Do you really want to tell her the reason Einar could not save you was because you hid all of his shit again! Wipe those damn smirks off your faces before I do it for you!” I have to take a deep breath in order to calm down before I can continue on. “ Now as to why I needed you all here, Bikar tell them what you found.”

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

“ More credits for us”, they all yell out.

A low growl from across the room causes Bikar to pause. All eyes glance over at Murgul , checking to see if he is going to be able to keep his shit together while we invade this ship.

My brother was captured by the insectoid species rotations ago as a youngling. When we finally located the planet he was being held on, his mind was so damaged we had to restrain him to even get him off their ship. The things they did to him though, ... no being could ever truly heal from, and it is easy to see by the wildness of his

electric blue gaze that he is barely holding on to his sanity.

Anger instantly infuses me as memories thoroughly grip my mind. I grasp the chair's arms so tightly I can hear them cracking. I will always carry the burden of not being able to protect him or our Life Givers when they needed me most. The only joy I get from remembering that rising now is knowing I personally destroyed every hand that ever caused him pain. Nevertheless , when he sees us all staring at him, he snarls out.

“ I'm fine, proceed. I have no intentions of losing it this rising.”

The words are harsh, almost as if he has to force them from his throat. Which is probably true, since his vocal cords were irreparably damaged according to Einar . I have always assumed their damage was caused by his screams and I cannot imagine the amount of torture it took to make a Rukuhk as tough as Murgul break, even as a youngling.

Once we are reassured that my youngest brother is not going to slip his leash and destroy the bridge with us all on it, they turn back to me. “ Brothers , what say you? Do we go give them a traditional Rukuhk , uninvited guest greeting?” An evil grin graces my features.

Their boisterous voices echo off the walls as they scream out. “ Frack yeah!”

“ Einar , you have not been off the ship lately, so grab one of the smaller shuttles and I'll take the other. Bikar , as usual, you have the comms. Falon get to the engine room, I do not want any mechanical malfunctions on this run. Ruarc , you are in command while I'm off the ship, and Murgul , keep our weapons hot. You know better than anyone these bugs rarely travel alone. Once Einar and I have the ship secured, you all are to hard dock the Zenith near their back cargo hold.

After the ships are sealed securely together, you know the drill. Bikar , instead of

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

Orders issued, I rise out of my chair, stretching my large frame before exiting the room, ignoring Bikar's boisterous shout as he hates to be left behind. I head toward my personal quarters to retrieve my double-edged swords. My spines are still trembling, warning me not all is as it seems.

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*Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 4:16 am*

### Chapter Twelve

#### SLAVIC

As I anticipate the battle I'm instigating, there is no containing the smile on my face as the shuttle powers up underneath me. No matter how many I kill, I'll never be able to destroy enough of these abominations that plague this part of our solar system. Several times I've considered moving our operations into another region. Nonetheless, the Commanders have too many ships regulating those areas and our way of life is highly frowned upon.

The Void has kept us hidden for many orbital rotations, allowing me and my brothers to survive. But that thought takes the smile from my face, as I know all we are doing is surviving. Many a darkness I dream of the life we should have had, but dreams turn to ash the moment I open my eyes.

Red settles into my gaze as my anger renews with the thoughts of all that has been taken from me and my family. Knowing I am a danger to myself and all others around me when I allow the past to rise up in my thoughts, I bottle these emotions up for the enemy. Backing the shuttle out of the bay, I maneuver it away from the main dock in a daze, my body working automatically as I fight to get my thoughts back on the battle ahead. As soon as I am out, I see Einar's shuttle cloak the second it clears the ship's hull. I confirm the coordinates that Bikar has pre-programmed into the shuttle and initiate the launch.

“Einar, are you with me, brother?”

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

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

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

I click our communicator off as we get closer. Einar and I both circle the ship slowly making sure that neither of us are walking into a trap. These bugs have not spread all over the solar system by being dumb. When Falon sends back a confirmation on the thruster failure, I give the signal for Einar to proceed. He will infiltrate the lower cargo dock while I slide right into the main one. For a moment I contemplate turning the shuttle’s cloaking system off just to see how much fun I can have all by myself.

Einar pings me, verifying that he is attached safely, and I feel the ship jerk as he cuts off their power. Opening the shuttle door, I pause long enough to make sure the atmospheric shield is still active. This fun activity would end abruptly if I was suddenly sucked out into the void of space.

The moment my boots touch the surface of their ship, alarms start going off. I smile as I anticipate the blood of my enemy flowing all along the floor around me. Then I stand there simply allowing the bugs to come to me. My swords swing around and around, an extension of my arms as I hear them approaching.

Entering the dock, they immediately spread out and their leader steps up like I am going to cower away. “ What is the meaning of this, Rukuhk ? You are here tempting your gods if you believe you can rescue your princess alone.”

“ A princess you say? I did not know there was still such a thing bug, but now you have given me even more reasons to shed your blood upon the walls surrounding us.”



The larger one thinks that his words have distracted me long enough for his crew to sneak up behind me. I lower my swords and shake my head, “ One thing you bugs will never learn.” Swinging my sword straight back hard, I hear the crunch of an exoskeleton. “is that you cannot hide the clipity-clop of those feet of yours. You really should invest in coverings.”

Snarling , I leap forward, ducking and slicing at the multiple legs like a madman. A loud bellow has me turning with a smirk on my face as Einar engages in the fight from behind them. With wicked smiles on our faces, we cut them into multiple pieces effortlessly. Unfortunately , the fight seems to end too soon, and I find myself covered in bug gore standing next to Einar as he rolls his enormous neck.

“ I haven’t enjoyed a rising quite this much, in well, some time! Are you injured, Slavic ?”, he asks, motioning toward my arm with a look of concern on his homely face.

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

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

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

Walking through the ship, I have to fight my gag reflex as the smell of death

permeates the air all around me. The ship is relatively small compared to the Zenith , and it does not take long to clear each room. The bugs devour everything, so there isn't much that can be salvaged in the upper chambers.

My comm unit goes off. “ Slavic , did you find anything interesting up there?”

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

Opening the next door, I stick my head in, instantly disgusted when I realize what this is...the leader's breeding nest. Movement in a middle one has me drawing my sword, rushing forward ready to destroy any and all young in there, only to slide to a stop when large, amber eyes blink up at me.

“ Slavic , is that really you or am I dreaming?”

“ Gods of Ruk , Kallen ? You are dead, you all perished. I saw it with my own eyes.”

“ Not all Slavic , but I am not long for this world, my old friend.”

I immediately sheathe my sword and reach down for her only to notice a chain attached to her emaciated leg. Grasping it between my hands, I tear the links apart with a growl on my face. Stopping , I take a second to look at her. She is nothing but skin and bones. Dark blood cakes her inner thighs and there is some sort of homemade bandage under her left breast.

“ Kallen , I need to lift you up out of there. Gods , what have they done to you? I will be as gentle as I can, Princess .”

Kneeling on one knee, I slip my arms under her. Tears form in her eyes as I lift her up. She is so weak she simply hangs on me, and I have to stop long enough to secure

her head against my shoulder.

“ I thought you were a ghost sent to bring me home”, she whispers.

“ We will get you better Kallen , do not give up on me now.”

“ Do not forget Ruby .”

“ Who ? I know no Ruby .”

At first, I think she is talking out of her head until I see movement in another bowl nest. I hit the comm unit on my wrist.

“ Einar , I need some help up here.”

“ Be right there.”

Taking a second to look around, I quickly realize that there are several humans in the breeding nests next to the outer wall. Thankfully , I hear loud footsteps stomping toward me, and for once I am glad my other brothers are a curious lot.

Einar is the first through the door, and before I can say a word, he is storming past me across the room, a snarl on his lips. Tearing a bowl nest apart as he searches for the chain's connection that is draped over its side, for a moment, I am confused by his actions. Then I see the spines on his back emerge and start fluttering, darkening in color. Expecting him to lift another of our kind out of the nest, I am stunned when he pulls up a frail, multicolored human female instead.

He turns, practically running toward the door. The female is wrapped so tightly in his arms that you can barely see her. “ I will meet you on the Zenith .” That is all he says as he sprints past me.

Ruarc barely jumps out of his way as he walks in. Both of us glance down the hallway after Einar's departing form. "Slavic, the cargo is loaded, but I sent Falon and Murgul to the bottom deck to ensure we got everything and to check out the other heat signatures Bikar keeps nagging about." The moment he turns toward me it's like he sees a ghost. His eyes flare as he starts clenching his fists, like he is trying to control himself.

"Give her to me NOW Slavic, before I cannot hold back any longer!"

"What the frack is going on with everyone?"

"Ruarc, get your head out of your ass and check the rest of this room out. If any of them are alive, bring them back to the ship. If they have been infested with the bugs young, ... kill them."

"Slavic, I am not joking, brother."

A sound in one of the nests has both of us turning, only to see a pair of dark brown eyes staring at me over its edge. Without thinking, I hand Kallen to Ruarc. Everything else fades away as my whole world shifts.

### Chapter Thirteen

#### SLAVIC

In a fog, I find myself standing over the breeding nest in the corner, a pale and yet brightly colored human female, staring up at me with huge, brown eyes. I have no idea how long I stand there looking down at her when I hear my comm unit go off and Bikar yelling something about swarm ships approaching. All my mind can comprehend is the female lying in front of me. I have found my mate.

My eyes roam across her tiny form, logging all of her injuries, and I growl, wishing now that I had made them suffer a little longer. She is trembling all over, but unlike Kallen , she seems alert. When I lean closer, she does her best to scoot away holding her puny little hand out, like she is trying to stop me. I make myself soften my voice as I effortlessly break the chain holding her. Her eyes get large at witnessing my strength and she whimpers, curling into herself when I step closer.

“ Be at ease little one, no harm will befall you in my arms.”

“ Ok , Big and Ugly . Thanks for snapping that chain, but I have no clue what you’re saying.”

Tilting my head, I try to figure out how to reassure her while the spikes on my spine quiver as I ache to have her in my arms. Especially since I am fighting the urge to simply grab her and hide her away from all others until she wears my mark. A loud bang hitting the side of the ship’s hull takes the choice from me. Then Bikar’s voice practically screams over the speakers.

“ Get your frackin’ asses back on the ship, NOW ! If we don’t leave in the next tick, we don’t leave! Slavic , I don’t know what has your attention on that deck but wrap it up.”

The more voices she hears the more terrified she becomes, and I know there is no way to coax her to come to me on her own. Stepping inside the nest, I stoop down and gently pull her up tight against me. My spines quiver and for a moment, I feel as if I’m suffocating as my mating collar burns its way up my neck, marking me for all to see. In all my rotations, I never dreamed this could happen. At first, I am so wrapped up in the sensation of having her in my arms and what this means, that I do not notice her struggling weakly against my much larger frame. A sob leaves her lips and with the last of her strength she hits my chest and then points to one of the nests.

“ Please , if we’re going somewhere, get my sister. I can’t leave without her.” Her words are so soft that it takes a moment for my translator to pick them up.

Looking around, I do not see but one other female in a nest. Quickly and without letting go of her, I lean down, checking the pulse of the female laying there, but it’s obvious she is dead. Turning , I show her that there are no others in the room, but instead of this giving her comfort, she wilts.

“ The green girl said she was there, why would she lie to me?” The pain in her eyes makes my hearts hurt. A single tear flows down her cheek, and I reach up, wiping it away.

“ Little one, we will find your sister if she is still alive. I give you my word.”

The hopelessness in her gaze almost crushes me when she shakes her head. “ I don’t know what those growls mean, big guy and it doesn’t matter anyway, not if she’s gone.”

I do not know how to comfort her, nor do I know if her sister was actually here at one point. Her nest was so high she more than likely would not have seen Einar take the other female.

“ Slavic , MOVE !”

Bikar’s words have me running down the corridor with her tucked in close so that I do not accidentally hurt her worse than she already is. Sliding on the bloody deck, I am grateful that Bikar can operate the shuttle remotely and it is already turned to exit the ship.

Stepping in, I arrange her on my lap while the hatch seals and the straps lock us in the seat together. She has stopped fighting completely and this worries me. Pushing the matted hair off her pale face, I lean down slightly to make sure she is still breathing, grateful, when I can feel her breath across my cheek. “ Bikar , I have my hands full, get me the frack out of here.”

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

Before I can respond, the shuttle accelerates so quickly I am pinned against the seat. Something warm running down my side has me pulling my precious package away from me slightly. Only to be horrified when I see her inner essence running freely down her chest onto mine. Looking up through the viewer, I don’t see the Zenith on the horizon anywhere.

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

“ If you had been paying attention, you would be aware that several large, and I mean

big ass swarm ships appeared out of thin air. I had to separate us in order to deflect their fighters. However , I am holding the Zenith back just a little bit trying to get them slightly closer to us before I blow the Velgriddix ship we just relieved of its cargo and crew.”

Before I can say a word one way or another, a bright flash appears all around the shuttle, and for a moment, I am blinded. When the ship starts to tilt, I realize that Bikar has lost remote control. Grabbing hold of the console, I immediately switch it to manual. The inner area of the shuttle is only set up for one person, so this makes it awkward to reach everything with my little human in my arms.

“ Bikar , can you hear me?”

“ Yes , head toward the asteroid belt and find a place to hang out. I am kind of busy back here.”

“ Confirmed .”

A shuddered breath has me looking down at the female in my lap, my heart breaking at the shape she is in. I need to get this shuttle somewhere safe and see if the medical aids were restocked.

Taking one hand, I pull her up closer to my neck so that I can feel her breathing as I maneuver us through the asteroids. My thoughts are chaotic as I am being torn in two. Everything in me demands I stop what I am doing and tend to my mate. But the rational part, the one that is barely hanging on knows that is not possible right now.

“ Little female I need you to survive. Up until the moment you were placed in front of me, I was willing to go into the afterlife at any time, but now all I want is a future with you.”



Her fingers twitch where they are laying on my chest and I nuzzle the top of her head, hating the smell of those bugs on her. Never in all my existence did I ever dream I would be excited to see a random group of asteroids appear, but I steer toward them like I am headed home. ‘ Home ’, I am not sure where that is now.

It takes me longer than I wanted to find one that is stable and not spinning wildly through the open space around us. I ping my location to Bikar as I notice he has blocked all conversations in or out for reasons unknown to me right now.

The moment I set the shuttle down and anchor it securely, I hit the lever for the chair to move as far back as possible. Making sure not to jostle her around too much, I start going through the compartments. Relief hits me full force when I see the medical container tucked safely in its assigned spot.

“ Thank you Einar , for being so organized.”

Yanking it open, I suddenly stop as I realize I have no real knowledge on how to treat her. What if I end up doing more harm than good? I almost hit the communicator, only to stop myself short before hitting the button. I cannot risk my brothers just because I am scared. That’s when I realize I am shaking all over. I can only imagine the amount of teasing I would be getting right now if they could see me.

A small groan pops me out of my wandering thoughts, but what can I do? Pushing everything around inside the case, I discard most of it, until the only things left are a few bandages and some cleansing foam. Glancing down at her, I surely will not hurt her worse by cleaning the wounds I can see. This helps motivate me as I push through all the emotions I am feeling right now.

What I would prefer to be doing is annihilating every being that has ever harmed her. Rage a war and destroy their entire race with her name bursting from my lips, so they would know who was avenging her. Instead , I am struggling to find a way to save

her. Because if I lose her, they will have to put me down as well. My soul is now tethered to this fragile female, and I do not even know her name.

Finding some antiseptic wipes and a few bandages, I start on her shoulder, as it seems to be the one leaking the most. She is so small I am terrified just the slightest pressure will break her. Gently , I try to remove the leaf from her skin, but part of it is dried and sticking to her. I have never felt so helpless, ever, and even though I will deny it if asked, I almost cry out in relief when Bikar's voice sounds throughout the shuttle.

“ Slavic , I have your location. Release your anchors and strap in. I am going to grab you on the way through.”

“ Thank the Gods ,” I mumble before gathering her close again. “ Bikar , did Einar return to the ship safely?”

“ He did, and has been in medical, ranting and raging, unlike anything I have ever witnessed before from him. I have tried to speak to him several times, but whoever is in there with him has all his attention. His assistance could have helped me evade the swarm ships quicker, but he would not leave the med bay.”

“ I am assuming you were effective in evading them?”

“ Do you doubt me, brother?”

“ Not in the slightest.”

“ I am coming in hot, so make sure you are secure.”

“ We are.”

“ We ? Frack , I can tell things are no longer going to be boring around here. Just to

give you a heads up, Falon and Murgul brought more on board than just cargo.”

### Chapter Fourteen

#### SLAVIC

Bikar never ceases to amaze me with his ability to multitask as he lands the shuttle effortlessly inside the Zenith . The moment the engine's power down, I slap the lever for the hatch to open. Before it can slide all the way back, I am trying to squeeze my way out.

Careful not to hit her limbs on anything, I bundle her into a tiny ball as I make our way to Einar and his medical rooms. Smacking the door with my shoulder, I almost bounce off it when it does not open.

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

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

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

Those last words no longer leave my lips that the door slides open. He stands there looking down at me since he is several inches taller than I am. “ Your mate, Slavic ?” He motions for me to come in and promptly starts preparing a bed next to the other one that is occupied now.

“ Put her right here, quickly. I know not what games our Gods are playing with us

right now, or if we are merely being tested, but I have never been so terrified in my life, Slavic . While : Of course, I know what humans are and where they originate from. I lack any real knowledge of their anatomy and treatment. I am at a complete loss. The rumors circulating about their species is that their planet of origin was destroyed by a world ending storm. Bikar is doing his best to track down anything and everything he can on their species that's left, via the normal back channels, but he's already warned me that if he stretches his reach out too far, we may inadvertently bring some unwanted attention from the Commanders this way. It's believed that Commander DaR has put their race under his protection, but he would have to kill me before I would allow him to take her!"

The whole time he is talking to me, he is pulling out things all around the bed.

"What are you talking about?"

He nods toward the bed next to this one while I am mid-motion, laying my head on the table. I glance over, instantly seeing the resemblance between the two of them. "Do you think they are sisters, Einar ? She was distraught when she saw the nest next to her was empty."

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

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

"I have no clue, brother, but I wish they would have watched over them a little better. My mate's lungs were almost completely collapsed, and she has numerous other injuries, but I have managed to get her stabilized. I have a few minutes I think, so let us see what we can do for your mate while mine is resting. First thing we need to do is get these leaves off and out of her. Whoever did this knew that the leaves

would slow down the blood flow, but unfortunately infection has set in. You can already see where her skin is turning red around the edges.”

I stand back for a moment as he scans her from top to bottom. “ I need you to take her to the sanitizer unit. The mixture of bug guts, and your blood combining with hers is corrupting the scan. I will not get an accurate read on her while she is covered in so many viscous fluids.” I look up at him.

“ Will it hurt her?”

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

Gently picking her back up, I turn toward the large sanitizer in the back of the medical room. Dropping my swords, I step in clothes and all, then hit the button. Steam surrounds us and I must make myself hold her body out away from me slightly, so that it can get in between us. Her face scrunches up in pain when the machine hesitates on dirtier areas.

“ Shush , little one. This will all be over soon.” Her eyes flicker open for a moment and even dazed, her dark irises find me.

“ Oh , Big and Ugly , it’s you again. Are we dead? No , I don’t think we are, because everything hurts too much.” The sprayer passes over her face, and she squeezes her eyes closed, a frown upon her pretty lips. I try not to let her words bother me as she is not in her right mind. Nevertheless , I know what I look like and even though I wish it was different, her description of me is not inaccurate.

The sprayers must have hit one of her wounds because she tries to push away from

me, only for her wrist to buckle where she was putting pressure on it. A small scream leaves her lips, and I have never felt more helpless as once again she goes completely limp in my arms. The only thing I am thankful for is that I can now move her around to make sure she is as clean as the sanitizer can get her, without causing her any more pain. The moment the machine shuts off, I have to make myself wait for the dryer to commence so that we are both free of moisture before stepping out.

Cradling her tiny form against my larger one, my long steps quickly get us back to Einar who is bent over the other female, adjusting a heating pad.

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

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

I end up holding her until he turns around. No matter how many times I tell myself to let go, I just cannot. Einar turns and I expect him to berate me, but instead he gives me the time to fight myself without saying a word. Finally , I unlock my arms and lower her down.

She looks so broken lying there as bruises and open wounds mar her tiny frame. Anger unlike I have ever known has me growling out and Einar grabs my arm. “ She does not need your rage; she needs your love and attention. Lock that shet down for later.”

Einar pushes me away from the bed while he scans her. “ Frack , these two are a mess. Both are dangerously dehydrated and starved to the point that they are nutrient deficient. Their delicate skin has been exposed to the elements and ultimately, that will lead to permanent scarring. I will do my best to reduce it, but saving their lives is more important than a few scars. On top of that, it looks like your mate also has a nasty infection, and by the shape of the wound, it was a Velgriddix that did this to

her. Her shoulder muscles are torn, and that was probably caused by fighting back. Not to mention, her wrist is angled wrong, which indicates a broken bone. I have to give these little humans one thing, they are tough. Many times, I have seen lesser wounds bring a male to his knees.”

I run my hand over the top of her head glad that even though still matted, her hair is at least clean.

“ Here .” Einar hands me an odd-looking brush.

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

“ You are simply giving me something to do.”

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

Moving closer to the table I gather her long tresses in my hands and do as Einar said. Not having any hair myself, this process is odd at first. But with each stroke, the colors become clearer and soon I find myself entranced in the process of gently working out each knot.

Out of the corner of my eye, I observe Einar as he goes back and forth between the two females. Both of our comm units go off several times, but I trust my brothers to handle whatever issue they are trying to alert us of.

“ Slavic , I am going to give her a sedative. She cannot awaken in the middle of the



surgery I need to perform to save her leg.”

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

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

My mind drifts off, thinking I have called her everything in my mind. I just could not fathom that what I was feeling is what is truly happening, but when Einar states it as something so obvious, I know it must be true. ‘ She really is my mate .’

“ Do you want me to proceed?”

This breaks me out of my own thoughts. “ Brother , I trust you with not only mine, but all of our lives. If you believe it is safe, then do whatever it takes to heal her.”

He turns from me, gathering a set of tubes and instruments from a hover table nearby. Movement from the bed has me glancing down and instantly drawn to the dark eyes staring up at me. Her body tenses when Einar moves closer and I reach down, touching her arm softly.

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

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

Glancing up at Einar , he actually shakes his head, a smirk on his face before turning her slightly. Her eyes move to watch him as he injects her with a numbing agent. She blinks slowly, fighting against the drug’s effect. Einar waits until her eyes close, then proceeds to insert the hydration fluids and other meds before working his way down

her frail form.

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

“ But she will survive?”

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

A ding sounds, and Einar pulls a screen down, scrolling through the data. “ Well , at least one question is answered. They are blood sisters.”

A pounding on the wall has me snarling out and bending over my little mate. “ Here Slavic , put this on her and once she is covered, I will see what the frack they are blowing our comm units up about.”

The moment I have her concealed, Einar opens the door, only to find Ruarc and Falon standing in the hall. Ruarc gets right up in Einar’s face. “ What the frack is going on in here that is so important that neither one of you can take a moment to answer your comms? You are needed out here.”

“ We had pressing issues to deal with, Ruarc . What do you need?”

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

“ Other three what?” I snarl out.

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

Glancing down at my mate, I look back up at Einar as he says, “ They will be out for at least half a rotation. I have the monitors set to alert me if they so much as twitch.”

Never in all my rotations has anything been as difficult as leaving her side. Nonetheless , I bite the inside of my lip and make myself follow the others toward the back of the ship. Falon hesitates when we get to his quarters.

“ Well ?”

He hits the entry panel, and I rub a weary hand over my face as three terrified human females stare back at us. Every word out of my mouth is basically making it worse because they cannot understand we are the good guys. Well , not normally, but in this case we are.

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

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

“ Gods , they are nothing but skin and bones. Einar see to Kallen , because in the midst of all this confusion, I completely forgot about her, and she was in very rough

shape. To the point where she had given up and she thought I was a ghost sent by the gods to take her into the afterlife. ... Bikar ?”

“ I am listening.”

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

“ I am on it.”

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

### Chapter Fifteen

#### SLAVIC

Two risings have passed, and she continues to lie there, as still as death. “ Einar , how much longer do you think?”

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

“ Has she revealed anything yet?”

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

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

“ At least now they have a chance at fulfilling that bond. That is, if Ruarc can get his head out of his backside before he ruins it. If we had remained on Viri 9, they would never have interacted with each other. Our status was ... his pause is weighted, as if the words pain him before he forces himself to continue, too low. They would not

have ever crossed paths, and I think that is even sadder. I think that is why Ruarc is fighting the bond. He feels like he is not good enough for her, which breaks my hearts. So many pray and hunt for their mates, never realizing they may have walked right past them at some point in their lives. Personally , I am glad this is his fate and burden to bear and not mine. I cannot say I would be behaving any differently in his situation.”

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

The med system pings, and I watch once again as Einar checks the readings. His words flow through my mind as I look down at the little female that should never have been gifted to me. I am not worthy of her either, but I refuse to give her back. If the gods made a mistake, that is on them. The worst part of all of this is realizing the shet she had to go through in order to be here right now. How do I ever prove myself worthy of all she has lost? Einar’s voice yanks me out of my deep thoughts.

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

“ You are just trying to get rid of us,” I tease him.

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

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

“ Your words are true Slavic . However , the one thing I have learned as a medic is

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

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

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

However , Ruarc won’t let Kallen out of his room, stating that she is too weak, and I blame him not. Frack , I would react the same way, if not, probably worse. Shet , I already am. Even now I am changing things to protect our mates at all costs. This

whole experience is new to me and now I am doubting every decision, something I have never done in the past. One of the things rolling through my mind is the fact that the Zenith is not big enough for all of us. If we remain on the same path, we will be forced to start making some serious modifications or possibly need to trade her for something larger. Then the next issue is, how are we going to continue to fund this little adventure if we are all too scared to put our mates at risk?" I can tell that my words have Einar thinking.

"Has Kallen told Ruarc where she was taken?"

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

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

"You go on Einar, I will stay and watch over them."

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

"This would be much easier with translators."

"Possibly Slavic, but then maybe not. Either way, they will wake terrified and



confused. Words alone will simply not make those emotions disappear, only our actions will.”

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

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

I nod my head and glance away from his knowing gaze, fighting the anger that always consumes me when my little brother is mentioned. Following Einar’s massive form, I reluctantly go out the door. It is obvious our brothers’ permanent damage weighs heavily on his wide shoulders. My hearts and mind are once more torn in many directions. Never in all my life have I fought myself like I have these last couple of rotations. Being the oldest, I do not have the luxury of doubting my choices. My life givers and brothers have always depended on me to provide for and protect them. But this situation has broadsided me, making my thoughts chaotic and scrambled. I feel as if I am standing outside myself, looking in with no clue how to fix the issues bombarding me.

Rounding the corner we run into Bikar , who is walking into the dining chamber with his arms full of empty trays. “ I see the females are eating. That is a good sign.”

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

I nod as he continues talking. Grabbing the first thing the replicator spits out; I eat the food without tasting it. The now darkened collar around my neck itches and I rub it absentmindedly, my mind full and blank all at the same time. When my spines start to rattle on my back, I jerk my head up and I am out of my seat before Einar can say a word. My mate is awake and she is in distress. Running down the hall, I feel as if my

feet are moving through deep sand. Sliding to a stop in front of the medical center, I slam my hand against the security panel, stepping forward the moment it opens, only to stop dead in my tracks.

### Chapter Sixteen

#### RUBY

First thoughts, Shit - Damn - Hell ! How many more times am I gonna wake up somewhere else? This shit is getting old real damn quick. Second thought, ROWAN . With my heart beating fast in my chest, I anticipate the fight coming when whoever has done this realizes I'm awake. When I don't hear anyone else nearby, I move my head gradually, glancing around. Realizing I'm in some sort of medical facility, a familiar cough has me sitting up. My eyes seek out Rowan , grateful when I find her in the bed next to mine.

Reaching up to rub my eyes, I flinch when something sharp pokes the inside of my arm. Moving it out from under the blanket covering me, I notice the odd tube and track it to a hole in the wall, where clear liquids are dripping into it like an IV back home. Picking the blanket up, there is no missing I'm naked and that seems to have become the norm lately. My leg has a huge patch over it, which has me glancing over at my shoulder. Rolling it gently, it twinges a little, but it's tolerable. For the most part, someone has pieced me back together, and I'm not sure if that's a good or bad thing.

Throwing my legs over the side, I gasp when my wrist hits the bed. I'd forgotten the damage until I put pressure on it. Rubbing the hard, clear wrap around it, I slowly slide down to the floor. Pulling the small hose out of my arm, I make my way sluggishly over to where Rowan is lying.

She seems to be sleeping peacefully, and tears form in my eyes when I realize I no

longer hear the rattle in her lungs. She is clean and someone has even taken the time to brush her hair, oddly enough. Easing the blanket up to see how her bruising looks, I start to cry when I see that someone has removed that damn chain and its hooks. She has several patches like mine all over her and they've wrapped her ribs. Thankfully, most of her bruises are lightening, and this gives me an idea of how long we've been in this place. I shake her slightly, "Rowan, can you hear me?" but she doesn't move.

Leaning against her bed, I brush my hand down the back of her head, my mind trying to figure out, what now? I don't believe someone would've taken the time to fix us up if they were going to hurt us again. Vaguely, I remember something large and gray carrying me, but I'm not sure if it's a real memory or made up. A loud pounding sound outside the doorway has me looking around for a weapon. I will not lay here and be a good little victim this time. Grabbing what looks like a small knife off a tray, I push myself up onto Rowan's bed, crouching over her when the door slides open.

I swing the knife out in front of me. "Stay the fuck back." The creature just stands there, his eyes roaming leisurely down my naked body and I can't help but shiver slightly, as it feels like a gentle caress.

"I wondered if you were real, but damn, seeing is believing that's for sure. You can put those eyes of yours back in your head Big and Ugly. I've never been one who enjoyed being gawked at."

He growls a series of sounds at me.

"Look, I think we've already had this discussion. I have no idea what the hell you're rambling on about. With so many different species out here, ... wherever the hell here is, you'd think some smart ass would have found a way to fix this damn language barrier."

I had just lowered the knife down some when something else charges into the room

right at me. Without thinking, I slice out with the small knife when it reaches for Rowan . I don't know who is more shocked, me or Big and Green standing aggressively over me. His tusk snapping angrily as dark blood drips from the slash on its arm, I back up, pulling Rowan with me when it advances again. “ We can do this all day, Green Giant , but you are not touching my sister.” He snarls at me, and I recoil.

My big and ugly grabs the green monstrosity and practically throws him out the door. That kinda shocks me because the green one is bigger. The gray one is standing over the green one, breathing hard. His massive, yet impressive chest is moving up and down quickly, like he has or is fighting something internally.

When Rowan sits up coughing, the big green one tries to charge into the room and I almost cheer when Big and Ugly slams him again. Out of nowhere, another one shows up, joining in the battle outside the door. I'm impressed at all the muscles it's taking to separate the two massive beasts fighting out there. A whimper behind me has the green one stopping dead, mid-swing to look in at us. I flinch when my gray one swings out, clipping him in the jaw, blood flying off his torn knuckles as they'd caught on the green one's tusk.

I feel Rowan's small hands grasping my arm as she pulls herself up behind me. “ Are you ok?”

When she doesn't answer me, I take my eyes off the scene in front of us to glance back at her. Rowan's eyes are huge, and I can feel her trembling slightly right before a coughing fit hits. Apparently , that's all it takes to push the green one into a rage. Because before I can even blink, he is standing right in front of me. I don't even have time to raise the knife up before he grabs it quickly, prying it out of my hand. Then he picks me up and practically slings me toward the gray one, who catches me in his arms.

It snarls out something, then points to the doorway. The second I realize what it's telling the one holding me to do, I start fighting like a madwoman. Just as the door closes, I hear Rowan's weak voice calling out for me, and with renewed strength, I push hard against the giant arms holding me. Wrestling with me, it takes him a minute to get my arms pinned down, but once he has me secured against his chest, he takes a deep breath, then turns walking both of us down a long hall. Squirming in his arms, I try anything and everything to get free. Biting and kicking backward as hard as I can, he quickly catches on, simply moving out of the way. Feeling like a small doll in his massive hands, the skirmish finally wears me out, and I find myself in front of another door. He hits it with his shoulder and an even angrier guy opens the door. Looks like everyone is pissed off about something around here. This one is a mix of the green monster and the one holding me. They snarl back and forth at each other before I hear another voice.

“ Slavic , Ruarc , that is enough. Can neither of you see how scared she is? She just going to end up back in medical if you two don't stop.” When Kallen sticks her head around the corner, I all but collapse in Big and Ugly's arms.

“ You're real and you're alive. God , I thought I was losing my mind, even though that might be easier to deal with.”

“ Yes little Ruby , I am well, or at least on the mend. I see that you have found Slavic . Forgive them for all the growling, as they are not trying to scare or hurt you, it is quite the opposite. They can understand you, but as of right now, they do not have any translators on board so that you can do the same.”

“ Kallen , I think it's more he found me. Will you tell him to let me go? I need to go save my sister from the green giant.”

“ Ruby , you must be speaking of Einar , he is their medic. Your sister will have the best of care with him. If he was aggressive with you, it is because he was worried

about her. I promise, you and your sister are safe. Things are confusing for everyone right now, but it will get easier with each rising.”

“ Ahh , well, that explains a few things, ... I think. Not sure why they were fighting each other like ragging bulls, but to each their own I reckon. Maybe you’d like to explain to me why these two are standing here looking at each other like they want to rip each other apart?”

“ Ruarc is fighting our mate bond, and all males, even his brothers, are a threat to him in his mind. It doesn’t help that I am in such bad shape either. His protection mode is in overdrive right now.” I see her start to slide down the wall, and the other guy, I believe his name is Ruarc , instantly has her in his arms. The growling starts again, but this time even Kallen joins in. It’s easy to tell they’re arguing, so I just hang here buck naked, down the front of Big and Ugly . Dangling in his arms like a rag doll he is packing around for his enjoyment, and I seem to be the only one who thinks this is odd.

For a moment Big and Ugly loosens his hold, and I hope it’s because he’s going to put me down, but nope. He simply swings my legs up so that I’m more comfortable cradled in his arms. Surrounded by his strength, I’m not sure how to act now. Lord knows, I am not strong enough to win any physical battles with this brute.

I see the guy holding Kallen start to shut the door, and she holds out her hand to stop him. “ Ruby , the male holding you, is Slavic . He is the captain and oldest brother of this crew. There is no place in this universe safer for you than in his arms, and he will take good care of you. Once your sister is feeling better, you will be allowed to see her, I will make sure of this myself. Take time to heal, you have no enemies on this ship.”

The door shuts before she can say another word. “ Wow , bossy bunch ain’tcha? Well , I reckon I can no longer call you Big and Ugly . That probably wasn’t very nice of

me, anyway.” I know I’m rambling, but he is just so ... intense. His bright, yellowish-green eyes watch my every movement, like he’s memorizing me for a research paper or something.

I look over at the closed door and then back up. “ I don’t think he’s going to open that door back up no matter how long we stand here. If there’s no place we need to be, can you take me back to my sister?”

He shakes his head no. “ Ok , I’m not real happy with the answer, but at least I know what it means. Gotta count the little things sometimes, I reckon. I have another yes or no question ... or several, actually. Is my sister safe with the guy you were trying to beat the hell out of earlier?”

I get a nod yes.

“ Hey , we’re making progress here, let’s move on and play the game. I have a million more questions for you. Are you planning on putting me down anytime soon?”

He shakes his head no.

“ Well , it was worth a try. Is there a rule about clothes? Because I would really like to stop flashing everyone we meet. I mean, I’ve never been overly bashful, but this is a little much. Pretty sure everyone in this place has now seen my tits. They’re nice, but I’d prefer to pick my audiences.”

He actually closes his eyes and looks up, like he’s fighting something inside himself. The moment he glances back down at me, it’s as if he just noticed I’m buck naked. Snarling , he turns so quickly my hair flies out behind me.

“ Whoa big guy, take it easy because the world just swam around in my head there.



Where're we going in such a hurry?" He doesn't even acknowledge me as he stomps through the ship. The doorways are passing so rapidly, I shut my eyes and turn my head toward him, noticing that he smells rather nice to be big and ugly. Like fresh tilled earth.

Before I realize it, a door slides open then shuts, and the noises that were surrounding us in the hallway are no longer there. Opening my eyes, I glance around, immediately noticing we are in a bedroom. I almost panic when he moves to put me on the bed, but relax when he chooses a chair instead. Sitting me down gently, he motions for me to stay there. Then he turns away, touching the wall. I can't help but gasp when it practically disappears in front of him.

He walks inside what appears to be a large storage area. Several containers are thrown to the side as he hunts for something specific. "Hey , you don't have to tear up the place, a simple towel would be great about now." A very large thump has me crawling toward the back of this extremely large chair. " Or not, the place seems to need updating, anyway." ' Lord God , what have I got myself into this time?'

While he's tearing that other room apart, I take a moment to look around. This area is rather large compared to all the others I've seen on this fun filled trip called "abduction". The bed is the size of two kings and takes up the entire center of the room. However , these males are rather big, so that's understandable. Hell , now that I think about it, this chair is swallowing me whole. I look like a little kid sitting in her dad's chair, kicking her feet back and forth. There are a few stands here and there, but for the most part, the place is rather dull. No books, trinkets, or even a pair of dirty underwear lying around. A sudden shiver wracks my entire frame.

" Hey , I'm going to freeze to death before you find whatever it is you're looking for in there."

He comes back out with a pile of stuff in his arms, practically filling my lap full as he

dumps it all on me. He grumbles out a few sentences as I gather up the material all around me. At this point, I'm just letting him growl. I refuse to keep reminding him that I can't understand him. Instead, I start sorting through the pieces of cloth, trying my best to figure out what all this is.

The first one I pick up has several holes down the sides, and I reject it, putting it to the side. I would prefer my tits not to be hanging out as an advertisement. He must have gotten aggravated with my sorting process, since he's been standing over me, not saying a word. He suddenly grabs something out of the pile and slides it on over me. As I am fighting to get my head through the hole, he grabs me under my arms, standing me up in the middle of the chair.

“ Hey , watch the shoulder, you brute.”

He snarls something but still ends up pulling the material hard until my head finally pops through. I just stand here a little confused at his behavior when he reaches behind me, pulling my hair out gently. He motions for me to hold my arm out, then he proceeds to close the holes up in the sides by simply pressing the material together. Quickly, I'm completely covered in an oversized gown that's hanging off me like a flour sack. Well, I'm not going to win any fashion shows, but my butt is no longer hanging out, and the material is soft and warm. So, at this moment, that's amazing.

“ Thanks ! If this thing had pockets, it would almost feel like a robe.” Even standing in the chair I'm not quite as tall as he is. Rowan and I are both a little on the short side, and I have the hips to prove it, or I did anyway.

He just stands there looking down at me, and I decide to take a moment to do the same. Massive is one way of describing him, as he has the widest shoulders I've ever seen on a guy. He's built like a tank. Now even though there is absolutely nothing pretty or even remotely handsome about him, his looks work for him somehow.

Those big ass, scarred shoulders taper nicely into his slightly smaller waistline. My eyes can't find a single ounce of fat anywhere. The pants he has on are weird, though they seem to be sewn in long strips up and down all the way to the colossal boots covering his feet. An old rusty belt wraps around his waist with small pockets hanging on it. Now that I'm looking closer, the cuffs on his wrist match. Apparently , rust is a fashion out here.

Originally , he appeared gray, almost slate in color, but now I can see other shades faded in. There are huge chunks of muscle missing in his skin and I have to stop myself from running my fingers over one particularly painful looking scar. My eyes drift upward, landing on what appears to be a dark collar that circles his neck, leading down to the top of his shoulders. I don't remember seeing that on him before, but things were crazy. Not much different than they are now if I really think about it. Another thing I missed is that he has a short beard.

The color of his facial hair practically matches his skin. Sharp cheekbones lead straight up to pointed ears that he has no hair to hide, but it's his eyes that really catch your attention. Not only because they're so bright compared to his skin, but his pupils run up and down like a snake or dragons. Oddly enough, as terrifying as he is, I'm not scared of him. Reaching up hesitantly, I touch the cut on his face.

“ I'm sorry you got hurt. Seems like the big green guy got you good right here. You should probably have that looked at.”

His large hand covers my own, pressing it harder against his rough skin. He closes his eyes for a second and I hear something rattle behind him. This seems a little too intimate for me, and I'm glad when he doesn't resist me pulling away.

“ So , you're Slavic ?”

I get a nod, and then he points toward me.

“ Ruby .”

He tries several times to say it, but it comes out more like ugby. “ Ahh , you’ll get it right eventually, but right now you have all my attention so you shouldn’t need my name, anyway.”

A small chuckle growl leaves his lips, and I have to make myself not flinch when he smiles. Or I think that’s what that was supposed to be because his messed-up shark teeth just scared the living hell out of me.

“ Wow , where’s a dentist when you need one?” I mumble to myself. “ So , what now?”

He shrugs his shoulders as he moves away from me, headed toward the wall. He touches another panel, and this wall also disappears like it was never there. However , I’m not prepared for the view. He turns away from me, looking out, and this is the first time I’ve seen his back. There are large, spike-like things running down his spine and across the back of his shoulders. When I don’t join him immediately, he motions for me and the spikes shake. This is the sound I heard earlier when I touched him. Kinda freaky, ... those could hurt the baby .

Sliding off the chair, I walk slowly toward him. I get within a few feet of him before stopping. It looks like I could take a big leap and float right out. When he sees me hesitate, he touches the wall to show me it’s solid. I can feel his gaze on me as I ease closer.

“ Talk about a view, Wow ! You just had to do this didn’t ya? Up until now, in the back of my mind, we could’ve found a way to get back home. I mean yeah, we were on the run, and there isn’t really anything for us to go back to, but home is home. Now , I can’t pretend this ain’t real. I reckon I could lie to myself and say that I’m in a planetarium staring up at all the things that few have ever truly seen. But that’s not

going to change the fact that I'm on a spaceship, standing next to a creature that could snap me in half, ... with no damn underwear on!"

Angrily , I wipe a lone tear off my cheek and look up. " We can't go home, can we?"

He makes a few gestures with his hands like an explosion, or maybe something fading away.

" Shake your head yes if you are trying to tell me it's too far, or no ... if it's gone altogether."

He hesitates before shaking his head no, but I can tell this wasn't something he wanted to tell me. He seems almost as sad as I do. As his words sink in, I quickly fathom the what's and whys are becoming overwhelming in my mind. Realizing I could rapidly spiral into anguish, I make myself push this information aside to deal with later. Right now, all that matters is mine and Rowan's survival.

A bright flash speeds by the big window thingy, and I lean forward a little to see it better. Part of me wants to ooh and ahh at the sights in front of me, but I can't seem to find any enthusiasm at the moment. He points at something in the distance, and it takes me a second to make it out in all the vast darkness.

" Is that another ship?"

He nods yes.

" Are we going there?"

Another yes. He points at himself and then back at me, shaking his head no.

" So let me get this straight, I've never been good at charades. You're saying I'm not,

correct?”

He points around the room and then back to the object that really doesn't look like anything I've ever seen before. It's shaped like a round, cylindrical object with multiple arms sticking out of it. Lights flicker on and off as smaller things move all around it. He touches my arm gently, making me look back up at him.

He makes several attempts to tell me something with his hands, but I just can't figure it out. Until he makes a cutting motion across my neck. “ Ohh , you're saying it's dangerous for me?”

The relief on his face is almost comical. He gently tugs on my arm, leading me away from the big window, and then touches another place on the wall. This time, a door slides into the wall, and he motions for me to go in. I glance in before walking all the way inside. Trust is just not something easily given from me, especially now.

It's a bathroom, or a version of one, anyway. He takes a second to show me how each thing works, and I can't help but laugh when he gets to what I'm assuming is an alien commode. Just to be an ass, I make him explain it several times because I can tell this is embarrassing for him. Finally , feeling sorry for him, I ask, “ Do you have a stool I can borrow around here?”

He shrugs his shoulders.

“ I can't reach any of this. Everything is giant sized, and I'd prefer not to have to crawl onto that commode. My luck, I would slip and end up face first in something I really don't want to talk or think about. Then I'd be flushed out with all the other turds into space. I mean, wouldn't that just make this trip all the more memorable? It's been so much fun so far; I can barely hold in all my excitement as I wonder what's next.”

He growls out something and for some reason, I can't deal anymore. Turning away from him, I stomp out of the room, heading for the big chair he originally set me down in. It takes me a second to crawl up in it and once I'm there, I gather all the pieces of material he dropped on my lap. Lying down, I simply pile them all on top of me.

I don't even have time to settle before his enormous arms are sliding under me and I find myself being put in the bed. Mad , I smack his hands away and crawl out, gathering all the material back in my arms again. This time, it takes me several tries to get into the chair because my shoulder and wrist are hurting so damn bad, but I'm not easily swayed when angry.

Once again, I settle down, completely covering myself over with all the loose pieces. I hear him let out a long sigh and I prepare for a fight when I feel him bump the chair as he leans down. But instead of him grabbing me again, he slowly separates the layers until he finds my face.

He then gives me this 'why?' expression. " Look , I need to be in control of something, no matter how big or small. Just give me this because my mind can't handle anything else right now. I'm tired and my whole life has been turned upside down. Please ." The last part comes out as a whisper.

Gently he runs his hand down the back of my head and then shockingly tucks the material all around me. Closing my eyes, I try my best to blank everything out, even though this is a huge improvement from where I was. The unknown is still terrifying. I fight the tears and the helplessness I feel. I know feeling sorry for myself isn't going to help, but damn it, it's hard to see the positives. However , Rowan is apparently with a doctor, I'm clean, warm, and momentarily safe, ... I think. So , thank you Lord , for the little things.

### Chapter Seventeen

#### SLAVIC

Standing over the chair, I fight my own feelings as she curls up under my old garments. My mind and body are demanding that I provide for her, and these feelings seem to be overriding everything else. However , I understand the need to feel like you are in control of something.

Stepping back, I walk over to the edge of the bed and sit down, rubbing the rough skin on my head back and forth as I try to get my emotions under control. The fact that I have nothing she needs is practically ripping my insides apart. Frack , even now she is not covered properly. Glancing over at the mix-matched pile of shirts lying all over her, I have to stop myself from growling out loud.

Those things are not even worthy of touching her delicate skin. Frack , it's hard to remember the last time they were even sanitized, as I have not worn any of them in orbital rotations. She needs comfort and proper coverings, but how do I obtain them without alerting others of her presence? I knew I should have updated the broken garment fabricator, but there was always something else that needed to be fixed first.

Flipping the bed warmer on, I sit and wait. When her breaths even out and lengthen, I can no longer fight the need to comfort her. Getting up, I quietly make my way to the lounge. Sliding my arms under her small frame, I make sure not to move her around too much. She may be tiny, but her temper has proven to be quite large so far. Slowly , I settle her into the warm coverings on the bed. My relief instantly turning to need once I see her lying there, and I force my arms to release her. Because what I really



want to do is explore that luscious little body of hers. There are so many interesting marks and speckles I want to observe closer.

When I realized I was parading her around naked for all to see, I could have ripped this ship and all its occupants apart, brothers or not. I do not know how I managed to contain the fury running through me, as I felt like I was going to explode. Maybe that is why the storage area now looks like a storm hit in there. Trying to find those garments had me throwing things everywhere.

Thankfully , she settles again quickly, and this gives me time to stand back and look down at her. I have never seen such a beautiful creature. The fact that I got to hold her in my arms is a dream I never allowed myself to have before. She has no idea the power she holds over me. A red flash on my comm unit has me glancing out the viewer. This must be Bikar notifying me that we are getting ready to dock.

Reluctantly , I leave her side, as I know we need to get in and out of Navale as quickly as possible, for all our sakes. Walking down the hall toward the helm, I am shocked to see Ruarc .

“ I didn’t expect to see you, Ruarc .”

“ Nor I you, Slavic . Kallen has no proper coverings and I need to rectify that issue.”

“ Was there nothing appropriate in the crate that Falon brought up?”

“ Nothing those bugs touched will ever be given to my mate. That is the last thing she needs to be reminded of right now.”

“ I thought you were denying your mate, Ruarc ?”

“ I will not consummate the union. She will be free to pick another once we return her

home.”

“ Just planning on dropping her off and leaving I see. Well , once we do I’ll have Bikar watch the Velgriddix ships better, just to make sure she isn’t picked up once again.”

“ Don’t push me Slavic .”

“ I am not the one fighting the blessing given. I plan on fully embracing the gift bestowed upon me, no matter if I deserve her or not. Are you going to the market yourself?”

“ I am.”

“ See what you can obtain for the others on board while you are acquiring things for Kallen ? The fuel we need will absorb most of our credits, but there should still be enough to buy a few comforts for the females.”

I feel the ship jerk slightly and power down just as the door slides open to the helm. Bikar’s fingers are flying over the control panel. “ Status ?”

“ Slavic , so far, nothing out of the norm. The Zenith is secure, and the atmospheric membrane is activated. We were lucky with our timing as there are only a few ships docked right now. I have notified them of our fuel needs, so now we are just waiting on their confirmation. One of us may have to go down to open the hatch. For some reason, it is not releasing.”

“ What of the cargo?”

“ Falon and Murgul have already opened the lower bay doors. They should have most of it unloaded within half a rotation. There are a few items I am still in negotiations

with for their sale, but this haul will put us back in the green on credits. Unfortunately , most of them will not hit until we are gone, as the sales are not final until the cargo is retrieved.”

“ The females?”

“ Secured .”

“ I will see to the fuel hatch myself Ruarc , you proceed with caution. If you hear any rumors of the females, return to the ship immediately. Bikar , you are our eyes, so keep track of where everyone is at all times. Oh , and notify Einar that he needs to guard the ramp in case someone breaks through the outer hull locks.”

“ Slavic , he hasn’t responded to a single comm I’ve sent him. I am concerned that no one has seen to the health of the other females. They are eating, but they all have multiple wounds that need to be tended to.”

“ Let him know I will put his ass in a holding cell if he does not do his part. There will be no mercy given to anyone who will not protect ALL the females. He is not the only one being forced away from their Starshine .”

Bikar turns as I walk out of the helm toward the main ramp. My spines tremble the further away I get from my mate, but I push myself onward. We need supplies and if we don’t refuel, and the panels fail, we would be sitting dead in space. If it was simply us males, that would be considered an adventure. However , that is no longer an option with the precious cargo we now have on board.

At the bottom of the ramp, I look around before heading toward the fuel hatch. Hitting my comm unit, “ Falon , the replicators need replenished with a larger selection of sustenance for the others. Can you see to that issue after you retrieve the packages?”

“ Shouldn’t be an issue, Slavic . Murgul is offloading the last of the cargo now, so while he awaits payment, I will head to the lower levels.”

“ Watch your back and leave your comm on at all times.”

“ Yes , sire! I am a grown male; you do not need to tell me how to do my job.”

Shaking my head, I head toward the fuel crew who are trying to get the hatch open. Seems like it won’t be long until I will have to reacquaint them with the sparing chamber. They need to be reminded why the oldest, Me , is the one in charge. The moment I duck under the hull, one of the Navale’s crew approaches. “ Captain , the lock has been damaged on the plate protecting the fuel cells. We can remove it, but we would have to fabricate another to replace it.”

“ Does the system need the hatch?”

“ It seals the inner enclosure from exposure, and we would not advise you to depart without the proper repairs.”

“ Do what needs to be done, but we will be leaving the moment the credits clear for the cargo we brought in.”

“ We should be able to secure it temporarily until you can plan on a more extended stay here on the Navale , Captain .”

I remain with them until the hatch is open and I see the fuel being pumped inside the main holding tanks. While they are busy with that, I take a leisurely stroll around the Zenith , running my hands along the bottom and making mental notes of the things that need to be fixed on her. She has protected us from day one, and I refuse to let the ship slip into disrepair.

The sound of a youngling giggling not far off has me ducking under the primary hull. A Valerian mam is playfully chasing her youngling on the connecting deck, and for a moment my mind drifts back, reliving a similar scene with my own mam. Shaking my head, I make myself wander further out into the main passage. Looking down at my comm unit, I take a moment to see where everyone is at.

Bikar is on the ship. Einar is standing at the top of the closed ramp. Murgul is at the credit depository. Ruarc is headed my way from the major market, but Falon's comm is blinking off and on.

I am just turning toward the lower levels lift when a strong hand grabs my arm. Immediately I turn, ready to attack only to see it's Ruarc. "We must get the frack out of here now. The Velgriddix have issued a bounty for any information concerning a certain flesh cargo and the pirates that stole them. Apparently, the main swarm ships are under the assumption that there was a breeding princess on board. They even sent out a detailed description of the ship, and guess who it resembles?"

"Shet, get back on board, but we will need to stall as long as possible. They just started refueling and Falon's comm signal is flashing. I am going to head down to the lower levels to see if I can find him, but you leave us if it becomes necessary."

Ruarc doesn't question me, simply turns to do as I have ordered. Hitting my comm unit, I lock onto Falon's location, then head that way. My eyes constantly on the lookout for any of the known bounty hunters that roam this area, I have just stepped into the lift and it was almost closed, when another sticks their arm out, halting the doors.

I have to bite the inside of my jaw to keep from snarling when I see it is a Korgon. Those four-armed bastards are a menace and impossible to beat in a fair fight, but who says this is going to be fair?

He nods his head, acknowledging me, as he walks in. I hit the button to level seven, then step back. If he needs another floor, he can tell the lift himself. The door slides open and as I start to step out, I hear him chuckle. “ Smells like a human in here, how is that possible, Rukuhks ?”

I act like I don't hear him, but my hearts hit my chest. I never imagined other species would be able to smell the females on us. If that is the case, we are projecting it all over the station that they are with us. I am walking so fast that I am practically running. My spines tremble in anger and fear as I fight my instincts to rush back to my mate. Others move out of my way quickly as I stalk through the halls with a snarl on my face, looking for my brother.

If the Korgons invade the Zenith before Ruarc returns and while I am down here, there is no way Einar and Bikar can fight them off alone. My female and the others would be lost to us forever as the Korgon ships are strong enough to puncture the Veil , and ours is not.

Thankfully , I find Falon quickly, strolling calmly toward me with several crates hovering behind him on a sled. His eyes not missing a thing as I approach, he says, “ Calm yourself, brother, your anxiousness is bringing unwanted attention our way.”

“ They can smell the females on us, and the Velgriddix have issued a bounty. We need to leave now!”

“ I am well aware, as my informant met me the moment I stepped off the lift. We are known to attack first and ask questions later, so for now, just keep that snarl on your face and walk with me.”

“ Did you get what we needed?”

“ I did and then some. The females should be happy if we make it back to the ship

that is. Don't look now, but we are being trailed by a Jynrel .”

“ How did this get out so rapidly?”

“ No clue, big brother. Comm Bikar and tell him to get the Zenith ready to launch as quickly as possible.”

“ Bikar , I need you to get the Zenith ready to depart the moment we are on board.”

“ Got a slight problem with that Slavic . I just happened to look down at our fuel status, only to realize instead of it increasing they were siphoning it out. I managed to shut off the main fuel valve, but now we have less than we did when we got here. We need that fuel Slavic , but I don't want to open the ramp to go out and confront them. Especially now that there have been several Korgons spotted at the entrance gate. I think they're waiting on us to lower the ramps.”

“ Looks like we are going to have to improvise then, Bikar . Look on the scanners and tell me what other ships similar in size are docked.”

“ On the North side is a Jynrel ship that is being loaded now, so the ramps are open. Oh wait. Well , would you look at that? Seems like the gods are looking out for us this rising. An Emperor Pyrkyne cruiser just docked two bays down from us. However , the fuel tanks are a match, as are the remote connections. Its cargo hold is cloaked, so I cannot see what they are hauling. The Navale's log is showing this is a drop and pick up, so they will not be here long.”

“ Firepower ?”

“ Nothing the Zenith can't handle. Their crew is small, but you know how overly confident those pigs are.”

“ Can you disconnect the fuel hose without exiting the ship?”

“ Already did, then set the hull to shock any who touch her.”

“ Excellent , we are at the lift headed your way. Keep me updated.”

Falon maneuvers the hover sled into the lift and when it engages, I take a deep breath, then double check my weapons as it accelerates. When I look over, Falon is doing the same. “ If we encounter any resistance, you get to the ship. The females need those translators. Worst case, leave me and I will catch the next ride out of here.”

“ No can-do big brother, where you go, I go. So , pull those big boy pants up, and let us get to the ship.”

I don't have time to argue with him as the lift doors slide open. Stepping out first, I motion for Falon to follow. My eyes survey the area as I look for anything hostile or out of place. We make it to the loading dock before I see the first Jynrel round the corner. He doesn't look at me, but those little frackers hunt in packs, so I know there are more close by. Thankfully , the Zenith is hovering above the floor, ready to lift off as we get closer.

Bikar must have seen us approaching because a small slide opens in the bottom of the ship allowing Falon to maneuver the hover sled inside. I stand guard while he pushes the small crates in. The moment he is done, I press the button on the small ramp and it closes. Now for the tricky part. How will Falon and I get back on board without opening the main ramp?

“ Bikar , open the cargo bay door wide enough for Falon and I to slide in and then take off. We will make our way up to the main areas once the ship is out of the Navale's orbit.”



“ Frack , brother, that’s going to be a rough few ticks. It gets mighty cold in the cargo bay.”

“ You have any other ideas? Falon and I can hold our own easily against the Jynrel , but not if they are joined by the three Korgons that just walked onto the dock. We can’t risk lowering the main ramp.”

I motion for Falon to head toward the lower bay door that is only a few feet above the floor of the dock. Ducking under the Zenith’s main hull, I hesitate when I see the fuel door swinging back and forth under the ship. Frack that is going to be a problem, but we don’t have the time to fix it now. Falon slides into the narrow gap Bikar opened and just as I am following behind, I hear the first roar of an attack coming our way.

They must have caught on that we were not going to lower the main ramp and started scouting the rest of the ship. I barely get my legs inside before seeing a blue hand reaching for me. A second one grabs the door, trying to shove it open more.

I hit the controls for the hull to seal shut, only to hear a whine where the ship’s closure mechanism is fighting the Korgon shoving with all his strength to get inside. Falon puts his weight against the door as we start to lift off. Bikar’s voice echoes throughout the room.

“ Slavic , get that door closed or both of you can say your goodbyes.”

“ Shock the hull, the fracker won’t let go.” The Korgon must have heard my words, just as I feel the energy sweep across the floor. He starts to let go and the door finally slams shut, but not without a little souvenir. The tips of his blue fingers lay severed near the seal.

Falon slides down the wall, breathing heavily. “ That was too close.”

The floor beneath our feet begins to vibrate, and the temperature starts dropping rapidly. “ I agree little brother, let us grab a few of these crates and head up. I would prefer to escape this cold as quickly as possible.”

Hitting my comm unit, I order, “ Bikar , get everyone to the helm and keep track of that Pyrkyne cruiser.”

“ Already ahead of you.”

### Chapter Eighteen

#### SLAVIC

I am not shocked to hear raised voices when I approach the helm. The moment Falon and I walk through the door, they all turn toward us.

“Bikar, did any ships launch in pursuit?”

“Negative, the Korgon ship is powered down for repairs and the Jynrel cruiser that is docked is too small to take on the Zenith. I suspect they had teamed up together temporarily in order to have a better chance of taking us there.”

Einar turns snarling at me, “How the frack did they figure out we were the ones who took the females?”

“Well, apparently, they could smell them on us, Einar. It did not help that the Velgriddix put a huge reward out for their return and half the frackin galaxy is out looking for any sign of them. Like untried youths, we put ourselves right in their sights rather easily, as I am sure they contacted any and all spaceports within their ship’s last known location.

“Ruarc, you and Falon go through those crates and separate the items acquired for the females. Einar, before you sneak off, you will tend to the other females hiding in Falcon and Bikar’s room. I do not care how you do it, but get it done. All females are precious, and we will not neglect them. Falon, I need you to verify that those translators are working. Do you know if they are the temporary or permanent ones?”

“ From my understanding Slavic , they are permanent. But my informant told me that implanting them could be painful.”

“ Einar , do we have anything that would assist with this?”

“ Not really, and I fear they will only be more distressed when we subject them to the procedure.”

“ Frack , these females have been hurt enough, the very thought of us harming them once again has me torn.” Shockingly enough, Murgul is the first to voice his opinion about what we should do.

“ Fear is caused from lack of knowledge brother. They will be temporarily upset, but will calm quickly once it’s finished and they can understand us.”

The entire helm goes quiet with Murgul’s words, as this is the most I have heard him speak in rotations. His words flow through my thoughts, but we have other more pressing issues to deal with. “ Bikar , where is that Pyrkyne ship?”

“ They left right after we did. I kept us cloaked once we departed Navale , now we are following behind them just out of their scanner’s range. At this speed, we will overtake them in a few ticks.”

“ Murgul looks like we are going to have to do this alone, suit up. I will be down momentarily. Bikar , hold back until I return to the helm.”

I leave the room before anyone can question my whereabouts. My long legs quickly eating up the distance from the helm to my personal quarters, the moment the door slides open, I know she is gone. Roaring , I return to the hall wondering if I was in her place, where would I have gone? God of Ruk , what if she snuck off the ship while we were on the Navale ?

“ Bikar , my mate is missing!”

“ Your outer door opened only a few ticks ago, so she can’t be far. I would check the med bay.”

“ Frack .” Rubbing my hand across my bald head, I should have known to look there first. Only every other word out of her mouth has been about her sister. My emotions and this drive to protect her from everything has my thoughts scattered. I find myself in front of the medical area without even remembering walking this way. Instead of barging in like I want, I step around its main door and enter in through Einar’s private wing.

Walking through the back entrance, I approach the primary chamber slowly, curious to see what she is doing. I stop just short of going in when I hear her singing softly. Peeking my head around the side of the separation, I find her sitting on the bed next to her sister, rubbing her hand up and down her back gently. When her voice quiets down she rearranges the heated covering over her a little and then turns to look right at me.

“ It’s not polite to stare Big and Grouchy . You are about as stealthy as a bull in a China shop. I could hear you breathing all the way over here.”

“ You need to rest.” I’m forcing myself to remain where I am.

“ Yeah , yeah ... growl ... growl. We didn’t stay at that last place very long, and the ship moving is what woke me up.” She looks away from me and back down to her sister. “ I know I haven’t said this before but thank you for helping us. I have no idea what your plans are for us now, but I would’ve lost her if not for you and the green giant.”

Her words are soft, and I can tell she is still scared.

“ The plans I have for you little mate would shock the gods if said them out loud. Maybe it is a good thing that our mate bond is not completed, because you would run if you knew how much I desired you.” The door sliding open halts my words.

Einar walks in with two small containers in his hand. “ Slavic , you may have to hold her. I will forever hear the screams of the others while I inserted theirs. Falon had to physically hold each of them, and the last one ran when she heard the screams of the others. Of course, she ran right into Murgul as he was coming out of the armory, then passed out the second his large hands grabbed hold of her.

He promptly handed her over to Falon , but I was shocked that he stayed while I inserted the translator. He even snarled at me when she whimpered slightly from the pain before waking back up. Falon was distributing the clothing and a few other items he found on the Navale when I left. I had a crate delivered to your quarters as well.”

“ She is going to fight me, Einar .”

“ I would expect nothing less from any female mated to you Slavic . She has to be tough for the gods to have given her to you. The quicker you do this, the better.”

“ I do not see you running right over to yours with the intent to cause her more harm.”

“ Mine is still sedated and will not recall the procedure at all, but in her condition, I believe she deserves some kindness. Try to explain what we are doing and hopefully yours will not fight us too badly.”

I approach Ruby slowly, taking the small device out of Einar’s hand, hoping she will recognize what it is.

“ Do not touch that with your skin Slavic , or it won’t work.”

“ I know Einar . I may not be a medic, but I am not stupid.”

Stopping just out of her reach, she looks up at me and then toward my hand. I motion to my mouth, then my ears, before pointing back at the translator. She just looks at me like I have lost my mind. Despite my repeated attempts to show her what this does, she only sighs wearily.

“ I think I’ve covered the fact that I suck at guessing games.”

I motion from the translator to her, and she frowns when Bikar’s voice comes over the speakers. “ Slavic we are in range, Murgul is waiting for you.”

Einar walks past me toward the other female on the bed and I stiffen up when he approaches my mate, as she is still sitting on the bed next to her sister. “ We don’t have all rising Slavic ; hold on a tick. She might be more receptive if she watches me give this to her sister.”

Einar looks up at Ruby before brushing her sister’s long red mane out of the way. Gently he takes the translator out of the case with a pair of surgical tweezers. The entire time my Ruby hasn’t moved, but her eyes watch him intently. The procedure only takes a few seconds, and thankfully the sister does not move or seem to be in any kind of distress.

While her focus was upon Einar , I move up right behind her so that I can easily subdue her if needed. When Einar straightens up, she glances back at me. He motions to the one in my hand and then back to her.

“ Let me get this straight. You want to put that in my ear?”

Both of us nod.

“ I had a feeling you were going to say that, and even though you are being patient, you’re really not going to let me say no, are you?”

I shake my head, “ I am sorry little one.” The words come out even though I know she can’t understand me. I am hoping she will submit on her own, because I certainly don’t think forcing her to cooperate will gain me any favors.

“ Ok , let’s do this then. Rowan seems to be alright, so do it before I change my mind.”

Before she realizes what is happening, I grab her and pull her close. How Einar got the translator out of its packaging that fast, I have no clue, but his large, green hand practically envelopes her entire head as he tilts it gently against my chest. I feel her tense up and even though I know it’s coming; I am unprepared for the tortured scream that escapes her lips. It takes everything both Einar and I have to hold her as she fights against us.

My throat is so tight I cannot even get any comforting words out. Einar takes her head in his hands, making her look right at him. What feels like a lifetime later she collapses in my arms, small tremors wracking her tiny, unconscious form. Einar nods at me right before releasing her.

“ She will be fine, the translator didn’t attack her optical nerves, which means it merged with the Cochlear nerve successfully. Half a rising or so, she will recover fully. You can leave her here with her sister, while you and Murgul take care of our fuel issue. I will suit up just in case you need me.”

He turns on the warming sheets as I lay her down. Brushing her long mane away, my heart hurts at the pain still showing on her face. “ Did the others react the same?”

“ They all responded differently, but at least this unfavorable business is over. You



should go before Murgul heads out without you.”

“ Easy for you to say, you can remain with your mate.”

“ If you only realized the trauma mine has delt with you would not speak with such flippancy and would look at the spunkiness of yours in a different light. The body always heals quicker than the mind, and unfortunately mine is dealing with both. I am hoping the translators help. They need some peace in their lives after all that has been done to them. I will guard her with my life Slavic , you know this. Now , go get that fuel, so that we might find a safe haven in which we can become more than what we are. Someplace we can reach our true potential.”

“ Dreams like that, brother, are dangerous.”

“ True , but now I have a reason to want more.”

With his words echoing through my mind, I leave my heart behind and walk out of medical.

### Chapter Nineteen

#### SLAVIC

Murgul and I stand at the airlock door, ready to push forward the moment our tractor beam locks onto the Pyrkyne ship. The light turns green, and I release the outer valve securing the tunnel connecting us. Bikar and Falon will use our distraction to steal the fuel out of their tanks remotely, while we take care of the crew. Pulling the plasma cutter out, I quickly disable the outer seal of their ship and yank the door open expecting to be met with its guards, only to find the hall in front of me empty.

“Bikar, where the frack are they?”

“I am showing five heat signatures on board Slavic. I scrambled all messages coming in and out, but they have not even tried to call for assistance. Proceed with caution.”

Stepping forward, I motion for Murgul to head one way, while I take the other. I hate separating us, especially against any Pyrkyne, but we need to figure out what is going on this ship. Heading directly toward the helm, the familiar layout of the ship makes it easy to navigate. The doors slide open, and I draw my sword as fighting with live ammo on a space cruiser is guaranteed death, only to stop when I see the crew.

Three youngling Pyrkyne huddle together in front of the control panels. One that is slightly older than the others, stands protectively in front of them. I lower my sword. I may be a pirate and wanted for more crimes than I can count, but I am not a youngling killer.

“ Where are your parental units?”

I must give this young male credit. Although I can clearly see the fear on his ugly face, he continues to stand between me and the younglings behind him. “ I am the captain of this vessel.”

“ Right . ... So , I am assuming the reason you didn’t send out a distress signal when we locked on is because you either stole this ship, or you are on a joy ride.”

Before I can say another word, I hear a scuffle behind me as Murgul pushes another two he found into the room. I turn my head as the female straightens up her clothes, the bite marks, and scratches on each of their skin, showing everyone what Murgul walked in on. I have a smirk on my face when I glance over at him.

“ Do not say a word, brother! I .... That ... Ughh , I will forever have that burned into my brain.” He actually shudders in disgust and I can’t help but laugh.

“ Look Rukuhks , we do not want any trouble. You had no reason to board us, as there is nothing of value on board.”

“ What were you doing on the Navale ?”

“ Picking up my younger sister and her mate. My sire was adamant that I didn’t possess the skills to fly there and back successfully, but I was determined to prove him wrong. Are ... you going to kill us?”

“ No , but when your sire finds out what has happened, you may no longer see my kindness as a blessing. While you are dwelling on that thought, let me tell you what we are going to do. I am taking your fuel.” When he goes to speak, I put my hand up to stop him. “ We will leave enough for you to get home safely. While we are siphoning the fuel, I plan on looking around and then we will rid your ship of any and

all of its cargo. While we are plundering the cargo hold, one of you will accompany me to your quarters where we will relieve you of all your jewels and credits.”

The one I am assuming is the sister starts blubbering and snorting. They are a disgusting, filthy race. The rotting and putrid smells wafting off their bodies, has me holding my breath. “ Which one of you is going to be our escort?”

I am impressed when the young male steps up. He may be on the small side right now because of his youth, but normally the Pyrkyne are formidable opponents simply due to their size and stamina on the battlefield. When my mind tries to drift back to the days of my own youth and the many beatings my brothers and I received from this race, I have to remind myself that these younglings were not at fault.

I nod for Murgul to watch the others as I grab the male slightly harder than I need to. Marching him out the door toward their personal rooms, he enters into the captain’s quarters two steps in front of me. I cannot help gagging when the smell hits me. The room lays in ruin and waste, and even though I know how disgusting their race is, I am still unprepared for the refuse in this area. Kicking the old food and torn garments out of the way, I direct him toward the ship’s safe. “ Open it quickly.”

With fumbling, fat digits, he finally gets the code right and the door swings open. I grab all the documents and chips inside the vault without looking at them, swiftly placing them inside the many pouches attached to my belt. “ Where to next?”

“ That is, it. Anything we had, we put in the safe before landing on Navale . I knew there were pirates there and wasn’t going to take the chance of openly carrying any credits on me. The few things we purchased have already been used as we were only going to be on the ship for another rising.”

“ Your home world is a few rotations away, and there are no other space stations or habitable planets in this direction. Your navigation is off.”

“ The hyperdrive cuts the distance in half.”

“ This ship is equipped with a hyperdrive system?”

“ Isn’t yours?”

“ No , but it will be now that you have been so helpful. I should send a thank you to your sire.” Hitting the comm on my wrist I ask, “ Bikar did you hear that?”

“ Every word. Falon is on his way over now to lighten their ship of a few devices. The fuel transfer is almost done and because these younglings are going to be traveling a few more rotations than planned, I have pumped all our garbage into their cargo hold. That should tide them over quite comfortably until they arrive home.”

“ How gracious of you, brother. Let me know when Falon has retrieved the equipment, and I will send Murgul to the cargo bay to loot the crates in that area. Until then, I will be at the helm with our most amicable hosts.” Murgul leaves and heads to the cargo bay the moment we return.

The instant I release the young male, he goes to stand in front of the others. The female is still blubbering off to the side. She has a few jewels embedded in her skin, something that is common for their females. And even though it’s tempting, she smells so bad I would not dream of getting close enough to retrieve them. Instead , I address the youngling that is trying his best to be brave.

“ Youngling , who is your Sire ? If your family owns this star cruiser, there is no way you are a commoner.”

He hesitates to reveal his family name, and the moment he does I see red. “ Governor Rambore is my Sire , Rukuhks .” Before I do something I regret, I turn and walk off.

“ Please relay my condolences when you return and tell him that Slavic and his

brothers appreciate the bounty we pilfered from his ship.”

The helm’s door shuts behind me, “ Bikar , unhook us and get everyone back on board, my stomach cannot take any more of this smell.”

“ Murgul and Falon have just returned. Simply waiting on you, big brother.”

After welding the outer hulls airlock on the Pyrkyne ship closed, I hit the locks to reengage our flight path on the Zenith . The younglings’ predicament of having to explain to their sire what just happened is one I do not envy. Though I may detest the male, his younglings are not to blame for the system’s control over him. I could have taken out my revenge on his spawn, but my life giver would leave her grave merely to remind me of what a disappointment I have become. I will not tarnish my life giver’s memory by destroying an innocent. No matter the amount of hatred I hold for their creator.

Normally after a raid, I am in a great mood, but the mention of their sire’s name has done nothing but throw my failure in my face. I walk into the sanitizer, grateful to have the funk of that species off my skin only to be greeted by a small, red maned, pissed off female.

“ You guys are nothing but a bunch of fucking thieves!”

### Chapter Twenty

#### RUBY

Someone gently stroking my cheek has me opening my eyes only to close them again because of the bright light.

“ Zenith , lights to fifty percent.”

“ Acknowledged .”

“ You should be able to open your eyes now, Ruby .”

Blinking a few times, I find Kallen sitting beside me on the bed. “ How is your head feeling?”

“ Like I’ve been on a weeklong drunk. What the hell did they do to me?”

“ They gave you a translator. Normally these are implanted at birth with little to no side effects. I do not think anyone anticipated the amount of pain they were going to cause you all. I could hear the screams of the others all the way in Ruarc’s rooms.”

“ Others ?”

“ Yes , they rescued three other human females from one of the cages in the back of the Velgriddix ship when they found us.”

“ Damn , I’m such a selfish bitch. I was so wrapped up in myself and Rowan , I didn’t even think about the other girls in there.”

“ Do not judge yourself too harshly, we all handle things differently.”

“ Are the other girls alright?”

“ I just came from there. They are doing about the same as you and your sister, healing, scared, confused. All things that are considered normal in these circumstances. Falon and Bikar gave up their rooms so that the females could have some privacy. Just as I was leaving, the males were bringing in some crates full of garments and personal items.”

“ You look much better, Kallen .”

“ Thank you, I am starting to feel more like myself. I would have sought you out sooner, but Ruarc is being an overbearing ass. The only reason I am here now is because he had to cover for Slavic at the helm and forgot to lock the door behind him. The moment he was gone, I headed out. Some of the other females were initially scared when they saw me but quickly calmed down once we talked some. It probably helped to see another female amongst all these growling barbarians. One was particularly friendlier than the others and she asked several questions about Bikar . He hasn’t said anything about feeling a mate bond, but from my understanding, they have been talking to the males from the other side of the door.”

“ So , you’re saying you escaped because your big and scary is covering for my big and ugly.”

“ Slavic was once one of the most sought-after males on our planet. Many a female pranced in front of him hoping to trigger his mate collar. The horrors that male went through to protect his brothers, and his life givers is enough to give a being



nightmares. They have been on the run for many orbital rotations, but things have changed greatly since they escaped the Aynar fairies. However , because of Ruarc's possessiveness, I have had little time to talk to any of them. In your case, I am sure Slavic is as confused about you as you are him. Finding one's mate is the ultimate gift, but not often found within another race. You would be and are, completely unexpected. And being males, they are sure to make a mess of things before fixing them. I only wish my own mate could see the time he is wasting between us."

" Hold up. Are you saying that I'm Slavic's mate, and that yours is fighting this mate thing that is supposed to be so sacred? You need to spell this out in stupid simple for me Kallen , because I'm freaking the hell out over here!"

" Ruarc is fighting our mate bond and by doing so, he is hurting us both. He is convinced that there has been some sort of mistake. Because why would the God of Ruk bless me, a Princess , with a thieving pirate? What I cannot make him understand is I am the princess of a fallen planet. I have nothing but this worthless title. He is everything I have ever wanted in a mate and every time he turns from me it rips me apart inside. My collar is already lightening, and I fear the consequences we will both bear if he continues on this path."

" And you like him, not just because of this God thing, right?"

" I have watched him since we were younglings, and until our mate bond clicked into place, I could not understand why I sought him out. He , of course, never noticed me. But anytime I saw his family coming out of the mines, I would stand in the upper window of our dwelling hoping to catch a glimpse of him. Most pathetic now that I think about it. In a way he is right, my life givers would have fought the bond back then, but the female I am now only wants to be in his arms. He is everything and more than I ever wanted in a male, but he won't listen,"

" I think that is a default trait, no matter the species, Kallen . Back to Slavic , are you

saying bad things could and will happen to him if this bond thing doesn't happen?"

" Absolutely . It will start gradually after several rotations, but if his collar fades completely and he is not strong enough to survive one of his hearts stopping, he will perish."

" Hold your horses, did you say two hearts?"

" Yes , most of the dominant males of our species have two hearts. It is one of the things that makes them so powerful but can also be their biggest weakness. Normally if one of us loses a mate, the other is not far behind, as our lives are linked through our mate bond."

" You act like this is common knowledge and something I should already know."

" There are no secrets in the Void , but it can be a place of joy or heartache."

" Isn't that the truth of any world?" Her words have me glancing over at Rowan who is still laying in the same spot but seems to be resting peacefully. Kallen sliding off the bed has me sitting up.

" Before Ruarc notices my absence, I should probably return. I am glad that you nor any of the others had any adverse reactions to the translators. I have been talking to you in common tongue with no issues. Hopefully , this will help you and Slavic ."

" Kallen , just to make sure I understand exactly what you're telling me...this collar thing around your neck marks you as a mate?"

" No , it tells the world that you are mated to another. I have no idea if once your bond is consummated that you will have a matching one or not. But if you take nothing else out of this conversation know this; he will weaken the longer the bond is

not tethered together, and our world needs Slavic .”

“ No pressure on a girl at all, huh? Don’t I have a say so in any of this? I mean I’ve already lost everything, am I just supposed to say, ‘ OK universe, here I am, do with me as you will?’ Because some big ass guy decides he wants to get it on with a human chick half his size. I mean have you seen the size of these guys? If big noses, feet, and hands add up the way they’re supposed to, I’m literally fucked.”

Kallen’s laughter brightens up her entire face, and this is the first time that I notice she is really very pretty, for a green girl. “ Little Ruby , I have no idea what those references mean, but I do believe if you remain open-minded, the horrors you have been put through may turn into an adventure and love you never dreamed of. The fact that two sisters were fated to be mates to two brothers is a wonder in and of itself.”

“ You mean my sister is also going to have this mate problem?”

“ Yes , Einar was the one who saved her, not only from that breeding nest, but from the lung disease plaguing her small form.”

“ You mean the green giant and my little sister?”

“ Yes .”

“ Your gods must have one hell of a sense of humor.” I no sooner say that, then the door slides open and in strolls the one I believe is Ruarc .

“ Slavic is returning from plundering the other ship. The lot was substantial and now the fuel tanks are filled. Say goodbye to your new friend Kallen , you need your rest.”

“ I feel better than I have in forever Ruarc .” He doesn’t allow her to say another word, simply swings Kallen up in his arms like she weighs nothing and let me say,

that woman is not small. He walks back out while she waves over his shoulder just before the door closes.

So Big and Ugly is on his way back from whatever poor vessel he decided to set his sights on? If this thing in my head is working the way Kallen says, then I think it's about time me and grumpy have a talk. Swinging my legs out of the bed, I exit after Kallen and her man, following far enough behind them not to be noticed. Or so I thought until Kallen looks back at me, then motions down a hall I almost passed with a smile on her face. Giving her a thumbs up, I head down the other way, listening to all the weird noises the ship is making. I barely get out of the way when I hear someone's heavy steps heading toward me. A flash of long white hair and dark skin passes me without a side glance. "Hello to you to mister friendly," I call after him. "Fucking aliens", I mumble to myself.

Continuing down the hall, I almost miss the big shower Slavic is standing inside, with his head hanging.

"So , you guys are nothing but a bunch of fucking thieves!"

I can tell he is shocked to see me when he just walks out of the big shower thing. He isn't snarling like always, but it's easy to tell his thoughts were elsewhere. I had half a dozen things to say to him and I don't know who's more shocked, me or him, when I confront him with that statement.

"I see your translator is working. How do you feel?"

"Don't change the subject by acting like you care. You held me for heavens sakes, so that thing could melt my brain."

"You are tougher than you imagine, tiny female, and yes, we are nothing more than thieves. Even though that is something you should be grateful for, because if we had

not been put on this path, no one would have rescued you nor your sister from that nightmare you were found in.”

“ Well , it isn’t like either of us wanted to be there, you grouchy ass. And at this point, I’m not sure who the monsters are or aren’t. Even though Kallen has tried her best to talk you up as the good guys.”

He gently grabs my jaw, “ Let me clear something up for you little one. I would and will destroy anything that tries to harm you in this life and the next. There is not another living being anywhere more important to me than you. I do not deserve you, but now that I have held you in my arms, that is where you will remain. I would not expect you to care for me right away, but in time I will prove myself worthy of your affections. Until then, I will do whatever is needed to provide for and protect you, even if it is from yourself.”

“ Do you think for one moment I wanted to witness the pain that translator was going to cause you? I could have left, said I had other things to do, like rob the ship that had the fuel we needed to escape the fracking bugs hot on our trail because we took you, ... their incubators. Instead , I held you, trying my best to will my strength into your small form while you fought me like a wild Suet . My hearts were literally being ripped apart from your screams. I would have taken every ounce of pain you had ever experienced all at once. Done anything to keep you from going through that, but here we are. I am a mere fleshly being that can only provide so much comfort. I ask for your forgiveness even though I do not expect you to give it.”

I don’t know what to say after all that. Initially , I’m angry. Then I regret jumping to conclusions, and now I’m speechless as I face this huge man pouring his heart out to me. Has this ever happened to me before? I don’t think I’ve ever been struck speechless in my life. When I don’t respond right away, he frowns, shaking his head.

“ I expect nothing from you Ruby , except that you need to realize you cannot change

what has happened, but you can control how you move forward. Either you see this as a challenge and a positive thing, or you wallow in a past that can't be rewritten. That is the only decision you can make. Until then, come ... You need sustenance, and Falon was supposed to have delivered a crate to our quarters for you while I was away."

The next thing I know, he has swung me up in his arms and we are stomping down the hall. Instinctively , I throw my arms around his neck, holding on tightly. I could be petty and pull away from him, but instead, I take this time to really look at the behemoth packing me around like I'm a case of pop or something else that inconsequential.

All this time I've been focused on how much different he is from me, but as his words flow through my mind, I realize he isn't as strange as I first thought. He also may be the first person that's ever cared for me, that didn't expect anything in return. I'm a fish out of water right now.

The door slides open to his room and once again he places me in that huge ass chair. I still haven't found my voice as he stomps around, pulling things out of the many pockets he has linked to that rusty belt that is settled low on his hips. The moment he's done, he starts talking into that watch thing.

"Falon , where did you put the crate for my mate?"

' There's that mate word again ', I think to myself.

"Slavic , I set it just inside the doorway; you probably walked right past it."

"Frack , I see it. Thanks ."

Two steps later, he is lifting a metal container the size of a washing machine like it

weighs nothing, before sitting it in front of the chair he deposited me in. I watch as he flicks several levers on its sides before pulling off the top.

“ I was not able to select these myself, so I had to trust Falon to get what you needed. Hopefully , some of this will be to your liking and if you require anything else, I will find a way to obtain it. For a short time, I will be in the refreshing chamber. I need a moment to myself, and I feel saturated by the filth that covered the Pyrkyne ship. Take this opportunity to sort through it and then we will find a place to store your belongings.”

“ I take it I’m staying here with you, whether I want to or not?”

“ You are free to leave but know I will simply follow you. Even if that means that I slumber at your doorway.”

“ Go do your thing: shit, shower, and shave. Then we’re going to talk.”

I swear for just a second, I think he’s going to smile at me, but instead turns around and disappears into the alien bathroom. Closing my eyes, I fall back against the chair. Hell’s damn fire, what I wouldn’t do not to feel like I’m in the twilight zone.

My curiosity starts to get the best of me as I wonder just what’s inside this big ol’ box. Scooting up to the edge, I pull the first bag out, only to realize how many are in here. I feel like a kid at Christmas opening one thing after another. Quickly , I find myself surrounded by shoes, accessories, and clothing in multiple designs. One particular dress catches my attention and that’s what Slavic catches me holding up when he walks out of the bathroom.

“ That is a ceremonial gown. I am not sure why that would have been included unless they assumed you were also a Rukuhks .”

“ It’s beautiful, a little big, but I think I could alter it if need be.”

“ Will any of the garment’s work?”

“ Oh yeah, and the ones that are too long or too large, I can fix if you have a sewing kit. This is really more than I need, but Rowan will require some clothes as well. The alterations should keep me busy for a few days.”

“ Your sister has her own crate, as do the others. Before you start reworking them, maybe you should see what they have to trade?”

“ Trade ? Wow , I don’t think my people have done that in years. That’s smart though, and it will give me a reason to talk to the others. I’ve been so wrapped up with Rowan and all this shit, I forgot that there were other girls on that ship with us. Is trading how you guys normally get things out here?”

“ For the most part, yes. We may offer an item, manual labor, or even knowledge to obtain what is needed. Those of us born in the Void have learned to adapt. Thievery is not honorable, but when your brothers are starving, you learn to reevaluate your morals. Just to make this clear from the start, I will take, kill, or maim anything to take care of my own and not lose an ounce of sleep over it.”

Damn , he’s intense, “ What’s the Void ?”

He grabs ahold of my chair and pulls it, crate and all closer to the bed, so that he can sit down. I can see the fatigue written all over his drawn features. I wonder when I started paying that much attention?

“ The Void is hidden behind the Veil that separates the outer parts of the Darverian Universe from the inner, more populated planets. It’s also full of pirates such as ourselves; criminals, bounty hunters, and the unfortunate.”



“ So , it’s a place to hide?”

“ The Veil hides all, and it is a natural barrier that cannot be seen through if you are on the other side, and almost impossible to breach from either. Our ship, the Zenith , does not have thrusters powerful enough to break through it. If we tried anyway, the Veil’s magnetic field would tear the ship apart. Now there are ships that can power through it, but the few that can do not even know this part of space exists.”

“ I’m assuming the bug ships are powerful enough?”

“ Unfortunately , true. The only favorable thing is they prefer to keep to the outer sector. The only time they tend to leave Ebritis is during their mating season.”

“ Oh , lucky me, huh? I was merely in the right place at the right time.”

“ Female , your words, and the way they are spoken delight me. I do not understand them half the time, but your tone makes it easier to comprehend your sarcasm. I know you are not where you want to be at this exact moment in time, but the forces that control our lives have a way of bringing two souls together when needed the most, and the gods knew I needed you.”

“ Little bit of a romantic in those multiple hearts of yours, huh?”

“ I want no confusion or misunderstandings between us, so I beg you to ask all the questions you want so that your decisions going forward are made with a clear and knowledgeable mind.”

“ Slavic , you likely have some questions for me too.”

“ I care not how you come to be here. Though the journey seems far from memorable, a nightmare even by the look of your wounds, I would gladly take your pain away.

The fact that you are sitting before me, glowing like a bright star in the sky and openly talking to me without fear on your face, is enough for now. There will be a point in the future when the memories are no longer painful, and you will discuss them willingly. Then I will know all, but until that time comes, all I want and need is you.”

“ That’s the second time you’ve said you need me. Why me Slavic , and wouldn’t you have been happier with one of your own?”

“ Were you happy with one of your kind?”

“ Well , not for the lack of trying. You see, my world and yours are slightly different.”

“ How is it so in the things that really matter? You were born to loving parental units who strived to provide and care for you. They even gave you a playmate in the form of a sibling. As you grew, you were taught what you were going to need to succeed in life as an adult. Then you matured and started noticing the opposite sex. The urge to mate and procreate made you seek out others that appealed to you either in sight or personality. My people are the same, Ruby . Our bodies simply have a way of helping us notice when another is more compatible.”

I reach up, running my fingers over the dark collar around his neck and watch him shiver all over. Quickly he grabs my hand, pushing it against his scarred face. “ Have you had a mate before Slavic , can this happen more than once? Could the mate bond be wrong about me?”

His bright eyes seek me out and I know the answers before he says them. “ No one has ever been before you, nor have I ever wanted another the way my blood sings for you my Starshine . You are a light that will never fade, a smell that will merge with my own. The voice I will always ache to hear and the body I wish to lose myself

within. The God of Ruk grants few blessings in this harsh world, even to those who walk the righteous path, but somehow, he found me worthy of you.”

For the second time in my life, I’ve been rendered speechless.

### Chapter Twenty-One

#### SLAVIC

She sits before me, her small body swallowed up by the immenseness of the lounge I placed her in earlier. Gazing at me with those huge brown eyes, I wonder what she makes of my honesty. She has not taken her small hand off my face as of yet and hopefully that means she doesn't see me as disfigured and disgusting. A flash behind us catches her attention, and she looks away.

“ How did you and your brothers become who you are now? If that question is too personal you don't have to answer. Kallen was trying to fill me in on a few things earlier, but it just made for more questions in my mind.”

“ Do you mind if I lay down? That is a long one to answer, and I am fatigued this rising.”

Of all the questions she could have asked, it would be this one. But if she is going to tie herself to me, then she needs to know what she is getting into.

“ We can do this another time if you're tired Slavic . It isn't like I'm going anywhere.”

“ We never know what the next rising might bring. After all, I never saw you coming.”

“ True .”

“ You will be more comfortable down here with me. This sleeping platform is the only thing I have ever spent any credits on for myself. I give you my word that I will not behave in any way unfavorable toward you.”

I look away from her as she contemplates the words I just said. As much as I would love to pull her into my arms and explore everything that makes her different from me, I know that some things need time to develop. Even though it feels like forever, I am pleased when she seeks me out on her own.

Slowly she crawls over my legs, settling on the other side of me closest to the viewer. Crossing her legs, I watch as she pulls part of the blanket over them before looking at me seriously.

“ I do not know where to start, and I am sure I will miss things that you need to know. Nevertheless , you are welcome to stop me anytime. If I was in your place, I would be curious to learn about this new world around me as well.

I am the oldest of the six sons my life givers created. I am also the only one not born on Viri 9. My parental units, along with several other families left our home planet of Uzrul in the search for a better life. On Viri 9, what they found was a prison instead.

Maybe I should back up a little here, so that you will know why they left Uzrul in the first place. There is a race of Scientists called Aynar that infiltrated our home world under false pretenses. They held rallies and grand parties, promising all that followed a better life for them and their younglings, if they would uproot their lives and go to work for them. We found out later that they targeted our race specifically because of our known strengths and the high birth rates of our females. Remember that specific detail as we go forward.

My life giver, sire, and several in the community were tired of the struggles on Uzrul and fell for the Aynar’s false words. I was just a youngling, but I can remember us

packing up our few belongings and the smiles on both of their faces as they looked forward to the things to come. Mam was already expecting again with Ruarc , we just didn't know it at the time.

Anyway , they were true to their word in the beginning. We were given a nice dwelling and sire was put in charge of the mining operation just like they promised. We were there for several risings before things started to change. Sire started coming home later and later saying he was having to jump in and help because the Aynar were upping production temporarily. What he didn't know was that it was only a test to see what my race could actually produce if pushed.

I was put in guard training soon after we arrived, as were all the others my age, much to my Mam's displeasure. I excelled quickly and moved up the ranks in a short amount of time, even for a youngling. When mam started having complications with carrying Ruarc , my Sire put mam's care in my hands, but I was so wrapped up in making a name for myself that I almost missed her sudden weakness. One rising I found her on the floor, grasping her stomach and I remember being in a panic when I rushed her to the infirmary. If I had only known that I was playing right into their hands with that choice.

She was suffering from separation sickness, but as a youngling, I did not understand the link of a heartbond between mates. My Sire loved my Mam more than his next breath, but this new job kept them separated for long lengths of time. Unfortunately , it was playing havoc with mam's health.

A Scientist took her from me saying that they would give her something to strengthen her and the baby. I believed him and like an idiot, gave full permission to proceed. What I didn't realize was that they were experimenting on all the younglings before they were born. Gene splicing their essence, trying to create workers for the mines that would never tire nor be easily damaged. Every lunar rotation they would have me bring her back, saying they needed to monitor her and the baby's health. Foolishly , I

never questioned their word as mam did seem stronger.

Life become a blur after Ruarc was born. They would allow sire to come home just long enough for mam to become bred again. Neither of them realizing at the time that it was all being done on purpose. The moment they realized she was expecting again, sire's schedule would double. Each youngling born to my parental units after that was different from the one before. By the time Murgul was born, all our similarities to each other were fully gone. But they were my brothers, and I did all I could to protect them. Being the oldest, I was around the Aynar the most and subjected to their instant disapproval and punished the harshest when I refused to bend to their will.

One rising I was in the middle of training when my coach demanded that I take a lesser fighter's life. When I disobeyed, he threatened to send me to the mines. I did not believe he would and refused. That was the rising I saw them for what they truly were; monsters cloaked in pretty and deceiving colors.

Some called them fairies, because most all saw were delicate, fragile, beautiful creatures. What I saw instead of gossamer wings and bright colors were leathery wings, eyes black as night, and layers of razor-sharp teeth. The guard I originally ignored threw me out of the way like I weighed nothing using hands smaller than your own. Then he ripped out the youngling's throat with his own teeth.

I did not even react, or try to help, just lay there in shock, convinced my eyes were lying to me. By the time my mind cleared, it was too late for the youngling, but that event was the beginning of major change and unrest in the community.

The Aynar stopped hiding their true forms after that, and we were all quickly subjected to their cruel nature. The worst part was the younglings that had been tampered with in the womb. These could be controlled by their powerful mages. A mere thought in their direction would have them helplessly writhing in pain. They used those powers to gain and keep our cooperation. Every time one of us pushed

back or didn't meet our quota, they would focus upon our loved ones.

Once the truth about the Aynar was revealed, I was immediately removed from training and placed in the mines alongside my Sire . Ruarc , being the oldest still at home was put in place as overseer for our mam and life continued. The mines were nothing like sire had said and once there, I realized why he had lied to us. He did not want us to know the circumstances he was subjected to every rotation, as he blamed himself for why we were there in the first place.

Being his son, I was pushed harder and given a larger quota to meet. In the beginning, my anger pushed me through the hard risings. After a while, I realized I was never going to see the sun again as they kept moving us further down and deeper into the mountainside. I slept, ate, and worked so far under the ground that after a while my skin started taking on the darkened hue of the onyx dust. I am not sure what pushed me from that point on, that is until one rising when they were bringing in new recruits and I found myself paired up with Ruarc .

The only positive was occasionally sire was allowed to return to mam on the surface and he would come back with stories of my brothers and things happening top side. Unfortunately , that would not last long either, as both life givers were gaining in age. Mam's reproductive ability declined after the birth of Murgul and when the Aynar realized this, sire was no longer allowed to go to her. This is also when I was subjected to the true horrors of my Sire's position and how they held each one of his sons over his head to get what they wanted from him.

I had not seen any of my other brothers nor my Mam in so long that I did not recognize Einar the next time we met in the infirmary. Cave -ins were simply part of the job and had become an issue every rotation. The Aynar were greedy and cared little for our safety. Barely escaping one when I placed myself between the ceiling and Ruarc , sire was able to get me sent to the infirmary to be stitched up. I know not who was more shocked, Einar or myself when we saw each other. Not only had all



my hair fallen out, but my skin was now dark; the minerals having permanently stained any part of my exposed body.

Once Einar realized who I was, he did his best to explain to me how our sire had used the last of his personal favors to have each of his sons put in different facilities. Einar was in medical, Bikar communications, Falon engineering, and our youngest was excelling in weapons design. Through deception, they had taken our Mam to their main laboratory and no one knew where she was.”

“ Slavic , you mentioned that they could somehow control your brothers?”

Turning away from her curious gaze, I look out the viewer while unconsciously rubbing the scar on my chest. “ The mines were not only a place where they worked you until you died, but also where there was little sustenance. Orcs are massive and we require a lot of food in order to maintain these forms. Not to mention the amount of energy it took to mine the onyx and transport it up the many shafts to the loading docks.”

“ Ruarc had fallen behind due to a shoulder injury, and when one of the others tried to steal his rations, I stepped in between them. I honestly cannot remember how it got so out of control. But in the end, I found myself standing over one of the other workers, a machete imbedded in my chest and his crushed head in my hands.

My mind was still in a rage when the guards attacked. Ruarc tried to block them from me, and even though I still do not truly understand how, with simply a look, he was flailing on the floor, crying out in agony. Distracted by him, the Pyrkyne guards were able to capture me. Then they decided to use me as a reminder of what happens if you act out.

I was hung up, and each member in the crew had to take a turn whipping me, unless they wanted to be strung up alongside me. Being the willful male that I am, I refused

to scream or even react to the pain I was sustaining. Even when the Pyrkyne guards started using their knives to carve out souvenirs of my flesh, I would not acknowledge the pain. I can remember the look on my Sire's face when the whip was handed to him.

When he hesitated, I shook my head no. The moment that whip crossed my skin I watched my Sire change. I had never seen such rage in his eyes before, even when they told him he could never see our Mam again. He simply powered through the pain of their heartbond to focus on Ruarc and myself. They left me there for a few risings for all to see, as a reminder of what happens if you go against them."

"Slavic , how did you escape?"

" There had been whispers of unrest upon the surface, but without any real contact, that is all it was, rumors. What I did not know was sire's plan on how he was going to get his family away from the Aynar . I mentioned before that we had to transfer the onyx up to a loading bay. Normally , that area was empty besides loading containers that were to be put on the transports. They made sure that there were never ships in those hangers at the same time we were, even to the point of having auto bots load the shuttles.

Ruarc and I were seldom ever tasked with heaving the massive rocks up the shafts, but this rising, my Sire assigned us to this task himself. We were almost to the top with the final load, when a massive explosion behind us collapsed the main mine shaft.

Ruarc and I both took off running, trying to escape the cave-in headed our way, only to find a massive ship sitting in the hangar. My Sire was yelling something, but the explosion had been so loud I could not make out his words. But his intentions were clear when he motioned for us to get on the ship. I was almost to the ramp when I saw Ruarc fall, his body twisting in agony.

With strength I did not know existed, I picked up his massive frame and headed up the ramp, when suddenly my Sire's angry voice stopped me. Laying Ruarc down just inside the ship, I ran back down the ramp only to find my Sire in hand-to-hand combat with several of the Pyrkyne guards.

Charging the closest one, I grabbed him, throwing him effortlessly away when I hear a scream behind us. Somehow , I knew who it was before I ever turned, and I still remember it like it is all happening in slow motion. One of the main Aynar mages must have figured out my Sire's plans for escape, because he held my Mam in his arms with a smirk on his evil face.

My Sire and I both stopped in our tracks when we saw the knife being held against her throat. My brothers come running back down the ramp, but with a single look from the mage, they all lay convulsing in pain. Their bodies controlled by the monster holding my Mam .

Everything happened so fast after that, it's still a blur in my mind. I remember mam looking at my Sire with so much love in her eyes and somehow, I knew they were going to sacrifice themselves to get us free. My Sire's words burned their way into my mind that rising when he yelled. ' Slavic , save your brothers, get to the ship now, and do not make our sacrifice be in vain, Son .'

Many times, since, I have wondered what I could have done differently. He had raised me to follow every order he whispered, and I did just that. I ran toward the ship, somehow gathering up each of my fallen brothers in the process. The moment I had them all inside, I turned to face the mage holding my life giver. ' Carry my love with you always my child .' That's what she said to me a tick before my Sire was able to fight his way toward her. He had a plasma pistol raised that he had stolen from one of the guards and was aiming it at the mage. Then the mage started laughing as he cut her throat open right in front of us.

Because sire hesitated, this gave the other Pyrkyne guards time to retaliate. He was dead before my Mam's body even hit the ground. I am not sure what happened after that, but the ramp shut. in my face and my brothers were free of the Aynar's powers. I fought against the many hands holding me back. I found myself thrown to the floor, still yelling their names as we launched into space. From my understanding, Einar had to give me a sedative when I started fighting all of them, trying to claw my way back down the ramp."

As the memories overwhelm me, a tiny finger wipes the lone tear off my cheek. Blinking , I find Ruby lying beside me on her side, so close I can feel the heat coming off her small form. " I'm so sorry, Slavic . When I asked that question, I don't know what I expected, but that wasn't it. I know we all have our own personal hells, but damn. I'm impressed you all survived that."

She traces the hunks missing out of my shoulder and now I brace for her disgust as she knows how I came to be this damaged. " I understand little one, if my form is appalling to you."

" Your form says a lot of things Slavic , but appalling, horrific or disgusting are not any of them. What I see under your skin is strength, honor, love, sacrifice, leadership, but most of all, a boy who tried his best to save and take care of his family. If I'd been in your spot, I would've questioned my parents' choices. Instead , you took their sacrifice and did exactly what they asked of you, ' take care of your brothers.' I'm sure if there's an afterlife out here, they are both watching you from above, proud of the man you've become."

" Being a thief is not something to be proud of, little Ruby ."

" I disagree, because how else would you have found me? I may not understand why things happen the way they do, but I'm not stupid enough not to realize who saved me and my sister from what would've been a living hell. You could've walked away,

and most would've. Seldom do others entangle themselves in problems that don't directly involve them, but your morals and your standards wouldn't let you."

"I could never have left you."

"You believe that because of this mate thing, but what if that hadn't been the case? You had no ties to the other females, and yet you still saved them, or at least your brothers did. Are you telling me that you'd walk away? Because I'm calling bullshit. You still would've bent down and lifted me out of that nest!"

I do not answer, but I can tell by the smirk on her face she knows the truth. Taking her hand in mine, I kiss the ends of her fingers before pulling her close. When she does not fight me, I tuck her into my side and close my eyes. My mind and body exhausted from reliving the memories.

### Chapter Twenty-Two

#### RUBY

Slavic has pulled me up tight against him, causing me to wake up overly warm for a change, with a massive gray arm draped heavily across my side. I should be upset, but at this point why sweat the little shit? He hasn't done anything offensive or inappropriate, so I can deal with a little bit of snuggling. I should have expected this after laying down next to him last night. He has told me repeatedly how much I mean to him, and I'm not sure how to feel about all this. Most guys would never be that open, but the big marshmallow is determined to make me his. Normally I would be objecting to his highhandedness, but now? Well , I'm extremely comfortable right here.

My moving around must have woken him up because his breathing changes, and for just a second, he squeezes me. “ Sassy can't breathe,” I whisper out with a giggle.

“ Who is Sassy ? Are these translators not working? I thought you told me your name was Ruby .”

When he groggily grumbles this out, I pat his arm and roll my eyes because I swear, I can feel his confusion. “ Slavic , it's an earth joke. I'm still Ruby and you need to learn not to take everything I say to heart. Sarcasm is a way for me to deal with stressful situations, and I've had more than my fair share of those here lately.”

The watch thing on his arm beeps and several lights blink on and off. “ I think Kit is trying to get ahold of you.”

“ There is no Kit on this ship.”

“ You are ruining my fun this morning, grumpy ass.”

“ I have already brought out the fire in you this rising, and we have not even left the sleeping chamber.”

“ What can I say? I’m just a ray of sunshine in a shitty ass world.”

He actually chuckles a little and I turn in his arms, wanting to witness the rare mirth on his face, but he quickly frowns again.

“ It seems like big and grumpy is your resting bitch face, huh?”

“ You seem to have left off one name little mate. If I recall, I’ve been called big, ugly, and grumpy.”

“ True , but I think I’ll take back the ugly, though you’ll never be Thor . However , you are quite fetching in your own way, or maybe you’re just growing on me. Now , you’ll always be big, after all, I barely reach the top of your chest if I’m standing in front of you, but I guess grumpy is here to stay.” That watch thing beeps again. “ Shouldn’t you get that?”

“ They can wait. I have spent a lifetime dreaming of waking up with my mate in my arms. Not that this is the conversation I had imagined all this time, but I seem to be enjoying reality more than the fantasy.”

“ So now what?”

“ Are you against getting naked, so that I can explore that delectable little body of yours better?”

“ I was thinking along the lines of going to see my sister.”

“ So , that is a no on getting naked? Frack !”

Playfully , I smack him on the arm he still has draped over me. Looking out toward the stars that feel like they’re surrounding us, I suddenly feeling incredibly small. “ Your world is a lot different from mine Slavic , and I’m not sure where Rowan or I are going to fit in it.”

“ You are always worrying about others, Ruby . You need to learn to put yourself first for a change.”

“ I’m pretty sure that’s the pot calling the kettle black, mister ‘ I am the boss of everything’ . Being the oldest, it’s just a role I was born into, same as you. If you really think about it, we don’t know how to act any differently.” When the watch beeps again, I hit the button on top. “ Can we help you?”

“ Uhh , Slavic ?” I can’t help but giggle at the pause when Bikar hears my voice instead of his brother’s.

“ What ?”

“ Ohh , had me worried there for a moment, however, I believe I should have expected that.”

“ What do you want Bikar , quit your rambling.”

He hesitates to answer because of Slavic’s snarling. “ Kallen wants to talk to all of us at once, but Einar is refusing to leave the med bay.”

“ Then we will go to him. Inform Einar to make room for us. We need a moment to



freshen up before meeting you all there.”

“ Got it.”

Slavic doesn't move immediately and it's like he's preparing himself for something terrible. “ You can use the refreshing chamber first, Ruby . I am interested in seeing you in the new garments Falon was able to acquire.”

“ Maybe I'll model them for you later.”

“ Don't tease me, sassy one.”

I decide not to poke the bear and get up while he's still letting me.

### Chapter Twenty-Three

#### RUBY

Once again, I find myself standing in front of the medical center doors, but they won't open. "Einar, open the frackin door", Slavic yells out after his palm print won't open the door.

"Not right now Slavic, whatever is so important can be relayed to me at a later date."

"Ruby wants to see her sister. You can either open the door and allow that, or I will break it down and demand it."

The door opens slightly as he leans around it, looking through the crack, his face haggard. What in the world could my sister be doing to make a male like Einar look like this? "Rowan is not handling this well right now, and I am scared you will only set her back further."

"Get out of the way, Green Giant, and let me talk to her."

He hesitates for just a second before opening the door all the way. When I don't see her anywhere, I'm instantly worried. "Ok, where is she?"

He points toward the furthest corner in the room and that's when I spot her, sitting on the floor. Her body is curled up in a ball with her arms wrapped around her legs, her face hidden by a curtain of red hair where it's buried against her knees. It's as if she's

trying to make herself as small and unnoticeable as possible. “ Shit , she used to do this when we were kids. You two just hang out, this might take a minute.”

Pulling one of the blankets off the nearest bed, I make my way over to Rowan . Sliding down the wall beside her so that she can feel my presence next to her, I throw the blanket over our heads, hiding us underneath its darkness. Her mouth is moving, repeating the same sounds. So , I know she’s silently chanting something over and over, but no matter how hard I try, I can’t make out what she’s saying. After a few minutes, she starts to relax, slowly unwinding herself. Taking a deep breath, I make my voice as gentle as I can.

“ I know you can hear me Sis , so I want you to listen. We are safe right now. Has life changed? Yeah . Am I scared? Some , just not as bad as I was when I woke up.”

Her head twitches almost imperceptibly and I know my words found their mark. “ We have to hide Ruby , he’ll find us.”

I can barely hear her, but the manic desperation in her voice can’t be missed. “ Sis , no one is going to find us. Robert and all his thugs are dead. Well for that matter, everyone is dead, but we’re not going to get into that right now because none of them count at this moment. Me and you, that’s all that matters right here and now. Do you trust me?”

“ Yes , always.”

“ Are you feeling better?”

She pauses to look down at her body clothed in an attractive, dark green gown. I watch as she delicately rubs the material with the tips of her fingers, an almost reverent look on her face. “ Oddly enough, nothing hurts.”

“ That’s because of the ‘ Not so Jolly Green Giant ’ out there. He has spent day and night hovering over you, trying his best to heal all your new and old wounds.”

“ He’s a monster and the monsters want to do bad things to us. They’re just like Robert .”

Her thoughtless, insensitive words cause a spark of irritation to light up within me, and maybe a hint of guilt as well. It wasn’t that long ago that I was calling Slavic ugly to his face. “ Stop that, no they’re not. Not everything out there wants to hurt us. Yes , I agree most things do, and I think in this world that number just multiplied, but do you know what we have now that we didn’t before?”

She shakes her head causing a lock of hair to fall into her eyes. Reaching up, I gently sweep it behind her ear in a loving caress to get it out of her face before dropping the rest of the truth on her.

“ We have them. The big guy who scared you just now, he’s your safe place. When the world becomes too much, you grab on to the green giant and don’t let go. If things get too loud, he’s the quiet you seek. If you allow it, he’s the one that can make all the pain go away, physically, and mentally. The green giant can and will replace all that hurt with laughter and new dreams, but you’ve got to let him in. Take my word for it, nothing’s going to get through him to hurt you and even though he’s snarly and scary at first glance, he’s a big marshmallow inside and cares more for you than any other ever will, before or after this moment.

We’ve been given a second chance, Rowan . We had to lose everything in order to be reborn into something else. I don’t understand half of what’s happened, where we’re going, or even what’s going to occur next. We’ve got a couple options though. One , we can sit under this blanket in our tent and hope that the world leaves us alone. Two , we can be brave and decide to live this new life to its fullest. Three , well there really isn’t a three that I can think of right now.”

“ I’m not you Ruby .”

My heart breaks just a little when her words crack as she says my name. Thankfully , I know she’s listening to me if she can talk back, even if it’s not as sassy as she used to be.

“ No , you’re not, you’re more. You just let the world scare you for a while, but that world is gone now. So , look at it like this. All those mornings you woke up wishing your life was different, well your wish has come true. And even though he’s a little on the rough side, you might’ve been sent your knight in shining, but a little beat-up, armor. So , what’s it going to be? Life or misery? You don’t have to figure it all out right this moment, but you do have to decide on stepping forward. Sis , you already know what’s behind you, what do you have to lose? Let’s look at the stars with hope in our hearts and minds. Allow the big grouches to hover and let’s live what little life we have left to the fullest.”

I feel like I’ve won a huge battle when her grin grows, and she smiles at me. Grabbing her hand, we both stand up together with the blanket still covering us fully. “ You ready?” With a nod, I lower the blanket down, only to find the guys just a few feet away.

Grabbing Rowan’s hand, I make her stand next to me. While the scowling, not so jolly green giant approaches hesitantly, her hand tightens on mine a bit. But it’s not a death grip telling me she’s about to lose her shit. He’s moving with way more hesitancy than I bet he’s ever done before, and it solidifies everything I just told Rowan . This male, he’s one of the good ones and I’ve no doubt he can fix what that fucker Robert broke.

Einar can bring me my sister back.

He was just about to say something when the door slides open and in walks the rest of

the crew, a few I've not even seen myself yet. I feel Rowan shrink into herself with the addition of so many bodies as she slowly backs up against the wall. Instead of pulling her forward, I simply step back with her, so that we're standing side by side.

To my surprise, Einar turns to face the new arrivals but positions himself in front of Rowan . His body is angled so she can still see what's going on, and she has a direct path to escape if she needs to but is also protected from any threats in front of her. Smart male that Einar . Even if he is a scary as fuck version of my favorite vegetable commercial giant.

Kallen pushes her way through the multiple colors of massive males to stand in the front. “ Finally , all of you in one place.”

Slavic turns from me, walking toward her, the normal snarl on his face. “ Kallen what is so important that it could not wait until a later time?”

“ Oh , I do not know? ... The fact that your Mam is alive and you have a youngling sister?”

Absolute chaos breaks out. I realize this is getting out of hand fast, and the last thing I need right now is for Rowan to be terrorized any further. Putting my fingers between my lips, I let out a sharp whistle. All heads instantly turn toward me.

“ Ok , now that I have your attention, all the snarling in the world is not going to answer your questions. So , pick one and go with it, like you guys have some sense.”

Kallen smiles at me, “ Thank you Ruby , I need to learn that trick. I do not believe I have ever witnessed instant obedience from these or any males before.”

Slavic is the first to throw out his opinion. “ Kallen , I hate to interrupt your little speech here, but I watched that Aynar mage slit my Mam's throat with my own eyes.

There is no way she survived such a wound.”

“ You are right, most would have died and if the medics had not been on scene quickly afterwards, she probably would not have made it. You must realize, we also thought you all were dead as well. Slavic , your absence has spanned numerous orbital rotations. I have no idea how you’ve kept your identities hidden all this time. Your Mam even put feelers out to see if any of you had been seen or heard of, but nothing come back.”

The one that favors Slavic the most, Ruarc , and who has hovered over Kallen since they walked in, holds his hand up when one of the others starts to speak. “ I think you need to start from the time we escaped Kallen . Or this conversation is just going to keep going in circles. Later , you and I are going to discuss why you are just now bringing this up.”

“ I was not going to retell this story multiple times Ruarc , and it is not like you have spent enough time with me to talk, she snaps back at him. “ I am not sure if you all were aware of this, but your Sire was one of the males leading the resistance against the Aynar . The others who were planning the attack had been trying to recruit him for several orbital rotations, but until they publicly whipped you Slavic , he would not take the chance. After that, he was determined to free you and your brothers, at any cost.

The Aynar thought they were in complete control and that was what finally defeated them. They spent rotations building the perfect male, with unlimited strengths and stamina. When the confrontation happened, even with their mental strengths they were unprepared for the mass that attacked them all at once. When the main mages were killed, the rest of them fled in the few remaining space worthy ships still planetside.

According to your Mam , the plan was for her to meet your Sire and all of you at the

dock a tick after second sun rise. She was on her way there when the primary mage who had taken a personal liking to her, spotted her. She told me that she had no clue he was trailing behind her because the rising mate sickness had fogged her thoughts, and she was just determined to get to her mate one step at a time.

Your Sire was the one who planned the mine collapse and the landing of the Vespira , now the Zenith , to coincide with each other. His primary plan was to get his family on that shuttle while the workers in the mines were being rescued from an alternate entrance that he and a few others had been working on.

Once he got into orbit, he was supposed to bomb the main headquarters. However , we know that is not what happened, and this is how several of the Aynar were able to escape. Your Mam was found when another ship landed close by. While the males in the mines fought the remaining Aynar , all the females were rounded up and put on that ship. Once loaded, that vessel was programmed to head to the outer quadrants to an unpopulated moon called, Deapra .

It took several lunar rotations for any of the males to join us there, so in the meantime, we had to rebuild on our own. Your Mam , even though weak from the attack, only several rotations away from birth, and suffering the loss of her heartbond mate, is who took charge. Without her guidance, we would not have the trade routes or the society we have now. She will be overjoyed to find out that you all are alive and well, as she never believed any of you were dead.”

None of the guys are hiding their emotions well. Some are angry, others seem sad, but I can tell that Slavic is still not convinced.

“ I watched her die, Kallen !”

The conviction of his words and the anguish behind them brings tears to my eyes.



“ Her voice was damaged, and she has a terrible scar on her neck that she shows off proudly. Whether you believe me or not Slavic , she is alive and well, along with your sister Atasha , who is the spitting image of her.”

When Slavic’s eyes turn my way, I find myself releasing Rowan’s hand and walking toward him. I don’t know if it’s the pain in his eyes or the way he’s trying to hold himself apart from the others who are throwing question after question toward Kallen now, but when he opens his arms hesitantly, I walk right into them. I’m hoping after all he’s done for me that I can offer him some comfort at a time when he should be rejoicing. Wrapping my arms around his massive frame, he pulls me close, and I feel a tremble go through his body before he bends slightly, lowering his head on top of mine. Closing my eyes, I concentrate on the beating of his multiple hearts and wonder when I started caring. We couldn’t have been standing there long when an alarm sounds across the ship. Instantly , Slavic releases me. “ Everyone to your stations now!” His bellowing voice makes me jump as they all rush out the door.

When I see that Einar is not leaving the room but heading to a corner with a huge screen overhead, I look back at Rowan who is still standing against the wall, her eyes huge as she takes in the sudden chaos. “ Stay with Einar , do not leave his side, do you hear me?” She nods yes and I run out of the room chasing after the huge footsteps pounding away from me.

### Chapter Twenty-Four

#### RUBY

I don't get there quick enough and the doors close right in front of me. No matter what I do, they won't open. I've put my hand on the shiny thing on the opposite wall, jumped up and down in case there's a sensor and was just about to start pounding on it, when suddenly it opens. One of the brothers I've only caught a glimpse of storms past me.

Stepping out of the way quickly, I jump inside the door before it can close back again. Slavic is standing in the middle of the room issuing orders that I have no understanding of. The ship shakes for a second and the lights dim, and before I know it another one of them is rushing past me heading out the door.

Slavic must have realized I was in the room now because he turns toward me, then motions to the seat behind him in the middle of the room. I quickly plant my butt in it, as I'm sure one of these giants is going to accidentally run over me as they head toward various parts of the ship. Helpless, I sit here watching, as they all talk back and forth. My eyes jump over to the one whose fingers are rapidly flying over the panels and instruments. Slavic's voice echoes throughout the room as he asks questions.

“Bikar, what's going on?”

“The hyperdrive Falon just installed is not getting enough fuel. There has to be a vacuum leak somewhere due to the fuel hatch being open. Every time I try to engage,

it shuts itself off. Falon is on his way toward the engine compartment now.”

“ Have the swarm ships spotted us yet?”

“ No , the asteroid belt has us hidden at the moment. But if they get a lock on us, we will not escape them without that hyperdrive. Their ships are too big, and the Void doesn’t have enough space for them to operate that feature safely within its borders. Whereas we can duck in behind places, they cannot.”

Well , at least I’ve learned another name to go with a face, but the word swarm ship catches my attention. “ Slavic , are we being pursued by the bugs?”

“ Not necessarily, they are just in radar range and the Zenith alerted us once detected, giving us plenty of time to get away from them. You have nothing to worry about little mate.”

The door opens again, “ The hyperdrive is starving for fuel. The batteries can provide long-term power; however, it requires both fuels for startup. Each time Bikar tries to activate it; the fuel line collapses.”

“ Frack ! Falon , do you have any suggestions?”

“ One of us is going to have to go out and seal that hatch.”

I watch Slavic run a hand along his bald head for a second before he turns back to Bikar . “ Find a place to set us down, I’ll go suit up.”

“ Slavic , it would make more sense for me to go. I am the engineer on this ship and if something else needs to be fixed while I am out there, I would have a better grasp as to how to do it.”

“ No , Falon I need your eyes up here. I will wear a viewer so if you see something while I am out there, you can advise me on how to proceed further.”

“ Frack Slavic , you have a mate now. She is your first priority, let one of us go instead.”

“ She is the reason I am going, little brother. I will do anything in my power to make sure she is never in danger again. If something should happen to me, I know the five of you would protect her with your lives. Now , quit stalling and let's get this done quickly.”

The ship shimmies and I grab onto the arms of the chair while Slavic and Falon simply stand there like nothing is going on. This must be comparable to getting your sea legs, now we'll just call it space legs. I can't help but shake my head as ignorant thoughts flow through my mind. A mind that is doing its best not to flip out. Slavic turns to walk out of the room and just as I start to get up, Bikar's words stop him.

“ We have a problem, Slavic .”

“ What the frack now?”

“ The asteroid's surface is uneven and after I placed and anchored us down, I noticed the open hatch of the fuel cells is extremely close to the asteroid's surface. I am not sure you can fit under the ship to do repairs.”

“ Can you readjust the ship?”

“ Not without the unattached material giving our location away.”

“ Murgul is the only one slightly slimmer and you know there is no getting him in a suit.” Slavic puts his head down and closes his eyes, and I have no idea why, but I

blurt out, “ I’ll do it.”

“ No .” His response is instantaneous.

“ Why ? I fit the size requirement and I’m pretty handy to have around when it comes to tools. Just show me what I need to do and help me do it.”

“ No , we will fight them if need be.”

“ Slavic , you’re just being dumb right now. Can you give me a good reason as to why I can’t be the one to do this?”

“ I said no.”

“ Ok buddy, you’re going to learn real fast that shit like that doesn’t work with me, so we’re going to nip that in the butt right now.” Looking past his glowering frame to the other two in the room I ask, “ Do you guys have any other options or objections?”

Slavic practically roars when Bikar opens his mouth. “ Either of you say a word and I will personally throw you out the airlock.”

“ Ughh , men! What the hell is the deal? Look , I don’t wanna damage your ego volunteering or to die out there. So , pull your big boy pants up and let’s fix this thing. Is there a reason we can’t go together? I mean, I’ve never walked in space, but I’ve seen it on TV and it looked pretty terrifying. I’m totally ok with some backup or even an extra rope in case I start floating off into the wild blue yonder.”

For a minute, I think he’s just going to argue with me some more. I don’t know who’s more shocked, me or the other two in the room. He turns toward Falon , “ Will she be strong enough to use the sealant needed to secure the hatch?”

“ Absolutely , the seal is only temporary, and the hull repair can be applied anywhere in all atmospheres. If she can push the nozzle down while keeping the hatch in place, I see no reasons why she cannot.”

“ Bikar , will our suits reduce down enough to seal her in properly?”

“ We will simply have to see Slavic , but they are self-adjusting.”

Slavic turns all that aggression and worry toward me as I sit here in this enormous chair, swinging my legs back and forth like I don't have a care in the world. “ You will do everything I say, without question.”

“ That's kinda self-explanatory, grumpy ass.”

Before I can move, he's leaning over me, pinning me to the seat. His massive frame pushes me back as his lips crash down on mine. Large hands surround my face as he holds me still, his kiss stealing all reason or thought from my mind. Gasping for breath, his tongue invades my mouth, and I practically melt on the spot as our tongues swirl together.

A snort from behind us has Slavic releasing me, and I can't help but smile as he moves away. Never taking his eyes off me, he holds his hand out to help me up. Putting my much smaller one in his enormous one, he pulls me up effortlessly, then motions toward the door. My first step is a little unsteady and when I look up, he has a smirk on his face because he knows he's the cause.

Somewhat in a daze, I find myself standing outside what looks like a closet with Slavic pulling things out like a madman. After a few minutes, he turns, holding a huge amount of stuff in his arms. “ Come , I need to make sure these will adjust enough to protect you properly.”

Once again, I'm led inside a room that looks like it's straight off a Sci-fi movie, big ass door and everything. "Strip."

"What?"

"You cannot have anything on between your skin and the suit. It confuses the sensors on the inside."

"Well, this is an original one liner for sure. You're very creative when it comes to ways of getting me naked, I see."

"Little female."

"Yeah, yeah, ... I know the routine: you don't have to be so grumpy. Could you turn around or something. I mean, I know you've seen everything, but that wasn't my choice the first time."

"Nope, you are mine to look at, and I will."

I don't know if I should be angry or turned on, so instead I decide to fight fire with fire. Turning around, I look back over my shoulder and with a small smile, I leisurely slide the gown I have on down my shoulders. His eyes devouring every inch of my skin as it's revealed to him, I watch as he clenches his hands, fighting the urge to grab me when I stop the material right above my butt cheeks. When I finally let the material fall to the floor, it's like I can feel his eyes burning my flesh. He starts to reach out only to hesitate as I turn fully toward him.

"You are perfect."

"Not really, but we can pretend."

“ Hey , are you both almost ready in there? That Velgriddix ship is getting too close for comfort out here.”

“ I am just sizing her up now.”

“ I bet you are, brother”, is Bikar’s response and there is no missing his humor.

Slavic walks up to me with a huge pair of pants, opening them for me to step into. His eyes drifting over me and the desire in them has me squirming. My own need suddenly slicks my thighs, as he pulls the pants up slowly, forcing me to grab hold of his large shoulders as he runs his nose up my inner thigh.

“ Gods that smell! I can’t wait to lay you down and feast upon your nectar.”

I can’t take my eyes off him as he fastens the pants, then hits a series of buttons on their side. “ Wow , would you look at that, they’re magic pants.” Turning slightly, I watch them shrink as they snug up against my skin. I can’t help but tease Slavic as I stand here half naked, ready to jump out into space to fix a hatch like I know what I’m doing. “ Do these make my butt look good? I think this material is revolutionary, and convenient. Can we get these in other colors?”

“ Arms up.”

We go through the same process, and I swear before he pulls the shirt over my head, he licks my nipple. Standing with my arms out, he goes through the process again, tightening the shirt all around me. He almost tips me over when he lifts my foot up for the boots and I can’t help but laugh at his horrified expression right as he catches me from landing hard on my bottom. “ Turn those gun’s down, big guy!”

“ Frack , this is never going to work. The moment I open that door your insubstantial weight is going to float away like a feather in the wind.”



Sobering up fast, I realize he's truly scared for me. "Slavic, honey, I trust you. I know you're not going to allow anything to happen to me out there."

He lowers his head, "I cannot bear the thought of something taking you away from me, Starshine. When this is over, we will discuss my dislike of you putting yourself in danger for others."

"Yeah, you're growing on me, too." Before he can say anything else, the door slides open as Falon walks toward us with a canister and a few tools in his hand. "Slavic, this is the lightest container we have, but you will need to carry it until both of you are free of the airlock. Why are you not dressed yet?"

"I was double checking her seams."

I never imagined what a smile would look like with an accessory like tusks, but it completely transforms Falon's face, making him look a lot younger. "Once we clear this sector, you can inspect them further, if need be, but right now we are outnumbered. Get your head out of your crotch and get in the game."

While Slavic is getting dressed, Falon goes over how to operate the canister in zero atmosphere, making me miss the strip show that I'd been looking forward to. Things happen quickly after that, and when Slavic slides that helmet over my head, shit gets real, fast. Falon makes his way out of the room, and I hear a loud hiss when he seals one of the doors behind him.

"Ruby, can you hear me?"

"Which one is this?"

"This is Bikar. I will be walking you through each part. If at any point something I say confuses you, make sure to stop me before going further. We only have one shot

at getting this right. Slavic can hear both of us, but his mic isn't working correctly, so I will be the voice between you two. Right now, all you need to do is focus on staying attached to Slavic , and we will worry about the rest. I am initiating the outer seal to release, and it will be really loud in there.”

“ Ok , let's do this.” I try to turn so that I can see Slavic , but once this helmet sealed the whole outfit became cumbersome. A loud bang, then a hissing noise echoes all around me. I close my eyes for a second, praying we make it out of this in one piece. Something nudging me forward has me stepping up a level as the huge ass door swings open. For a second, I just stand here looking at the scene in front of me, amazed and overwhelmed by how small I feel in the midst of all this.

I see Slavic jump forward and just as I start to panic, he throws some sort of magnet rope out that instantly attaches him to the hull of the ship. Floating toward me, he hooks a smaller one onto my side, connecting it to himself. He motions for me to come to him and with a leap of faith, I leave the security of the ship and head out into space with my grumpy ass Orc . I bet no one ever read this event in their fortune cookie.

Slavic's helmet bumps up against mine and just seeing his face helps me focus on what we need to do. He points back toward the ship, then somehow maneuvers both of us to where he wants us to be. I was a lot braver on the ship than I am right now. Especially when I see the piece of metal hanging loose under the belly of this big ol' ship. It reminds me of those homes you see, and your first thoughts are, 'wow that's got to be huge on the inside', only to find out the rooms are so small you can't even get a couch in any of them. Because this bastard is massive, looming over my tiny ass out here swirling around on a floating rock, headed nowhere.

“ Ruby , your heart rate is elevating, are you in distress?”

“ Fuck yes, I'm stressed. I am two seconds from flipping the hell out, but don't

worry, I'll super glue that massive piece of metal together one way or another. Just hope your stuff doesn't stick to your fingers like the glue back home does, or I'm truly screwed, and not in the way I was looking forward to."

Slavic comes back in view, going as far as he can under the ship. Awkwardly , he hands me the canister, making sure I have it aimed the correct way then backs away. I see him letting out some of the rope so that I can go on without him.

" Time to earn your keep, girl", I whisper to myself.

" Ruby , can you see the fuel hatch?"

" Yes , if that's the big piece of metal hanging down."

" Once you are there, I need you to check a few things before you try to push the hatch up."

" Of course, you forgot a few things on the grocery list. Nothing I need to be doing anyway, just hanging out with the stars looking at star fleet command headed straight for us."

" Ruby , I need you to slow down. I can't hear you plainly."

" Listen to the words coming out of my mouth. There is a huge-ass-ship headed straight this way that makes ours look like a toy!"

" Calm down, I see it. Right now, we are cloaked, so you are fine. You need to focus so that we can get you and Slavic back on the ship as quickly as possible. Are you at the fuel hatch yet."

" Yes , it took me a second, but I can see up into the ship now."

“ Do you see any fluid or leaks around the seal?”

“ There seems to be some steam coming out around the edge.”

“ See if you can tighten it any.”

“ On it; lefty loosie, righty tightie, got it!”

Putting the canister between my knees, I reach up with both hands, grabbing the handle sticking out and twist with everything I have, considering I’m weightless. It turns just a little bit, but the stuff stops coming out. “ Yay , I think I did it.”

“ Wonderful , now I might be able to help you. Do you see a blue lever on your right?”

“ Yes .”

“ Before you pull that, you need to make sure you can step back out of the way. If the hatch can close at all, it will start moving upward. Once it stops, you will have to push it the rest of the way.”

“ You realize it’s the size of a 1979 Ford LTD hood, right? Never mind, I got this.” Grabbing the blue lever, I jump back quickly, losing my footing as the hatch comes up a lot quicker than I thought it would. A hard tug on my side shockingly steadies me and I swear I hear Slavic cussing in the background.

The moment the hatch stops moving, I try shoving it with both hands, but it doesn’t budge. “ Ok Houston , we have a problem. Looks like the puny human girl can’t get this eight-hundred-pound hood back in its slot.”

“ Slavic is making his way to you. He cannot get under the ship, but he might be able

to reach over and shove it in place.” A few seconds later, a huge arm appears out of the corner of my eye, moving back and forth until the tips of his fingers hit the lip of the hatch. Flattening his hand against it, I see the part move slowly, then just like a piece of a puzzle it pops in.

“ It’s in Bikar , now let’s watch me put all of Falon’s training to work.” Remembering to hold it a certain way, I aim the end of the nozzle toward the crack. It’s a little messy at first, but it doesn’t take me long to get the hang of it. Before I know it, I’m lowering the canister down, admiring my first space maintenance job.

“ Bikar , I’m out of gooey stuff.”

“ Good job Ruby , all sensors have reset, and we should be good to go. You two get back on the ship.”

I would dance a jig if I didn’t have to worry about floating off into space. I turn when I feel a tug on the rope Slavic has on my side. The moment I’m in front of him he grabs hold of me, an odd, scary smirk on his face. I watch as he tugs on the rope that has us secured to the ship and without any warning at all, he takes a big jump, and we fly up into the sky. I scream as he twirls us around playfully.

“ Slavic , quit showing off and get your asses back on the ship”, Bikar yells over the speaker inside my helmet.

Another jerk and we’re back at the door. Slavic sort of pushes me inside while he gathers up the things we had with us. Once he’s in, he detaches the rope and hits a button on the wall. A red light starts flashing as the main door begins closing behind him. He pulls me further away from the entrance, both of us kinda floating there until it closes fully.

Holding me against him, I don’t notice the gravity returning inside the room until the

light turns green. He sits me down in front of him and I watch as he unsnaps his helmet then his gloves, before starting on mine. The second my helmet is off, I can't contain my excitement as I grab his face, kissing him quickly.

“ We did it, and didn't float off into the great unknown, Woohooo ! We make a kick ass team you know.”

“ Yes my little Starshine , I believe we do. Now let me get you out of these garments. We will have to go through a decontamination sequence before the ship will allow us back into the main areas.”

“ I think you are just trying to find a way to get me naked.”

“ You have no clue. I will use any excuse I can find now that I have seen what those garments are hiding underneath them.”

When I start unfastening the top, he stops me. “ Let me do this. ... Bikar , light up those thrusters and get us out of here.”

“ Any particular direction?”

“ Deapra . And unless this ship is on fire, we are not to be disturbed for the next few risings.”

“ Sure thing, big brother.”

### Chapter Twenty-Five

#### RUBY

Slavic unwraps me like I'm an anticipated Christmas present. His gaze is so intense it makes me feel simultaneously exposed and cherished all at the same time. However, as he starts lifting my shirt and his eyes hit mine, there's a vulnerability there I didn't expect.

As he moves the shirt up higher, his claws gradually slide up my sides. His thumbs brushing the underside of my breasts sends a jolt of pleasure throughout my system and I bite back the moan that wants to escape my lips. Without meaning to, I arch further into his touch, pleading for more, but scared that I want it.

When the material hits the floor, I look up at the hunger in his unique, but terrifying eyes. They roam my naked skin from the waist up, and with a growl, his sausage size fingers move to cup my breast, kneading the soft flesh. He's not gentle, but I believe this is him trying to be. I can see the restraint it's taking him to hold back. It's like that fine line between love and hate, only it's between his strength and desire not to hurt me.

Shifting his hands to glide down my waist, he comes to the buckle holding my pants on. Slavic's eyes never leave mine as he steps closer. The heat coming off his body surrounds me in comfort as he lowers his head. His lips press gently against mine, slowly with a few tentative nibbles at first, but this quickly escalates as he pulls me closer.

The cloth of his suit is a major contrast against my naked skin. Suddenly , the kiss becomes more aggressive as his lips crash upon mine in a hungry demand for more. Raising up, I wrap my arms around his neck, pulling him closer. My resistance completely shatters when his tongue finds my own, only to pout when he pulls away from me slightly.

“ I never dreamed anything could feel as good as you do under my hands.”

Smiling , I rub my nose against his. “ Sweet talker, you better stop this now, or it will completely ruin your reputation.”

“ Are you sure you want this, Ruby ? There is no going back once I make you truly mine.”

“ Like you would let me go either way. I was yours the moment you picked me up out of that nest and you know it. I’m just a little slow and it took me slightly longer to get on the bandwagon.” Shaking his head, I can tell he’s fighting a smile.

“ It would tear my hearts out if you changed your mind, but I would respect your choice.”

“ Good thing I like those hearts of yours right where they’re at. Now , how do we get you out of this space-rig? I didn’t get the same strip show you did earlier, and I want to see the complete package.”

“ I am not appealing like you are pretty one.”

“ See , opinions are like assholes, we all have one. So why don’t you let me decide?”

“ Let’s get you out of this suit, then we will walk into the decontaminator together.”



“ Ohhh , my kinda date! Nothing like getting decontaminated before a little hanky panky, ... so let's hurry.”

When he smiles this time, I don't flinch away from the odd teeth he's showing. At some point, his differences have become endearing to me. He manages to finally get me out of this dang suit, and as I stand here naked for the universe to see, I watch him hesitate to remove his own.

“ Do you need some help?”

“ No , my Starshine . I am enjoying the look and smell of desire on you, and do not want to see disgust in your eyes.”

“ You know, I kinda like this nickname you have for me. Two of us can play this game, sweet thing. Now get your ass naked.”

Unlike how he unwrapped me, Slavic's movements are jerky and unsure, something I've never witnessed in him before. Leaning down to yank his boots off, for a second I think I catch a different color on his skin before he straightens.

Standing up, he towers over me and like ripping a band aid off, he unsnaps the button holding his pants on. The material pools at his feet and I get my first glance at WOW . He doesn't say anything, just stands there waiting on me to react.

But what do you say? ‘ No , thank you!’ ‘ Can I get that in a smaller size?’ ... said no woman alive! ‘ His gods sure had a great sense of humor when creating this.’ I mean they just keep scrolling through my mind. I can tell my silence is bothering him as the damn thing twitches, every time I look at it. But who wouldn't look at it? It's almost as tall as I am.

“ That's quite impressive Slavic . Does it have a name, its own zip code, possibly?

Talk about ridged for her pleasure, I think someone was an overachiever when they carved you out.”

He starts to put his hand over it, and I smack it away. “ Now there will be none of that, he’s just a little intimidating is all. You stand still while I do a complete inspection. I need to make sure no alien bugs got on you while we were out there playing in the abundant nothingness of space.”

Tracing a finger down his chest just short of the one-eyed monster looking at me, I stroll around him, my hands exploring every wound and scar that mars his massive frame. However , the moment I get to his butt, I stop dead. “ Well , would you looky here, what’s this? ... You have a tan line. Your butt is green!” Squeezing it gently, I smack it playfully when I realize how still he’s standing.

“ You can explain how this happened later but let me tell ya, I think we could sell your butt pictures for extra money in a pinch. I know plenty of Earth girls who would enjoy taking a second glance at this. Look at these dimples, mmmm nothing but yumminess. Now , if we really wanted to make some extra cash, let’s include video of my eyes following my wandering fingers across this hip bone of yours. Then they’ll bring me to these pretty little ‘ V’s ’ you’ve kept hidden from me behind that rusty old belt of yours. Shame on you! What , no growling or little human remarks? ... Have I rendered you speechless?”

“ You jest with me. I can see myself in the viewer as well as you.”

“ See , we’re our own worst critics. Apparently , your mirror is lying, but it doesn’t matter what it or you think. I’m the one looking at you, so why don’t you bring those frowning lips down here, and let’s explore this thing forming between us.”

Lifting myself on my tiptoes, I reach up, pulling his head down toward mine. “ Make love to me Slavic . Show me with your hands and body all the things you don’t know

how to say out loud. If I really am all you say I am, then this is gonna rock the ship, baby.”

I don’t have to tell him twice. His arms surround me as his hard length presses into my stomach, practically touching the bottom of my boobs, because of our height difference. My lady bits, having a mind of their own, grinds against that thing, knowing he’s going to split us in two, but the hussy is already aching with the thought on how we’re going to try anyway.

He must have gotten tired of bending down, so he lifts me up and my legs drape around his sides as there’s no way they’ll reach around him. Latching onto one of my nipples, he growls when the heat of my core makes contact with his shaft, vibrating my entire body. The claws on his hands press into my flesh, not hard enough to hurt, but they’re going to leave a few scattered marks across my fair skin.

“Close your eyes little one, this will only take a second.”

A cold mist flows over my sensitive body, and I shiver more from the suddenness of it than anything else. Shutting off rapidly, I feel us moving quickly. “Please, tell me that you’re not walking us both stark naked through the ship?”

“I cannot wait that long and I have to taste you.”

Next thing I know, I find myself being placed on another huge chair with Slavic on his knees before me. His large fingers trace a path from my neck, through the center of my boobs, down my stomach, around my belly button, only to hesitate right above my core.

“You are so smooth, and my hands have never felt anything like you before. No wonder the entire universe seeks your kind out if they are all like you.”

“ Now sweet thing, less talking, more playing. I will explain the differences in females at another time.”

He leans back, spreading my legs wide, his eyes devouring my most intimate parts and I'm glad I opted for the permanent hair removal as a teenager. Before I can blink, I feel his tongue and lips exploring my folds. He's moaning like he's savoring his favorite alien delicacy. A whimper escapes my lips when his tongue brushes over my clit, and I grip the arms of the chair as I fight the urge to press against him harder. His tongue circles slowly and deliberately when he hears me gasp out. He goes back and forth between long licks and small nips right before he sucks my pleasure center into his mouth. Crying out, my hands reach for his bald head as I'm granted another growl that vibrates my entire body.

My legs start to shake as I feel my climax getting close, his mouth playing my body like a well-tuned instrument. The second he inserts two of his fingers, I squirm at the sudden fullness. He's spreading me open, trying to get my tight channel to relax. Before I have time to get used to the two he's using, he takes them out and replaces them with his tongue, plunging it in and out of me before he pushes three of his thick fingers deep into my wet heat.

There must be something in his saliva, because three of his fingers are wider than any human man's dick I've ever seen. Yet I feel nothing but delicious pressure from his wide digits that he's pumping in and out of me while sucking on my little pearl. Just as I'm about to reach my peak, he yanks his fingers out of me, making me whine in displeasure.

I was so close!

Before I can bite his head off for denying me my orgasm, he lifts his head and spits on his hand before carefully pushing four digits into my weeping folds and attacking my clit with renewed vigor. It doesn't take long before I'm eagerly chasing all four of

his fingers, humping them, desperate to come.

White hot, overwhelming bliss builds with every thrust of his hand. It washes over me like a tidal wave giving no warning, and when the pressure releases, I scream out, shuddering in bliss, as my body trembles beneath his talented fingers.

“ So very wet for me Starshine . Now let me prepare you so that we can forever seal our heartbond and if the gods will it, our life force.”

“ Sweetness , ain’t no amount of goop or lube in the world going to prepare me for that thing you’re packing down there, but I’m ready to take one for the team.”

“ Luckily for you, my salvia and self-lube was created to help me give you nothing but pleasure. The taste of your desire has taken over my senses, and I am fighting my own urges in order to slow down.”

I can feel his lavish attention slowly building my body back up. “ Please ... Slavic , I need you.” His voice floats around me with a mixture of raw lust and tenderness.

“ You are ready for me, little one?”

My hands reach for any and all parts of him as I try to draw him closer. I’m so empty and I need him to fill me up. My pussy is gaping after the stretching he just gave me and nothing, but his cock is going to satisfy me now. The moment he takes that curved monster in his hands I almost panic, even as my lust makes me desperate for it. His eyes watch me as he lathers my folds in some sort of viscous fluid that feels hot against my delicate skin.

“ Look at me, Ruby . I want you to watch me claim you. Watch as your body accepts mine like the gods designed you to.”

He positions himself at my entrance and with a smirk on his face, presses against me gently. “ Relax for me; we will take it slowly. In time, your body will become accustomed to mine.”

“ Walking bowlegged for eternity is a sure fire sign it finally happened.”

Smiling , he pushes forward with a slow, steady motion and I feel my body push back for just a moment before it accepts his tapered head. Pulling back some, he thrusts again, going a little deeper each time, keeping his eyes glued to my face to make sure I feel nothing but pleasure at his touch. I’m biting my lip as he stretches me more and more each time. His fingers are nothing compared to the substantial girth of his throbbing rod. The delicious friction of those little nodules only seems to heighten the sensation of him being inside of me.

Finally , he’s fully seated within my tiny body. Looking down, I can see a slight bulge in my lower abdomen where he’s lodged deep inside me. Easing his hips back, he withdraws before gradually pushing back into me. His steady rhythm makes me moan in pleasure. At some point we both become lost in the feelings, our bodies move in sync as each increasingly savage thrust sends pleasure unlike anything I’ve ever felt before rippling throughout my body.

I cling to his massive arms; my nails dig into them as we both climb higher. The sound of our bodies coming together bounces off the walls in this room, as the smell of sex permeates the air and all of it heightens my own desires. Suddenly , we both reach our peak together and it’s so overwhelming the room spins. Sensations rip through my body as a climax sweeps over me, along with something far more fulfilling than any physical pleasure. It feels like two lost pieces finally coming together, just as they were always meant to be. Slavic gathers me in his arms, cradling me while our still connected bodies cool down.

“ Ok , there’s no way I’m going to be able to keep all that to myself, so do you have a

problem with me kissing and telling? Remind me to thank all those who came before me, because shit, damn, hell, that was intense big guy.”

The feeling of his arms hugging me tight as he laughs is the last thing I remember before drifting off to sleep.

### Chapter Twenty-Six

#### SLAVIC

I never allowed myself to dream of a mate, and if this is not real, I pray that no one disturbs me from my slumber. Not wanting to wake Ruby when I brought us back to our chambers, I didn't turn the lights on, so I'm not sure when this appeared.

In amazement, my fingers trace the delicate, inky black collar that now surrounds her tiny neck. But instead of it covering her shoulders like mine, hers narrows down to a point between her luscious breasts. I have never seen anything as beautiful as her, while she lays here next to me. The lights from the stars reflecting off her bright hair, highlight the dark speckles on her skin.

Reluctantly , I cover her up when I see her shiver slightly and just allow myself a moment to reflect on all the events leading up to this moment. The oddest part is realizing that this is what has been missing all along. What I was searching for all this time was a companion. This intimacy of lying together, of having someone to laugh with, to discuss all of life's ups and downs, is so much more than the need for sexual gratification. Our bodies will eventually mature and with age, libido lessens, so you need to have something to fall back upon that supersedes the desire for one's mate.

My body just felt more pleasure than ever before, but my mind and soul now feel complete. It's like a piece of me was missing until the moment I saw her eyes peering up over that nest. For so long, this ship and my brothers have always been the most important thing to me. Now I feel torn, I want to treasure her, worship the ground she walks on, take the time to show her what a heartmate really is. I want what my life



givers had and more. Wrapped up in my own thoughts, I do not notice the dark brown eyes staring up at me until a small finger traces my bottom lip.

“ You know, it’s not good for my ego when I wake up to a man frowning after the evening we had. Whatcha thinking about?”

“ You , ... this, ... and everything else.” I trace the dark collar going down her throat, a smirk on my face when I realize the whole world will see my mark upon her.

“ Ohhh , wow, ... pop up accessories. It looks like we have his and her shirts now. Did you know this could happen? Should I be worried? You didn’t say anything about pop up tattoos.”

“ It vaguely crossed my mind. If we had been the same species, your collar would have appeared at the same time mine did. However , it is widely known that humans are compatible with multiple races. This is a blessing bestowed upon us from the God of Ruk , as it’s even a rarity within my own race. I do not know what I have done to deserve such favors, but I will be forever grateful.”

I watch as she rubs her fingers across it, then shrugs her shoulders. “ A blessing from your god? I believe we will have to revisit that conversation in the future. Does it look good? I can’t see all of it without a mirror.”

“ It’s stunning.”

“ Wait a minute, how’d we get back here? The last thing I remember is us doing the dirty, then passing out because you pummeled me with that bat you’re packing around.”

“ After I caught my breath, I brought us back here. There were no comforts available for you in that part of the ship.”

“ The walk of shame for all to see, huh?”

“ I made sure the halls were empty.”

“ So , besides hiding in this room and fornicating until we collapse, what’s next on the agenda? I’ve never been one to sit around idle.”

“ I told Bikar to head toward Deapra . Even with the hyperdrive operating properly now, it will still take a few rotations to get there, but there is something I would like to show you. Grab something comfortable to wear and meet me at the helm. I need to check in with Bikar and Falon . Murgul has been exceptionally quiet these last risings, and that is always something to be concerned about.”

“ That’s fine, go do your thing, but I’m starving.”

“ We will stop by the dining chamber and grab some sustenance. Do not look at me like that. It is taking all my willpower not to ravish you as you lie here naked, ready to be worshiped.”

“ I’m not against that idea.”

“ You are small, and I will not damage you rutting like a wild animal. There are already bruises on your hips and inner thighs. The last thing I ever want is for my hands to damage you, so we must be more careful in the future. We have an eternity together for me to learn every inch and count every mark that dances upon your skin. There is no reason for me to push your newly healed body when the anticipation is as much fun as the act.”

She glances down at her hip, then smiles up at me. “ Oh , these little things are just love marks, sweet thing. It appears that I prefer my men grouchy, with big hands, and a caring heart. Go on and do your thing. I’m gonna use that cleanser thing real fast,

then I'll head that way."

It takes all of my willpower to turn away from her and get up, but Bikar has commed several times and I know I have been neglecting my duties lately. A sharp whistle has me looking back at her as I get out of the sleeping platform.

" Ohhh , it's all good, ... just admiring that ass again."

The smile on her face as she stretches makes my hearts hit my chest. I thought I knew what love was supposed to be, but it seems I had no clue the magnitude nor the depths of feelings it really represented ... until her.

### Chapter Twenty-Seven

#### RUBY

I wait until Slavic heads out of the room before crawling out of the bed, my body sore in all the right places. Shaking out my legs as I stretch, my inner thighs complain slightly, and I smile, thinking the joke about walking bowlegged just might come true.

Walking into the weird alien bathroom, I step up onto the stool that magically appeared after I asked for it and stare at the dark marks on my skin. Rubbing my fingers across my neck, you'd never know I wasn't born with this mark, as it seems to be imbedded within my skin. Instead of it being huge like Slavic's, it's daintier. Just follows the outline of my collarbones before merging between my breasts.

“My sister is going to flip out when she sees this.”

Not being much of a morning person, I walk into the strange, steamy shower and stand there. Letting my body soak up the heat before washing all, and I do mean all, of our combined funk off. Flipping it off, I step out to dry myself; my mind strangely quiet, all things considered. Wrapping the towel around me, I step through the bedroom and into Slavic's closet. Expecting to see the mess that was in there the last time, I'm shocked to find all of my stuff hung up neatly on one side, and everything else put in its place.

“He's not only a monster in bed but can clean and do laundry. Keeper if there ever was one.”

Grabbing the first thing I see; I slide the gown on before returning to the mirror to do something with all this hair. Running my fingers through it until it's untangled, I start picking up bottles until I find something close to a leave in conditioner. Once I've applied it, I quickly braid it over my shoulder, then walk out the door, only to find Slavic coming toward me with a huge tray in his hands.

“ What way you headed good lookin? You want some company?”

He smiles again and I notice he's doing that a lot more lately. He bends down, kissing the top of my head while managing the tray. “ You look lovely, Starshine . Come , I want to show you something.”

“ Do you need some help with that?”

“ We are not going far.”

To my surprise, we only walk two doors down before he skims his palm over the door scanner, unlocking it so it silently slides open. The lights are dim, but it's easy to see it's a very small space with nothing inside it but a large chair.

“ If we're going to do the dirty in here, we'll need to get creative.” When the door slides closed behind him, the room brightens and suddenly we are surrounded by a landscape. “ Awesome , what is this?”

“ It's a hologram simulator room. Right now, it is set to my preferences, but we can change or add anything you would like.”

For a few minutes, I just sit there watching the entire room change from one scene to the next. “ The things it's showing, are they real places?”

“ Yes , the one there now is of my home planet, Uzrul . Every so many ticks, it

changes to a different location throughout the known galaxy. Falon installed this quite some time ago, as we were all getting what they call space sickness. We are a race born and raised planetside and the confines of this ship, including the intense darkness of space was negatively affecting us. Some of these are so realistic you can feel the breeze and smell the air projected on the screens in the walls. This was the only open area on the Zenith that was not being used, so that is why it is so small. Sit , we will eat and admire the beauty around us.”

“ This is really cool. I never dreamed that things like this would’ve been needed, but it makes perfect sense now that you explained it.” Sitting down, I help Slavic maneuver the tray until he settles beside me in the chair. Scooting closer I glance down at the food. “ Is that a piece of pizza?”

“ I am not sure. Falon acquired the materials the replicator needed to provide your species with its preferred sustenance.”

“ Let’s just see.” I moan out as the not-pizza melts in my mouth.

“ Does this mean it is acceptable? I know you and the others have not been consuming much.”

“ Food has been the least of my concerns since all this happened. The little bar things you gave me tasted like dirt but quickly filled me up, so they were fine. I had already accepted that I wasn’t ever going to have another good meal, but you’ve redeemed yourself with something that looks like pizza but tastes like chicken. I’m sure if you show me this food thing, with a little bit of tweaking I could come up with all kinds of goodies. Ohh , look at this one. Now I wouldn’t mind lying on that beach.”

“ That is Targres Four . It is a vacation moon on the other side of the universe. The only reason we know of it or have these images, is the ship that Falon bought this from was a Banhan cruiser. It was being stripped piece by piece of its parts, but that

race patrolled everywhere before their ship was destroyed.

“ There are so many different species out here. I know that’s normal for you, but not where I come from. STOP !”, I yell out when what appears to be the redwoods of California scroll across the screen.

“ Is this, ... or was this your world? I have often wondered where this was when it flashed upon screen. This sector has nothing like it, and it is unlabeled.”

“ I believe it is. Personally , I was never able to visit that specific area, but I always wanted to. It’s crazy to think about it all being gone now. Even though you’ve told me Earth was destroyed, that’s more unbelievable than me being here with you right now. How does an entire world just go away?”

“ All I know is rumors that say ... it was a planet destroying storm. I will request Bikar to investigate this further if you would like me too. I am sorry that anything that beautiful is now gone. The planet had to be magical in order to have created you and the others of your kind. I am sure there are many things that you will miss. You have not really spoken much of yourself up until now. I am not prying, just curious.”

“ I was always the one with impossible dreams and no real roots anywhere. As a young girl, I was determined to forge my own dreams, yet despite moving, changing jobs, and dating, I never found them. Then life changed three-sixty for me. One day, I’m on the run trying to save my sister, giving up all I’d ever worked for without a second thought, in order to keep her safe. Then we’re lying down in bed after traveling for days, believing we’re finally safe and waking up in a cage surrounded by snakes. Just when I thought all hope was lost, in you stroll, ... growls and all. Was I terrified? Damn straight! Both mentally and physically I was done, and I had no more to give at that point. Now just days later, I find that I don’t ever want to wake up anywhere else, but in your arms. It’s strange how quickly things can change and how little it takes to adapt when you have to.”

Looking up at him, I can see the concern in his eyes. “ Slavic , this might sound cold, or unfeeling, but the moment I ... we were taken, ... that world died to me. But if I dwell on it anymore, I’ll go crazy.”

“ There used to be people that would preach the end of the world every time a disaster, or something unspeakable happened back home. I would get caught up in the turmoil, the news, and all the chaos, just like everyone else. Until I lost mom, that’s the day I realized when the world truly ends, it wasn’t just because I’d lost her. That was painful enough, because in that moment it all stopped for her. The second you take your last breath is the end of everything for you. That way of life and world ended for me the moment I woke up in that damn cage, staring at a snake man. I still have no idea how they were able to get to us in that cave. I mean, we were underground for heaven’s sakes.”

Slavic pauses as he lifts another piece of dark meat off the tray. “ The Jega’s home planet is mostly rock, and they seem to be able to compress their bodies down to incredibly small sizes. You thought you were safe, but instead it was in an easy location for them to infiltrate.”

“ Well , that explains that, then.” I watch as Slavic rubs his chest. “ Are you feeling alright? That’s the second time I’ve seen you do that since we’ve been in here.”

“ It is the heartbond. I am feeling some of your emotions.”

“ What ?”

“ It is common for our kind, but it may be different for you. In time, I will feel most of what you do.”

“ Ahh damn, you poor thing. Hell honey, half the time I don’t know what I’m feeling. I’d hate to shackle you with human female hormones.”



“ This is not one sided you know. At some point you will get to feel ... what do you call it; all my grumpiness.”

“ Yeah , that won't be so bad. There are ways to distract you and your super dick down there. Speaking of your accessories, this is a perfect time to tell me how you got that tan line.”

“ You already know that it was the material we were mining that changed the color of my skin, but the reason why my butt and cock were not affected is the breechcloth we all wore. The further down we went in the mines, the hotter it became. I had to learn to walk in boots all over again after we were in space for a while. My skin had toughened up in those conditions and even though the color has faded through the orbital notations, I do not believe I will ever return to the color of my birth. At one time, I had a mane as full and dark as Einars , but the constant rubbing of the ceiling killed the follicles, leaving me as I am now.”

“ Yes , nothing but yumminess all in one big package. I think that trouser snake of yours is being smothered, those pants you have on must be cutting his circulation completely off, as he seems to want to come out and play.”

“ I cannot help it. This area is small, and your smell has wrapped itself around me, to the point all I can think about is you naked.”

For a second, I really look at Slavic . Why wouldn't I want someone who has my best interests at heart? Someone I can lean on when I'm an emotional basket case. He asks nothing of me but to be myself. How wonderful is that in the scheme of things? Life may not have dealt me the cards I thought I wanted, but instead it gave me the hand I needed ... him.

He puts the tray down on the floor before sliding closer. “ Where did you go there for a moment little Starshine ?” His long fingers tug on my braid playfully.

“ Ohh , do you like to jerk on things, big guy?”

“ You are changing the subject.”

“ Caught on to that, huh? Looks like I’m going to have to put my poker face back in place, or you’ll know all my secrets.” Grinning mischievously, I trace his massive bulge with my fingers, gently rubbing the top of his shaft as it continues to grow out the top of his pants.

“ Behave . Like you said earlier, there is little room in here for any wild activities.”

“ Oh , I don’t know ... I think we could probably work something out if you sit real still. Now how does this clasp work on your fancy pants?” That’s all the warning I give him before sliding my hand under the fastenings. Once loose, I grab his shaft firmly in my hand, realizing it only circles halfway around it. With my touch, he arches off the chair before he seizes me, stretching me across his chest as he brings his mouth to mine.

“ You were warned, little mate.”

“ I’ve never been good at following the rules.”

Slavic grasps the back of my head, pulling my lips to his, and devouring me like a male starved. The entire time his mouth ravages mine, my hand never stops working his shaft as his naughty tongue plunders my mouth. He moans, the sound guttural, as my hand pumps him up and down vigorously. The motion is made easy because of his natural lubrication coating his shaft. Even though this all started as me teasing him, I can feel the slick coating my inner thighs, my body readying itself for the thick invasion I know is to come. The thought makes me quiver in anticipation.

“ How did I ever come to deserve you?”, he whispers before pulling me away from

him slightly. Taking a claw, he cuts through the flimsy little straps holding up the gown I'd slid on earlier. The slinky material flows down, pooling around my hips, leaving my upper body bare to his lustful gaze.

My head tilts back on its own and my hand stops its ministrations as he envelops my nipple within the hot confines of his mouth. Pulling me closer to him, my hand leaves his shaft completely.

“ I will never get enough of these delicious little morsels. I am planning to sample all of you, my little human. You have pushed me to the point of no return with your luscious body. If you want me to stop, you had better tell me now.”

He teasingly slides his hands down my legs, gathering the hem of my dress up as he goes. And just as I think he's going to grasp my hips to position me over his weeping erection, I hear a smug snicker as I'm thrown over his shoulder instead. The damn male doesn't even stop to tuck that monster of his back in his pants. He just walks out of the room with me laughing as I beat his ass from where I'm draped unceremoniously over his shoulder, my head hanging upside down.

Slavic isn't two steps out the door when I hear, “ Sis ?”

Pushing myself up, I wave at Rowan who's standing calmly by Einar only a few feet away, with a frown on her face. “ Oh , Hi ! Don't mind us, just a little fornicating in the hallways. I love ya, Sis ! You're looking much better.”

Slipping my fingers down between the gap of his pants and skin, I pinch Slavic's fine ass, only for him to swat mine back playfully. Right before he turns into the bedroom, I see Rowan smile at me and I grin at her in return, just as the door is closing behind us.

### Chapter Twenty-Eight

#### SLAVIC

Ruby's laughter follows us into the room. I can feel the heat of her core teasing me through what's left of her dress, where she is draped over my shoulder. Throwing her on the bed, my eyes commit the image of her lying spread out, half naked on my sleeping platform to memory for me to cherish always. Bending down, my hands move across her body in a whisper soft caress. Taking care to skim her skin gently, lest I leave more marks upon her. Smiling to myself, I feel her body tremble slightly under my teasing touches. Pulling her close, I kiss her softly at first, my tongue playfully dueling with hers. She has quickly become my new obsession, as I roll my tongue across hers in a deep caress as my ardor deepens.

Before she can protest, I take a claw and rip the rest of her pretty gown off until it lies around her in tattered pieces, like she is a present I have just unwrapped for me and me alone. Her full breasts with their hard, pale pink nipples are only inches away from my face. Reaching out with my long tongue, I flick one turgid peak while my fingers pluck the other one.

Ruby lets out a lurid moan as she squirms beneath me. Easing myself down, I lower myself beside her, partially laying across her nubile body. Slowly, I kiss my way down from between her breasts to her navel. Scattering light kisses all around her stomach, I rub the palm of my rough hand over my shaft, hissing at the friction I am forcing on myself. Her pleasure will always come before mine.

My hands eagerly look for the last clasp that is tenuously holding my pants on.

Releasing it, I free myself of the garment and run my hands up and down her long, smooth legs. My fingers caress her in tantalizing swirls as my lips kiss up and down her thighs. Without warning, I latch onto her swollen pleasure button and groan in satisfaction when she moans. Both of her hands dart down and clutch the skin on my hairless scalp, fingers digging into my skin as her hips arch when I insert two thick fingers into her weeping slit. Sliding down the side of the sleeping platform, I lower myself to the floor, pulling her legs up and over my shoulders, one plush thigh on either side of my head, opening her completely to do with as I so choose. Glancing up at her flushed face, I lewdly lick my mouth before refocusing on her glistening lips that beckon to me.

Licking her from button to arse, I press my hand to her stomach, forcing her twisting hips into the platform so she cannot escape the pleasure I am giving her. The sounds she is making spur me on, even as her hips writhe as if she's too sensitive to handle me going at her like a male starving for his last meal. I am utterly possessed by her. Inserting a third finger, I use my tongue to tease her nub as her climax builds. Suddenly, I feel her inner walls begin to flutter around my fingers. In response, I gently bite down on her pearl. The hint of pain from my sharp teeth along with the sensation of my tongue flicking her ever so slightly, is the push she needs to fall over the edge. Ruby arches, screaming my name as she climaxes hard.

Grinning in satisfaction, I nip the inside of her thigh and give her a second to catch her breath. Grasping her hips, I rub my cock against her pleasure button as she tries to squirm away from me, but I need to make sure I get as much of my lubricant on her tender folds as I can. I refuse to allow her fragile body to tear because I was too impatient to properly prepare her to receive my massive cock. Lining myself up with her now dripping sex, I rub myself up and down as she grips my arms, trying to use her legs to pull me closer.

“Don't tease me, Slavic. I need you.”

Positioning the thick head of my cock at her weeping entrance, I push in slowly. She

is wet, but I am a big male and she has to be tender from the rising before. I rock back and forth, each movement seating me deeper inside her. I grit my teeth at the hot clutch of her body. She is so tight it is borderline painful, but the best kind of pain a male can experience. Fracking my mate is a mind-blowing experience.

With one last thrust, I am fully seated deep within her precious body. Pausing , I allow her to adjust to being full of my member. A slight wiggle of her hips along with a sultry look tells me she is ready. Reaching between us, I flick her nub and I feel her inner walls tighten even more around me. Pulling my hips back, I withdraw until the tip is all that remains in my mate before I slam back inside her with one hard snap of my hips. I ignore Ruby's cries, asking for me to hurry, as I keep up my slow, torturous pace. It is not long until her wet heat begins to ripple around my hardness, pulling me along with her as my release sneaks up on me. I grab her hips tightly, as I viciously pump into my mate, forcing every bit of seed I have to bathe the entrance to her womb as she shrieks out her completion underneath me.

My arms are shaking from the intensity of what I am feeling all at once. But there is no missing the small grin on Ruby's face as she pulls me down on top of her, humming as my substantial weight rests against her much smaller form. Both of our bodies are damp with the exertion, and we are panting, trying to catch our breath after our passion for each other reached its ultimate culmination.

“ I am too heavy little one; I will smash you.”

“ Shush , just let me hold you while the world is quiet.”

The contentment and love I suddenly feel through our heartbond has tears forming in my eyes. Ruby quickly falls to sleep in my arms and I hold still, willing my erection to deflate so that I can tend to her while she rests. Easing my cock from her sweet warmth, I head toward the refreshing chamber on silent feet to retrieve a cleansing cloth. She mumbles a few times as I wipe away the evidence of our love on her thighs. Restless , but not willing to leave her, I stand up gazing at her peaceful form

lying there and I have never felt more complete.

The ship shakes slightly under my feet, and I turn, looking out the viewer and noticing that we have come out of hyperdrive. A series of planets come into view as the ship slows its course. I jerk when pale, thin arms circle around me from behind. Gently , I pull her in front of me and back against my chest. My arms drape casually around her naked stomach as we stare out the viewer together.

“ I didn’t mean to wake you.”

“ I could feel your restlessness, and that bed is too big without you in it. Where are we?”

“ One of these planets is, Deapra .”

“ Are you worried about what you’ll find when we get there?”

“ I am scared to accept Kallen’s words that my Mam is alive, and I will not allow myself to believe until I see her and the youngling for myself. Regardless , the future is uncertain for us, either way.”

“ I understand Slavic , more than you realize.”

“ I love you, my Starshine , and as long as we are together, we will find a path forward.”

“ Sounds like a date. I love you too, my big grouch.”

The End