



Whispers of the Void

(Voidborn Chronicles #1)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: High above the surface of the galactic capital of Calindrea orbits Oculus Nine. Housed within its glass walls are the knowledge and secrets of those who call the galaxy home. Controlled by the Omnium Order, a secretive sect of females from all species, outsiders are not welcome. What goes in does not go out.

Given to the Eye as a child, Neev Kaesong has dedicated her life to knowledge and found her talents. The lone human raised by the women of the order, she's walked the fine line between loneliness and contentment. Her peace is shattered when she's violently abducted from her quarters one night.

Commander Raiz Asterean trusts no one aside from those under his command. When rumblings of a new power begin to stir in the dark corners of his planet he has no choice but to take Neev in defiance of the Eye. She's the only one who can translate the ancient text that can give Raiz the knowledge to change and defy the rituals of his planet.

With each passing day Raiz begins to realize that Neev isn't who he thought she was. She's not even who she thought she was.

Neither of them are ready for the answers they find.

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CHAPTER 1

NEEV

* * *

Dust motes dance in the air around me, illuminated by the last rays of light from the sun at the center of the Esos system as Oculus Nine orbits Calindrea. I gently close the ancient tome in front of me and slip it into its protective film and hand it back to the librarian who stands sentry at the door of my office.

“Good night, Sister Junis.” I close the door quietly behind me and follow her back to the front of the library.

“Sleep well, Sister Neev.” She slips quietly back to her post while I walk out onto the main concourse.

A mischievous grin stretches across Torre’s face as I fall in step beside her. My sometimes lover and closest friend in the galaxy bumps her shoulder against mine. “Want to go down to the surface with me tonight?”

I gaze at her out the side of my eyes. “I haven’t been granted leave since the last time we went down there.” And she nearly started a brawl with a band of Calindrean patrols.

She huffs, her golden skin rippling with annoyance. “They deserved every bit of my ire. Besides, you don’t need leave when I’m with you.”

I consider the fun and trouble we could get in for a moment. A reprieve from the mundane daily routine I've found myself in. At the age of twenty-two, I am technically allowed to come and go as I please had I not been taken into custody briefly.

Unfortunately, a dull ache has already started building behind my eyes. Even if I wanted to go with her, with a headache beginning to take root, I know I can't.

"Maybe another time." I reach down and squeeze her hand, softening the rejection I know she'll feel. "I spent half a rotation translating ancient Zunarian into Universal Standard. I need dinner and a long night of sleep."

She grimaces at the mention of my job. As a member of Oculoun Guard, she prefers physical activity to sitting surrounded by texts all day. It's a wonder we became as close as we are when we couldn't be more different.

Her booted feet tap against the bridge linking the living quarters to the rest of the station. The juxtaposition of her fitted pants and the weapons hanging from the belt around her slim waist next to the flowing dress and silent slippers of my uniform serves as a physical manifestation of our differences.

"If you won't go down to the surface with me, I could come back to your quarters after my shift." Her voice takes on a husky purr. "It's been too long since we've shared a bed."

"As much as I'm sure we'd both thoroughly enjoy that, I'm not feeling well. I'd like to just eat dinner, take a relaxing bath, and go to sleep." I give her a wry smile. "I'm sure you can find someone's bed to slip into if you need release."

Her species isn't monogamous, which is fine by me. I've never been interested in being tied to another. I often wonder if I'd feel differently if I wasn't the only human

on the station. Would being around my own species change things?

I have no idea what to do. I was dropped off here by my father after my mother died in childbirth. All he said was that he was a merchant and that was no life for a child. He left nothing with me, aside from a name, and then disappeared into the vacuum of space.

There's always been a gnawing need to know where I'm from, to have some idea of the family I have left out there somewhere in the galaxy. Some days it hits me harder than others, the urge to leave this place and find my history. But inevitably I just continue to find myself too comfortable in my routine.

Then a new text will come in, the challenge of translating it, of adding more knowledge of the galaxy to our library is too great to walk away from. I'll lose myself to the task and forget the ennui.

Torre walks me right to my door and cups my cheek. Her deep brown eyes lock onto mine as I look back at her. I rise on my toes and press a light kiss against her bronze-tinted lips to soften the rejection I see swimming in her eyes.

"Be safe, wherever you end up tonight. Don't do anything I wouldn't do."

She laughs. "Unlikely." She lightly taps on the communicator pinned to the shoulder of her uniform. "I'm only a call away if you change your mind."

"Good night," I say with a smile as my front door slides open with gentle hiss.

My body relaxes as soon as the doors close behind me, the tension of the day melting away with the warmth of my personal space. All the quarters are identical, regardless of what your position on Oculus is. An open living space with a small kitchenette for those who prefer to dine alone instead of in the large dining hall at the center of the

station. Then a modest bedroom and bathroom. Each space is designed for the comforts and needs of your species.

Thankfully my bathroom has both a shower and bathtub. I've added candles and bath salts with exotic scents from around the galaxy to every spare corner. A few plants hang from the ceiling, their growth encouraged by the humidity from my frequent hot showers and baths.

I actually have plants all over my quarters. It's nice to feel like I'm not floating in space, even if it only takes one look out of my window to be reminded. I've spent hours down on the surface of Calindrea looking for rugs and blankets to bring a soft and cozy aesthetic into my space.

I pull my robe off and hang it beside my door as the light sensors activate and the home system comes online. I make my selection for dinner and walk into the bedroom to shower while I wait for it. My feet ache as I take off my slippers and set them inside my small closet.

Steam immediately fills the bathroom as I turn on the shower and disrobe. I toss my clothes into the laundry shoot and step under the hot spray. The floral scent of the soap Torre gave me for my birthday instantly relaxes me. My headache lessens just a bit, although I know without my medication it'll only get worse.

By the time I finish in the shower and dry off, my dinner is waiting in the warming drawer. I take my dinner to the small table set up by the windows. The lights of Calindrea sparkle like millions of jewels covering the surface of the planet. It's always beautiful, but at times I wish I had done more traveling.

There's always time for that though, I guess. I pick up the small cup with my medication and supplements and knock the pills back, swallowing them with several large gulps of water. A transport leaves from the docking station heading down to the

surface, and I smile to myself thinking about Torre going down there for a night of raucous fun.

She deserves it. We've been on the station for the same amount of time, although she was about ten years older than me when her parents sent her for schooling and discipline. Little did they know that she'd grow to love it so much she'd release her citizenship to her home planet in lieu of becoming an Oculoun Order guard.

After eating and cleaning my dishes, I sit down in front of the entertainment screen in my living room. Scrolling through an endless library of media from Earth, I finally settle on a nature documentary. Being in a star system so far from Earth means I'll likely never see the planet of my origin with my own eyes. This is the best I can do.

I lose myself to hours of footage about the planet's vast oceans and the centuries it took to right all the wrongs humanity wrought on the ecosystem. Sometimes I wish Calindrea had an ocean. What would it be like to walk along a sandy shore? Would the sound of waves crashing on rocks lull me to sleep at night? Perhaps someday I'll find the answers, just not any time soon.

I watch until I can barely keep my eyes open and then turn off all the lights and walk into my bedroom. Once I've brushed my teeth and put my hair in a loose plait, I roll out my meditation mat with the intention of taking ten minutes for some quiet reflection. But as I sit, I find it difficult to silence my brain. Whispered thoughts echo in the back of my mind.

The older I get the more common this occurrence has become. It's unsettling when it happens because I don't know what the thoughts are, it's like a scratch inside my skull that I can never itch. With a deep sigh, I push to my feet and set my mat aside for the morning. Maybe I just need a good night of sleep.

* * *

The sound of glass shattering jolts me from my sleep. I blink bleary, sleep-ridden eyes as I try to see what's going on. Three huge figures move quickly through my room, two coming toward me, and one rifling through my belongings.

"Take whatever you want," I cry out, voice wobbling. "There's not much, but I won't stop you."

The one closest to me lunges, and while I try to roll out of their grasp, I'm nowhere near fast enough. They move with incredible speed and stealth. I can't see a single glimpse of their flesh or features. Every inch of them is covered in black clothing and large helmets.

I open my mouth to scream, but one of them slams their hand over my mouth. It's a huge hand. I try to bite it, but the glove is too thick. So I begin to thrash underneath the intruder as they lift me into their arms.

My instinct to fight only becomes stronger as I see where he's carrying me. Toward the window that's broken. There's no screaming wind or suction out into space, though, and that's when I see it. A small transport ship sits attached to my apartment.

They're taking me away.

My thrashing becomes even more intense as I fight for my life. My elbow smacks into the helmet of whoever is carrying me. They nearly drop me when I land a kick to their thigh.

I feel a hard pressure on my neck just below my ear, and everything goes black.

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CHAPTER 2

RAIZ

* * *

The human female in my arms made an impressive effort to free herself. The fact that I had to use my gift to subdue her says a lot about her will. Especially when she is so slight, barely larger than a child.

The front door to her quarters opens just as I begin running through the tunnel back to our transport. My second, Altis, stays behind firing stun rounds as I run with the human and our pilot on my heels. Vynia runs to the cockpit and begins engaging the engines and pulling our docking tunnel back into the transport.

A cushioned bench will have to do for the human for now. After making sure she won't fall onto the floor, I run back to help provide cover while Altis makes his run and Vynia starts the transport.

Two of the guards appear at the broken window and watch as we fly away. Both of them half-dressed, as if they just heard the alarm and ran from their beds. I wish the high priestess had simply agreed to allow us to bring Neev Kaesong to Zeahiri just long enough to translate one of our ancient texts.

But no.

They refused.

The only way they would have allowed it is if we brought the text to them. Even more insulting is the fact that the text wouldn't have been given back to us. It would have been added to their own vast library.

I can barely restrain my snarl at the thought even as we speed away from Oculus Nine and to my ship hiding behind one of the Calindrean moons. The Order purports to hold the knowledge of the galaxies they're stationed within, but it's hard to trust such a secretive group. Especially one that hoards knowledge like a dragon does riches.

Seeing how quickly the guards came for her, I know any minute now we'll have one of their cruisers tailing us. Once we get to the ship, it won't be a problem, we can make a jump before they'll be able to track us. But in this transport? We're sitting ducks.

Having the girl on board with us should mean they won't fire at us. I'm not worried once we reach my ship, a first class Zeahirian warship is not an easy mark. As soon as we take off, I walk back up to the front of the transport and stand behind Vynia.

"Two cruisers just exited Oculus Nine heading right for us." She flips a few switches while I grab one of the bars and brace my body for evasive maneuvers. "Is the human secured?"

"Yes. Strapped to the bench. Do whatever you need to lose them."

Altis straps himself in and grabs the controls for the weapons array. "Should I fire on them?"

"Just warning shots."

He huffs in response. "Theirs won't be warning shots."

“They won’t risk injuring one of their own.”

Just as the words leave my lips the transport rocks with an impact. I’m thrown sideways, my hip crashing into a metal rack, but my grip on the handle keeps me upright. Alarms blare and smoke fills the cabin.

“Warning shots, huh?” Altis scoffs.

“They must not realize we have Kaesong.” I turn from the twins at the front of the transport, my trust in their ability to get us safely back on board the ship never faltering.

The impact must have sent the human’s body slamming into the wall. Red blood is dripping from her temple as her body lies limp. I drop to my knees and put my hand over her chest, looking for her life organ. It beats steadily beneath my palm. Heat seeps through her thin night clothes and into my flesh. My fangs extend as the sweet smell of her blood travels through my nose. Long dormant parts of me begin to awaken at the scent.

With another snarl I stand and open a storage compartment, looking for something to put over the cut for now. I don’t need this distracting the entire crew. I find a healing patch and seal it over the cut, covering as much of her blood as I can, and ignore the singing in my veins.

Vynia performs another evasive maneuver, and I brace myself over the female, keeping her from jostling anymore. She’s so much smaller than us that, while the restraints keep her from rolling off the bench, she still moves too much to be considered secure.

I listen as the twins bicker back and forth, Altis firing weapons and Vynia evading them, while we approach the ship. Tapping the communicator on my shoulder, I let

my third, Mydax, know we're coming in fast and currently being tailed. He informs me they're on standby with the transport bay doors open for us already.

As soon as we're in sight, I unbuckle the human and lift her into my arms again. Hyva, our chief medical officer, will be waiting to take her from me. I trust him to make sure she's stable and to heal her injuries.

As soon as I hear the engines power off the transport, I'm releasing the hatch and running down the ramp. Hyva meets me just as the doors to the hall open, a stretcher floating behind him.

"I had to induce her sleep. The cut on her head is from a skirmish. Otherwise, she should be okay," I call over my shoulder, running toward the bridge.

The twins make space for me as we take the stairs, our footsteps echoing off the metal stairs. I take my helmet off and toss it beside my chair. My fingers fly over the controls on my left as I open a channel up to Oculus Nine.

After a few seconds the image of Sister Andira, high priestess of the Order, flashes onto the screen in front of me. Her face is mostly obscured by the pale blue robe she wears, but I can see her aged, pink skin peeking through.

"Call off your attack, Sister." A jolt rocks through my ship, hardening my features. "I have one of yours on board."

"I know." Her voice is nothing but steel. "Bring her back. Now."

"No."

"You don't understand, Sister Neev can't be?—"

“You don’t understand. No harm will come to her. I just need her to read the text.”

“Bring the text here, fool.” She stands, her wrinkled hand shaking with effort. “She cannot leave the station. She’s a danger?—”

I slam my fingers down on the button that cuts the communication channel. Why won’t these stubborn females just listen without threatening? I have one of their most skilled translators in my possession, and they’re firing at us without concern.

Targeted blasts hit our shields and warning lights flicker across the bridge. Another round hits us, alarms sounding now.

“Commander?” Altis asks. “Return fire?”

“No.” We didn’t come here to kill. “Vynia, engage jump drive.”

“Sir.” She fires up the energy core. “Thirty seconds to jump.”

We take another round of fire. My hands grip the armrests of my chair. They’re hitting us with their strongest weaponry. What the hells are they thinking?

“Twenty seconds to jump.” Vynia’s voice remains collected, even as the ship rocks with another impact. “Ten.”

Everyone checks their harness as the lights flash to green throughout the ship signaling a jump. Just as the shields drop to allow the jump, we’re hit by another round. Their weapons aren’t strong enough to seriously damage the ship, so I’m not concerned.

One second we’re in the Esos system, and the next we’re in the Diadem system. The dual stars at the center shine brightly into the bridge, forcing all of us to shield our

eyes from their intensity. We all relax as the solar screens deploy, dimming the light that filters through the screen at the front of the bridge.

“Report.”

“Life support systems at one hundred percent. No injuries,” Mydax calls out.

“Engineering reports minor damage from the blast we took when shields were down,” Vynia says. “We’ll know more soon.”

I pull my harness off and stand. “You have the bridge, Altis.”

He nods and sits in the seat I just vacated. The doors to the lift open, and I step inside. “Med bay,” I command to the ship controls.

The doors slide open to the long corridor that leads down to the bright space where Hyva and his assistants move around, running tests on the human. She’s on a table, her eyes closed, and a blanket pulled up to her shoulders. A monitor shows her life signs, none are flashing which means she’s stable, but that’s the most I can infer.

“Commander.” Hyva doesn’t look up from the tablet in his hand as he scrolls through lines of text at an impressive speed.

“How is she?”

The cut on her temple is closed, but a purple bruise has bloomed across her forehead. I move my hands behind my back, tempering the compulsion to move the lock of hair hiding part of her injury from my sight. My eyes track down her body, watching as her chest rises and falls with relaxed breaths.

“Unconscious but otherwise okay. I’ve never treated a human, so I’m cross

referencing all medical texts to ensure I'm not overlooking anything. Her heart rate is normal, and her oxygen levels are good." He finally looks up at me. "You used your gift to put her to sleep? How did she receive her head injury?"

"Yes. I strapped her to the bench seat in the transport, but even with the strap tightened all the way, she still hit the side of the ship when we took fire."

He sends me a sharp and disapproving look, something not many would even consider doing. "Humans are much more fragile than we are."

"I'm aware." I look away from him and back to the female. "When will she wake?"

"I don't know. That will depend on how she reacts to your power."

Unease swells within me. I loathe the gift I was cursed with. Having the ability to enter another's mind, to bend it to my will, has always left me feeling disgusted. It doesn't stop me from using it when necessary, but it never gets easier.

"I used touch." I frown down at the human. I'm skilled enough to not need to use touch to bend a being to my will, but at that moment I couldn't risk her not responding immediately. Some species are more resistant or have an innate shield against my type of gift. I wasn't sure about her.

"Could be days then. I'll make sure she's given everything she needs to recuperate."

"Inform me as soon as she wakes." I hesitate to give the order, but who knows what her mental state will be when she comes to consciousness. "Restrain her in case she wakes angry."

"Commander." Altis's voice crackles through the communicator on my shoulder. "You're needed in engineering."

“On my way,” I reply, turning to leave med bay without another word.

The red lights that line the corridor brighten marginally as I walk down the hall to this level’s engineering entrance. I walk through the doors as they slide open for me, looking around to see where our chief engineer is. A plume of steam and muttered string of curses comes from the level above me. I cross to the metal staircase and jog up to the catwalk, crossing to where I see Cuna’s legs sticking out of an opened panel in the wall.

“Cuna,” I greet them.

“Commander.” They slide out, their dark eyes locking on mine as they sit up to give me a report. “I have bad news and then really bad news.”

I drag a deep breath in. “Let me hear it.”

“The bad news is that the last blast we took hit the hull when the shields were down, it held, and there’s no structural damage.”

“And the really bad news?”

“I’m not there yet. Several of the jump drives were knocked free from their bindings.” They set their tools down on the counter. “I can’t fix them until I replace their housing, which I have none of.”

The closest trading outpost will take at least ten days to reach without jumping. And it’s on a pleasure planet, which are notoriously unsafe for humans, especially this far out in the galaxy. The species is prized for its delicacy, bodies that are soft and supple. Easy to break.

Frustration swells inside me, my senses becoming unnervingly keen as I fight to stay

grounded. I'm going to need to spend the night sparring, otherwise I'll be no use to anyone. I flex my hands to keep them from fisting.

"Will this slow any other functions down?" I ask.

"No. Everything else is entirely operational."

"Good. Keep it that way. I'll go up to the bridge and enter our course."

* * *

After altering course, I leave the bridge in Mydax's command and drag Altis into the training room with me to spar. We strip down to our training uniform, removing our shoes and all devices until it's just two Zeahiri males about to beat each other bloody.

The best thing about my second in command is that not only does he work well with me, he also knows me like a brother. He grew up in my family's noble home, House Aste, and has known me since he took his first breath a year after my twin and I were born.

His knees bend slightly as he circles me with a wide stance that mirrors my own. I watch as he observes me with keen, dark eyes. He and his twin, Vynia, were both born gift-less. Vynia also was born missing part of her leg. It's a blessing as much as it is a curse. They weren't forced into the Bak'hura, the blood rite that dictates the next leader of the family, but they could never ascend in Zeahiri society, even if they wanted to. Luckily for me, they're happy to serve under my command.

Altis's fist barely misses connecting with my jaw as he takes the first shot. I move forward, my elbow striking out and landing in the center of his chest with a loud smack. His lips curl into a vicious smile, his pointed incisors elongating slightly.

I grunt as his foot catches the back of my knee, knocking me off balance, and I fall to the floor. I'm not down for long, though, as I get ahold of his arm and swing his massive body over mine. Using the momentum from that maneuver, I jump onto my feet and twist his arm into a tight hold for a count of three. I don't release him until he yields.

We go round after round, both of us connecting as much as missing our punches and kicks. Blood runs from the corner of his eye down his cheek as he walks over to the water station. I run my tongue over the cut in my lip, wondering if we should switch to weapons next.

"Don't even think about it." He steps up beside me, gripping his ribs. "I can't take another hit today."

"Scared?" I give him half a smile.

"Smart," he corrects. "What's going on that you feel the need to beat the hell out of me?"

"Stopping for these parts on the pleasure planet is going to be intense. With a human female on board, we'll have to be even more careful than usual."

"Can two of us just take a transport down to the surface to get what Cuna needs?" He pats his face dry with a towel.

"No. The parts are too big for the transport. We'll have to go down and land on the surface."

"Are you going to let the crew out?" He looks at me from the side of his eyes.

"For a twelve-hour leave, yes."

It's been a long time since the crew had down time. They can go gamble, fuck, drink, whatever they need to blow off some steam because when we get home the hardest work will begin.

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CHAPTER 3

NEEV

* * *

Am I dead?

The question flies into my brain as bright light filters through my eyelids. I decide to keep my eyes closed as the memories come crashing back. I was taken from my quarters by three intruders. An alarm from the monitor attached to me alerts someone to my spiked heart rate.

Hushed voices and quiet footsteps approach. Male voices. I'm not on Oculus Nine.

My heart begins to race when I feel a warm hand on my forearm.

"Sister Neev," the unfamiliar voice greets me softly. "It's okay. You're safe. Open your eyes."

Tears gather under my still closed eyelids as I shake my head. "Put me back to sleep," I whisper hoarsely.

"I can't do that." He pulls his hand from my skin. "My name is Hyva Taorin. I'm the chief medical officer on the Ryx 322, a Zeahiri battleship. No harm will come to you."

Zeahiri.

I search my mind for any crumb of knowledge about them. Their planet orbits a red dwarf in the outer band of the galaxy. They're known for being extremely violent with brutal customs dating back millennia.

Gathering all my courage I open my eyes, blinking a few times until he comes into focus. My gaze immediately locks on his dark red eyes. I've met many different people while living on Oculus Nine but rarely have any of them been as intimidating as the male looking down on me. He towers over me, his body broad with muscle that is clear even beneath the fabric of his uniform. His skin is a pale gray with darker stripes of gray wrapping around his neck and the back of his hands.

Because the Zeahiri evolved from the sea.

Their coloring must be a remnant from those days. In fact, two of his fingers look as though they may be partially webbed. I try to sit up, but my arms are restrained at my biceps. My brows slam together as I look from the bands holding me down up to the medic's face.

"Apologies. I was instructed by the commander to keep you restrained."

"Why?" It's not as though I could get anywhere.

He doesn't answer me, just tilts his head slightly and steps away from the bedside just as a bigger, taller male strides in. He's the most striking male I've ever seen. Similar coloring to the medic, except his hair is longer on top, and instead of the deep crimson eyes, his are verdant green. I can't help but wonder if they glow in the dark. A jagged scar runs across his neck, the only imperfection to be found on his imposing form.

I shrink back into the bed; my base instincts recognizing the predator that approaches me. His gaze runs the length of me, as if taking stock of my physical condition. I feel the brush of his eyes as they rove from the tips of my toes up the sheet draped over me all the way to my forehead. His lips flatten into a straight line.

“Sister Neev. I’m Commander Raiz Asterean.” The deep timbre of his voice sends shivers down my spine. “We need your help translating a text.”

I blink in surprise. “I could have done that on Oculus Nine.”

“No. It’s not a text that can be given to the Order.”

Fair enough. “You could have requested my assistance from the high priestess. I could have met you on Calindrea.”

“No.”

“Am I a prisoner?”

“No.”

“I’m free to leave then?” I raise a brow, doing my best to bluff self-assertiveness that I most definitely do not feel.

“No.”

“That’s quite contradictory. Why am I restrained?”

“For your safety.”

“I pose no threat to myself.” I don’t pose a threat to anyone on this ship.

He doesn't wait for the medical officer, just reaches down and presses a button on a console beside the bed. The cuffs immediately release my arms. The medic walks around to the other side of the bed and places a light hand on my shoulder, keeping me from pulling myself into a sitting position.

"Let me help." He presses a button, and the back of the bed rises until I'm in a comfortable seated position.

"Thank you." I incline my head.

"I told Sister Andira that we would return you safely after the text is translated."

"And she approved it?"

He inclines his head.

I don't believe him. There's no way they'd just let someone abduct me from my quarters and then approve leave. At least I don't think they would. But it's not as though I understand every decision she makes.

"How did you convince her?" I ask.

"Told her you're the only one who can do the task while vowing to keep you safe."

I run my fingers over the tender spot on my forehead, feeling the raised skin of a healing cut. "You're doing an awful job so far."

"I'll endeavor to improve," he says flatly before turning to Hyva. "Can she be taken to her quarters or does she need to stay under observation?"

Hyva begins pulling sensors from my skin. "She can go." He meets my eyes. "If you

have need of me, all you need to do is tell the ship-wide computer. I'll be alerted and come to wherever you are."

I dangle my legs over the side of the bed, immediately aware of the fact that I'm still in my pajamas. Cool air brushes against the bare skin of my legs as goosebumps ripple across my flesh. As soon as my feet hit the floor and I stand, I'm aware of just how big these males are. I'm average height for a human woman and barely come up to mid-chest on these two.

The commander sweeps his arm out in a gesture for me to walk through the door first. He falls into step beside me quietly. For a being so large, he moves with a surprising amount of stealth.

I tear my focus from him and examine my surroundings as he leads down a long corridor. The walls are made from deep gray paneling. Two lines of lights line each wall along the floor. Dim red lights shine from above.

"I apologize for the abrupt way you were brought on board," the commander says. "Time is of the essence. We don't have time to play political games."

"So you settled on abduction," I say dryly.

"Yes." His confirmation is a matter of fact. "I must stress again that you are not a prisoner on board this ship, though."

He leads me onto a lift, and as the door closes, locking us in the small space together, I smell him. His scent is intoxicating. I can't identify the notes, but it takes all my willpower not to lean over and sniff at him like some sort of animal. I part my lips, determined not to inhale through my nose again until we're out of this small box.

There are more Zeahirians walking through the corridor as we step from the lift.

“This is the crew quarters level. The mess hall is through those doors.” He stops and points behind us. “There is a training center that way.” He points to the end of the hall in the direction we’re walking. “And beyond that is the recreation hall, including a small library.”

“How long until we get to your planet?” I appreciate the tour, but I doubt I’ll be spending much time in the common areas.

“Ten to twelve days. It would have been sooner, but our ship was damaged trying to evade the Order.”

My eyes snap up to his unnaturally green ones. “Damaged how? The Order doesn’t have weapons.”

His brow creases as he holds my gaze. “You are mistaken. They repeatedly fired at us.”

Two doors slide open in front of us, revealing nicer-than-I-was-anticipating quarters. Everything is still dim with the same lighting as the corridors, but long rectangular windows line the walls, allowing for a beautiful view of space.

There’s a long desk on one side of the open room and several oversize chairs. Oversize for me, at least, but given his size, it makes sense their furniture would be larger than what I’m used to. I catch a glimpse through a bedroom doorway.

“There’s a food synthesizer along this wall.” He lifts a panel revealing a built-in kitchenette similar to what I have back home. “It’s programmed for human dietary needs, but don’t feel as though you need to stay sequestered back here. The synths in the mess hall have been updated for you as well.”

“Okay.” I look around, trying to take everything in. “Do you have clothes for me? I

obviously wasn't given time to pack." I arch a brow.

"Not yet." He disappears into the bedroom and comes back out with a black long-sleeve shirt and pants. "They'll be too big for you but should work for now."

I take the items, surprised by how soft the fabric is. It's clearly part of their military uniforms, so I was expecting something stiff and uncomfortable. I set the clothing down and look from his face to the door, silently asking him to leave. I'm not going to thank him for providing the bare minimum when he abducted me from my quarters in the middle of the night.

I don't fully understand the goal of all this, at least not yet. The only thing I know is that he isn't telling me the entire truth about everything. I don't trust him. I won't trust him or anyone on this ship until I know more.

* * *

I'm not sure how long I slept or how many days have gone by. As soon as I laid my head down in the huge bed, I lost myself to sleep. It took me longer than I'd like to figure out the shower, but now that I'm clean, healed, and rested, I slip into the clothing the Commander gave me. It's all too big, but I've made do by rolling the waistband and tying the hem into a small knot behind my back.

I'm finger combing my wet hair when the door to my quarters whooshes open. The commander strides in with no warning. He stops short when he sees me, his eyes dragging up and down my body. The expression on his face is unreadable as he holds out a pile of clothing and a pair of boots to me.

"These have all been tailored to fit you."

"Thank you." I take the clothing. "But how did you know my size?"

“The beds in med bay record all measurements.”

“Oh.”

One of his slanted eyebrows lifts as he stares quietly at me. “Get dressed. I need to brief you with the rest of my officers in fifteen minutes. I’ll be waiting in the hall.” He turns on his heel and leaves the same way he came in.

I shake my head at how abrupt of an encounter that was before heading back into my room and changing. Stacked beneath the shirts are several bras and pairs of underwear. I’m curious how they were able to get all this to me because we haven’t passed a system in days. Or however long it’s been since I was given a room.

Everything fits perfectly. I kneel to tie my shoes and wish for something to pull my hair back with as it sweeps past my shoulders and curtains my face.

The commander is standing across the corridor from my door when I walk out. He had been focused on a tablet in his hand, but now I once again find myself the center of his intense attention. For the third time I stand frozen while he looks me up and down without speaking.

It’s awkward but not lewd. I feel as if it’s more of an appraisal than anything else. Saying I didn’t find it intimidating would be a lie, though.

“Are the clothes acceptable?” He inclines his head and begins to walk down the hall.

“Yes. Thank you.”

“You haven’t come out of your quarters.”

“No, I haven’t.”

“Why?”

Is he really asking me that?

“I don’t know, it may have something to do with being kidnapped.”

“I told you that you are not a prisoner.”

“So I’m free to leave?”

“There’s nowhere to go. I doubt you’d want to be sent out of an air lock.”

He leads me through a set of doors and into a room with a long table. Around it sit five Zeahirian officers. Hyva gives me a smile, the first I’ve seen since being on board. His incisors are sharp points, like fangs. I give him a tentative smile in return.

“This is Sister Neev Kaesong.” The commander pulls a seat out for me. “This is my first officer, Captain Altis Jai.”

The male seated to the left raises a hand in greeting.

“My pilot, Captain Vynia Jai.”

The only other female I’ve seen on board gives me a nod. She looks identical to the first officer, so I’m going to guess that they’re siblings and not a couple.

“Lieutenant Mydax is my second in command.”

The male looks me up and down skeptically. Fair enough. It’s not like I trust anyone in this room.

“Finally, my chief engineer Cuna. You already know Hyva.”

“I’d prefer to just be called Neev. You don’t need to use my title.” I look around at the group assembled. “I assume I’m finally going to hear why you need my assistance.”

“Yes.” Commander Asterean types something into his tablet and a holographic image materializes on the center of the table. “This is the tome you’ll be translating.”

I lean forward focusing on the grainy image to see if I recognize anything on the front. The hologram is too blurry, and, because they stole me away in the middle of the night, I don’t have my glasses.

“Had you acquired my help more diplomatically,” I shoot a pointed look in the commander’s direction, “I would have been able to grab my glasses, so I’d be prepared for the strain on my eyes. Am I to translate via hologram?”

“No.”

“You haven’t been given the corrective procedure for eyesight?” Hyva frowns.

“They tried twice. It’s always failed.” I wave a hand dismissively. “I see perfectly fine most of the time. I’m usually bothered the most while working.” And at the end of the days when the strain leaves me with pounding headaches and double vision.

I look over at the Commander to find him and Hyva giving each other an indecipherable look. They must have worked together closely for a long time to be able to have silent conversations like that. In fact, this entire group feels like an impenetrable unit. I can’t help the pang of envy I feel at thought. Spending my life learning and working mostly independently I have never had that type of bond. Aside from Torre, I don’t really even have friends. I never realized how isolated I was until

now.

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CHAPTER 4

RAIZ

* * *

“Y ou can read ancient Zeahiric, correct?” I ask as Sister Neev lifts her slight body from the chair and leans forward to get a closer look.

Her hair catches the light, and I realize within the black, there are also strands of purple, blue, and green woven through. She lets out an annoyed huff and pushes the thick mass behind her small, rounded ear. Her violet eyes turn my way.

“It’s a bit late to be asking that now, isn’t it?” Sarcasm drips from her words. “I’m fluent in over one hundred languages, and I can read twice that number.”

“How?” Vynia asks with awe in her voice. “Is it a human trait to be so good with them?”

“I wouldn’t know. I wasn’t raised with humans.” She sits back down, relaxing into the chair. “I’d say it was more like being dropped on Oculus Nine as an infant to be raised by the Order has the most to do with it. I assume the tome isn’t on board.”

“No. It can’t leave the temple it’s housed in.”

“And that’s on Zeahiri?”

“We believe so,” Altis says.

Her lips part as she looks from him to me. “Why exactly would you seek my help if you don’t even know where it is? What are you looking for?”

I look to Mydax to ensure he’s turned off any recording devices. He already told me he had, but before I go further, I need double the assurance. He gives me a subtle nod of confirmation.

“This is a covert mission. Everything we do has to be done with precision and expediency.”

“Covert from whom?” Her lips flatten into a firm line.

“The Sovereign.” I hold her eyes as the gravity of that statement settles in. “I’m leading the rebellion.”

Her face pales. “Members of the Order aren’t to be involved in political disputes. You are risking my entire existence.”

I can hear the increasing beat of her heart. The smell of her fear permeates the room, but under that sharp odor is another emotion. Anger.

Out of the corner of my eye, I watch as Mydax’s body goes taut. Every predacious instinct in our blood sings at the challenge she’s unknowingly throwing out into the room. I catch Hyva’s eyes and use my gift.

“Be ready to get her out of here,” I instruct him.

“Are you all just going to sit in silence?” she asks, her voice rising.

“Lieutenant.” I imbue the word with all my authority, but I can see the darkening of his blood through his skin.

Mydax launches himself across the table, talons extending. The tang of Neev’s fear fills the air. I lunge in front of her while Hyva lifts her into his arms.

Altis reaches for Vynia, whose control is also close to snapping. I’m not worried about her; their bond is still intact. He can keep her tethered.

Mydax is still young. His talons graze the skin of my cheek, their razor-sharp tips slicing across my skin. My blood roars at the challenge. The only thing holding me back is the shocked scream from Neev as Hyva carries her into the hall. Hopefully he gets her to med bay before anyone else on the ship scents her. Cuna follows after them as backup.

As soon as the doors close behind us, I unleash myself. Mydax attempts to kick me, but I grab his foot and twist it, knocking him off balance. He swipes out his talons, the razor-sharp blades slice through my uniform pants and into my thigh.

Altis has Vynia pinned against the wall with his back to her front. She thrashes but won’t hurt him. He’s completely calm as he watches me begin to subdue Mydax.

I keep my talons sheathed even as Mydax continues to cut me. He’s lost to the primal, his desire to hunt and consume too great. I finally get him pressed onto the floor and hold him down with my knee on his chest. I can feel his life organ pounding fiercely within his body.

I stare down at him until I see the first sign of submission, his eyes slowly losing their haziness and the blood around his eyes returning to normal. I lift my knee when I see the regret and embarrassment etched onto his face. His talons and fangs retract.

“I’m sorry, Commander.” He takes my outstretched hand and allows me to help him to his feet. “I didn’t expect to be so easily triggered. The scent of her fear was so potent.”

“It was.” I pause, hating this, but it’s protocol. “You’re confined to your quarters until further notice. Go.”

He walks away without arguing. Altis steps away from Vynia, and she follows Mydax out of the room.

“Are you okay?” he approaches me.

“I’m fine. Just a few scratches.” I run my finger over my cheek, realizing that the cut might need mending. “I’m more worried about our only hope being too frightened to work with us now.”

“I’ll take the bridge.”

Instead of using the lift to get down to med bay, I take the stairs. Any physical exertion will help settle me. I need to be completely controlled when I walk into the room with Neev.

She’s sitting on one of the examination tables with her palms braced on either side of her thighs. Her head was hanging between her shoulders but jerks up as soon as I enter the room. She looks me up and down. It’s as if she’s checking me for injuries .

No.

That can’t be it.

Hyva looks up from his monitor and zeros in on my face. “Let me clean you up.”

I put my hand up, stopping him from approaching me as I cross the room to Neev.
“Are you okay?”

“Yes.” She looks over at Hyva. “He explained what happened. I’m sorry for triggering him.”

“Don’t.” I shake my head and lean down, so I’m eye level with her. She needs to understand she is safe with us. “He is still young, and while he’s exceptionally intelligent, his instincts are still primally driven. Regardless, he should have been able to control himself. I am sorry.”

Her eyes, while violet from afar, have beautiful silver flecks dotting them. She holds my gaze for longer than most can handle, but then her eyes fall to my check. I don’t move as she lifts her hand, her small thumb runs along the slashes still stinging there.

“You’re hurt.”

I straighten with a scoff. “Hardly. I wouldn’t even have these cleaned if not for the fact that he used his talons.”

“Talons?”

I lift my hand and unsheathe my own. Her eyes widen, but no fear scents the air.

“We all have them. Some have two, others three, very few have four.”

“Stop preening for the female and come over here so I can clean the venom from your cuts,” Hyva’s voice cuts into my mind from the channel I’ve left open.

“I wasn’t preening, I was explaining.”

“Right.” His response drips with sarcasm.

“Stay here, and I’ll escort you back to my quarters once I’m done,” I instruct.

“Your quarters?” A wrinkle forms between her brows.

“Yes.” I lean against one of the tables while Hyva begins cleaning the cut on my cheek. “We don’t have guest quarters on board, so I gave you mine.”

I obviously couldn’t put her in with anyone else. Mydax’s outburst is exactly why. Maybe it’s a good thing she hasn’t ventured out into the common areas.

“Where are you sleeping then?”

“Altis and I have separate shifts on the bridge. I’m using his quarters for now.”

She quiets and steps back, so Hyva can clean the wounds. Once he finishes on my face, I reach down and unbutton my pants so he can get to my thigh. I should tear my eyes away from her, but I can’t. Her cheeks turn pink when she notices what I’m doing and immediately turns away.

Hyva looks from me to her back to me with a short shake of his head. Zeahirians are not a modest species. Many of us spend hours swimming naked in the sea, which still welcomes us home millennia after evolving to live on land.

“What do you know about humans?” I ask Hyva as he works on my thigh.

“Only what I looked up to treat her. Our bodies have similar functions and processes. They’re not nearly as physically strong as us. No psionic abilities.” He sprinkles mending powder into the wound after cleaning it. “Mydax got you deep here,” he says aloud. “No sparring for a few days.”

“Got it.” I stand and pull my pants back up, looking over at Neev as I do. “You can turn around now.”

She turns back toward us, and I’m disappointed to see her skin is back to its normal color. Her eyes don’t meet mine. Fine by me, it allows me to drink in the sight of her. There’s something about her, something intangible, that draws my attention to her anytime we’re in the same room.

It’s probably because she’s so small, so different. My protective instincts are triggered just by being near her.

She clears her throat, her eyes darting to me and then back away. “Should I go back to my quarters?”

“If you wish.” I fall in step beside her after she says goodbye to Hyva. “I’ll escort you.”

“Thank you.”

“Don’t let fear overwhelm you. Or anger.”

She stiffens beside me but doesn’t speak.

“We are predators at heart. We may have built a society, but we still scent your emotions. Younger Zeahirians have less control.”

“How old are you?” she asks, looking up at me.

“One hundred and twenty-two universal rotations.”

Those violet eyes of hers widen. “What’s your lifespan?”

“Depends on many factors. What bloodline one is from. How powerful one is. The oldest among us live upwards of eight hundred.”

“I’m only twenty-two.”

“I know.” She stops at the entrance to my quarters. “Do you mind if I come in to grab a change of uniform?”

“Of course.” She steps inside and then makes room for me.

I expect her to stay outside of the bedroom, but she follows me in and watches as I open the closet my uniforms hang in. After pulling them off the hanger and dropping them on the bed, she’s still looking curiously at me.

“I guess that explains all the locked doors in here.”

I incline my head. “Just a closet here.” I walk over and open a cabinet built into the wall. “This is for my weapons.” Knives, a sword, and a scythe all lay together alongside my array of photon guns for space.

“Swords?” Her eyebrows scrunch together. “Are you a collector of antiquities?”

“No. It’s all we can use on Zeahiri. Our sun is a red dwarf and the radiation it throws makes using most technology finicky at best. There are very few places with even basic electricity.”

“Oh.” She blinks several times.

“Don’t worry too much about that. I think you’ll find my home comfortable regardless.”

“Your home?”

“Where you’ll be staying as my guest.”

Her heart beats quickens, the thumping in my ears mixing with the slightest tang of fear. Not enough to send one of us into a frenzy but still enough to detect. I find myself dragging the scent deep into my lungs, savoring it. It doesn’t drive me to hunt, it drives me to protect.

“I hope I don’t put you out,” she says.

My lips tilt upwards in a rare and genuine smile. “Don’t worry about that. I’ll come get you for dinner. It’ll be better for everyone if the crew becomes used to seeing you around.” I close the doors and pick up my uniform to take to Altis’s quarters.

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CHAPTER 5

NEEV

* * *

I must have been exhausted because as soon as the commander left, I laid down in the bed, his bed, and fell fast asleep. I had managed to comb my hair into submission right before a knock at the door sounds. It's kind of him to knock when I'm sure the door is set to automatically allow him entry.

He fills the doorway as the doors slide open. I've noticed that none of the other Zeahirians on the ship have eyes like his. The bright green seems to be a unique feature, as does the fact that he's taller than nearly anyone else on the ship, his second in command being the closest. They aren't the tallest species I've seen, one of my sisters is double my height, but even that doesn't dull the intimidation they make me feel.

I feel safe with Commander Asterean, even though I shouldn't. I keep reminding myself he abducted me from my bed. I don't care if the Order eventually gave in or not. It was unnecessary. I'm not a prisoner in need of a jailbreak.

"Hello Commander."

"If I'm not to call you Sister, you are going to have to call me Raiz."

"I'll do my best."

Truth be told I've only spoken to a handful of males in my life. As a translator I don't do much speaking within my role. The few times I went to the surface of Calindrea most of the males kept their distance, knowing from my robes that I was from the Order, so they mostly left me alone. It's not forbidden to speak or even bed them, I just never felt as comfortable as others on Oculus Nine did. It is more than likely due to being raised by all females from infancy.

The crew nods deferentially to Raiz as we pass and then look at me with varying degrees of curiosity and interest. None of them make me feel uncomfortable. His towering presence doesn't hurt, either.

Loud voices and laughter fill the mess hall as I step inside. It all stops as soon as Raiz enters behind me. Boots shuffle and chairs slide as everyone stands and salutes him. He wraps his hand around my bicep, while the heat from his body seeps into my back. He calls out something that my translator doesn't catch, almost a growl. I feel the vibration from his chest in my back.

Every pair of eyes in the room lands on me as they fist their right hands and firmly pound them against their chests simultaneously. Curiously, as I look around the room, I don't notice anyone with green eyes like Raiz. They're all various shades of gold, silver, or red.

I realize they're all frozen in that stance, waiting for something. "What should I do?" I whisper over my shoulder to Raiz.

"Whatever feels natural to acknowledge them."

What the stars, that's the least helpful thing I've ever been told.

I incline my head, giving them all what I'm sure is the most uncomfortable smile in the galaxy. They all sit and go back to what they had been doing before we walked in,

although not as boisterously as before. Raiz leads me over to a wall of food synthesizers.

“Please tell me they’re never going to do that again.” My cheeks still burn at the attention.

He does a double take and raises his hand, moving as if his intention is to touch my face. He drops his hand as soon as he sees my eyes widen in surprise.

“Why does your face do that? Are you ill?”

“It’s called blushing.” I focus all my attention on scrolling through the options for dinner. “Haven’t been around many humans?” I ask.

“No. You’re the first I’ve closely interacted with. Why do the blushing?”

“Humans blush for multiple reasons. They might be embarrassed or angry or—” I’m not going to tell him about the more sexual reasons.

“Or?”

“I’m sure there’s other reasons. I was embarrassed, uncomfortable, with the amount of attention. I’m not used to it.”

“Interesting. Can’t say it bothers me.” He opens the door and pulls out a plate full of what looks like fish and some kind of vegetables, as well as a glass of amber liquid.

My synthesizer beeps alerting me to my food being ready. A bowl of steaming chicken and rice soup, a roll of crusty bread, and a glass of cold water sit ready on the tray. My mouth waters at the scent. This ship has some of the best food I’ve had. Definitely beats Oculus Nine. Not that it’s hard to beat, with the bland food they

insist on serving us.

“Is that all the food you require?” Raiz frowns down at my bowl when I sit down beside him at a table in front of a window.

“Yes.”

“That’s not what Hyva said. He said human functions and systems were similar to ours. Zeahiri could not survive on that.”

“This isn’t all I eat. Humans usually eat two or three times throughout the day.”

He doesn’t look convinced.

“What are you eating?” I gesture toward his plate. “I’ve never seen any of that before.”

“Taros, a type of underground vegetable.” He stabs his fork into one of the tender vegetables. “Eglick is a fish native to Zeahiri. This is a common meal.”

Two trays drop onto the table in front of us. When I look up I see Hyva and Lieutenant Jai sitting down. They’re eating the same thing as Raiz.

“Sister Neev,” she begins but I cut her off.

“Just Neev, please.”

She gives me a smile, her two fangs showing the tiniest bit. “Neev. Please allow me to apologize. My outburst wasn’t directed at you, it was directed at Mydax for challenging the commander. And call me Vynia.”

“No apologies necessary.”

In truth I didn't even realize she had any kind of reaction. One moment I was having a conversation, and the next Hyva had me thrown over his shoulder and was halfway down the stairs to get to med bay. Everything happened so fast.

“Neev says that this is all humans need to consume to live,” Raiz says to Hyva. “Is that accurate?”

Hyva's eyes meet mine, and I swear I can see the alien version of an eye roll inside them. “It looks sufficient. They eat more often than we do.” He examines my soup. “What is that called?”

“Soup. It has protein, vegetables, and grains. Perfectly balanced.”

“Liquid meals are not filling,” Raiz states.

I meet Hyva's eyes, which are full of mirth. Being abducted by a weirdly overprotective warrior alien wasn't something I had expected this year. Or any year really.

I decide to change the subject and look across to Vynia. “I haven't spent much time out of my quarters, but you're the only female I've noticed on board aside from myself. Are there any others?”

“No. It's just you and I. Female survival on Zeahiri is rare.”

“Oh.” What a different experience from what I'm used to. “Why is that?”

They share a quiet look that tells me maybe I should not have inquired.

“You and Altis share a last name, are you siblings?” I change the subject to avoid a social faux pas.

“We are twins.”

My stomach twists. I’ve always wanted a sibling. Someone who was just mine, who I could tell my secrets to and grow up, laughing our way through trouble.

“That’s lovely.”

Quiet settles over the four of us as we continue to eat. I let my eyes roam around the room, taking in the crew around us. It’s more boisterous than I’m used to when I eat in the company of others in the Order. There’s no vow of silence for us but rarely will one hear any sort of loud exclamation.

A dull ache begins to throb at the back of my head. So far I haven’t been plagued by headaches like I would have expected without my medication, but with each beat of my heart, I feel the pressure in my skull magnify.

Knowing that the migraine is bound to hit soon, I quickly finish my meal and drink as much water as possible. I consider asking Hyva if he has anything to help treat the problem, but I don’t want to trouble him again. Hopefully, I can sleep it off.

I look at my dinner companions and give them what I hope is a convincing smile. “Thank you for dinner. I’m glad you pulled me out of my quarters for a meal. I’m going to retire for the night.”

“I’ll escort you back.” Vynia stands. “I’m going that way anyway.”

She shows me where to place my dishes and then we fall into step beside each other.

“What drew you to becoming a pilot?” I ask.

“A lot of things.” She laughs quietly. “But mostly because a bunch of males told me I couldn’t do it.”

“Altis?” That doesn’t seem like him.

“No. Never. He and Raiz were always so encouraging growing up.” She stops us in the hall and raises her leg, unbuckling her left boot and pulling it off. “I was born missing half my leg and foot.”

I grab my chest. “I’m so sorry.”

She reattaches everything with practiced ease. “Don’t be. My lack of a leg probably saved my life or Altis’s.” She stops in front of my quarters. “Plus, what I lacked in physicality I made up for in tenacity. It’s how I climbed the ranks in flight school as quickly as my brother and the commander.”

“Did you all grow up together?”

“Raiz is as close as family to us. Our mother served his mother’s household. We were raised under his family’s roof.”

I want to continue asking questions, to soak up all this new knowledge of lives and culture outside of my lived experience, but a lance of pain shoots from the base of my skull to the front. I know I only have minutes to get in bed before it becomes a full-fledged migraine.

“You’re lucky to have each other.”

“We are.” She looks down at me, her golden eyes narrowing slightly. “Are you

alright?”

“Yes.” I feign another smile. “Just feel a headache coming on.”

“Do you need anything? I can go get Hyva.”

“No, I’m sure I just need sleep. Thank you.”

“If you change your mind, just hit the button by the door and tell the computer you need him or even me.”

“Thank you.” That’s good to know.

“Goodnight.” She waits until the doors close behind me to walk away.

“Lights dimmed, please,” I call out to the computer. As soon as everything around me darkens, I drag a deep breath in through my nose and out my mouth. I just need to make it to bed. My pulse throbs against my temples, and I nearly whimper as soon as my head hits the pillow. My eyes close, and I fall into a deep sleep before I can even kick off my remaining boot.

* * *

Everything around me is white. A yawning, endless expanse of nothing as the whispers grow steadily louder. I try to run from them as their volume increases, but there’s nowhere for me to go. No direction to run.

Tears streak down my cheeks as my chest tightens. I can’t breathe. Even as I feel the beating of my heart so fast and powerful inside my chest, my lungs won’t inflate and draw oxygen. I drop to my knees, pain shooting through my joints upon impact.

Maybe if I just lay down and close my eyes, I'll awaken back in my bed on Oculus Nine. Everything is a dream. I can breathe. I'm just sleeping.

I'll awaken.

Pressing my forehead to my knees, I curl into a ball and wish for quiet.

For peace.

CHAPTER 6

RAIZ

* * *

The quiet of the bridge normally puts me at ease, but as I take over for the night, I can't help but feel as though something is off. There's nothing near us, no ships within our range of detection, but I feel an overwhelming sense of dread. I pull all the ship systems to check for any issues, but all looks good. Sensors still show we're blissfully alone; we should make it to the outpost ahead of schedule.

"Captain?" Hyva's voice comes through my communicator. "I need you down in med bay."

"On my way. Lieutenant, the bridge is yours," I tell the young pilot who works alongside Vynia.

It's not unheard of for our crew to get carried away in the sparring ring, so I assume that's what I'm walking into downstairs. I'll just have to broker some sort of peace and dole out a punishment that makes sense.

I stop short as soon as I see who is laid out on the bed. My speed increases as I take up a spot beside Altis while Hyva runs a scanner over her body. A bunch of numbers flash on his screen, but I don't know what they mean.

"What happened?"

“I don’t know. Vynia told me Neev had mentioned a headache earlier, so I decided to go give her some of the medicine you gave me for mine,” Altis says to us. “I knocked, but no one answered, so I look in just to check and found her sweating on the bed. She was crying but wouldn’t wake up.”

“Do you know what’s happening?” I ask Hyva.

“No. It doesn’t make sense. Everything is normal aside from her brain wave pattern and heart rate spikes. I can’t get her to wake up.”

“Could it be from a headache?”

“I don’t know. My scope of practice on humans is quite limited.”

She whimpers and thrashes on the bed. Tears stream from the corners of her closed eyes. I look at Hyva and see the helplessness I feel mirrored back at me in his gaze.

“You could mind walk,” he says quietly.

“No.” My answer is quick and firm. The thought of entering her subconscious without her consent makes me ill.

“I know you feel it’s intrusive when you haven’t been given permission to enter someone’s mind, but something is wrong here. If I can’t get her heart rate under control, she could die.”

This feels like it would be akin to forcing myself on a female. Would this even work on a human? What if I do something that damages her while I’m in there? Not to mention, once a channel is formed, it’s so much easier for me to do it again.

Hyva grips my shoulder. “It’s the only shot we have unless we find a human

somewhere in the outer belt of this shit hole system. One with medical knowledge.”

Fuck.

“Get me a chair,” I say to him quietly. While he clears out the med bay and grabs a chair from his office, I lean down over Neev. “Please forgive me for what I’m about to do,” I say quietly, wiping one of the tears from her hot skin.

I slowly lower myself down into the chair Hyva sets behind me. My fingers glide into her hair, settling just behind her ear. I shouldn’t take notice of how soft it is, but I can’t help thinking that it’s even more beautiful up close. And stars, she smells of my soap, which makes parts of me stir in ways I’ve never experienced.

I close my eyes and search for a way inside her mind. Her mind is frantic; she’s scared of something. It drives me to push harder, to find a pathway in. To save her. I weave my way through the barrier of her mind and halt at what I find.

* * *

Everything is white in every direction. There’s only an endless expanse stretched before me, empty of anything except a small form curled in a ball in the distance. I run toward it, my instincts screaming that it’s Neev.

As I come closer, I realize I’m correct. Her eyes are closed tight, and she rocks back and forth, tucked into a ball with her hands over her ears. I drop to my knees beside her and say her name, but she doesn’t acknowledge my presence at all. I try again.

Should I touch her?

The question is answered as soon as I notice her trembling. There is no way I can’t reach out to her. Slowly I reach forward and put my hands on her shaking shoulders.

She jumps at the contact and lifts her head. Confusion colors her gaze at the sight of me. She looks around as though she's trying to figure out why I'm sitting in front of her.

I don't move, and, stars, her skin is so soft beneath my rough palms. I wonder if her skin is actually this smooth or if it's just some weird mind walking trick. She wraps her hands around my wrists and slides them up my forearms.

"Are you real?"

"Yes."

"How are you here? In my mind?"

"I can mind walk. It's a gift of my bloodline."

The fact that she knows she's inside her own mind is interesting. I wasn't sure how she'd react or what I'd find. She almost seems grateful or at the very least relieved to see me.

"Do you hear them?" she asks, still clinging to me.

"Hear what?"

"The whispers. They get so loud I can't block them out."

"The only thing I hear is you."

"Great." She drops her head onto my arm. "Even in my mind, my mind is fucked."

"Does this happen every time your head hurts?"

“Yes, but it’s rare. I take a daily medication for it on Oculus Nine.”

She’s still so pale when she looks up at me. Wet tracks cover her cheeks from the tears that keep streaming from her eyes.

“I’m going to try to bring you out with me, is that okay?”

“Can you do that?”

“I’ve never tried it before. But I never fail either.”

I stand and offer her my hand. She looks at me as she tentatively accepts my help up. I don’t release hers as she gets to her feet, and she doesn’t seem to want to let go of mine either.

Good.

I guide her in the same direction that I entered from. I should just be able to walk back out the same way I came in. At least I hope so.

The barrier of her consciousness puts up the barest hint of resistance, but I push through, dragging her with me. Then I open my eyes.

* * *

My fingers are still in her hair when I’m back in the med bay. I watch as her eyes flutter beneath her eyelids. Hyva says something, but I ignore him, staying entirely focused on Neev.

I can finally breathe again when her silver- and violet-flecked eyes open. They immediately lock on me. I didn’t realize how close I was leaning in toward her until I

feel the warmth of her breath brush my lips. I should back up, remove my fingers from her hair.

But I don't. I'm locked in this moment with her.

She breaks it when she looks around in confusion. "How did I get here?"

"Altis found you. He was going to give you a medicinal tea that helps relieve his headaches."

"Oh. That was kind of him."

"Is this something that happens frequently?" Hyva asks.

"No, but I've been taking medication regularly for as long as I can remember. I get headaches when I forget to take it."

Hyva leans back against the edge of the empty bed beside her. "Do you know the name of the medication?"

"No. I've been taking it for as long as I can remember. There would always be a little cup with the pill in it when I'd get dinner. I never really questioned it."

She sits up, causing my fingers to fall from her hair. I miss the softness immediately but back up to a more proper distance.

"It's okay." Hyva gently pushes her back down against the pillow. "Rest for a little while, and then I'll release you to go back to your quarters." He looks at me and then his office.

I take the cue and follow him, walking into the bright space while he presses the

button to have the doors slide close behind us.

“Contacting the Order is out of the question?—”

He holds a hand up, silencing me. “I don’t want to do that. I mean, I do want to know what they were giving her, but I think something else was going on.”

“What do you mean?”

“It doesn’t make sense that they’d just give her medication every day without ever telling her why. Now I have to figure out if her headaches are from not having the medication, or if it treated her headaches.”

“Do you know enough about human medications to look into it?”

“I know nothing about their medicines. Keep everyone on board healthy for the next few days while I research.”

“What do I do with her in the meantime?”

“Keep a close eye on her.” He looks at the monitor showing all her readings. “Everything looks good now. She’s okay to leave.”

He stays behind, already beginning his research while I walk out into the main room. Her eyes are closed, the fringe of hair that grows along her eyelids fans out over slightly purpled skin. I move to place my hand on her arm but stop just before making contact. I have to stop touching her.

“Neev.”

Her eyes flutter open at the sound of my voice. She blinks a few times and pulls

herself into a sitting position. “Am I good to go?”

“From med bay? Yes.”

“Good.”

She tosses the blanket that’s covering her off and swings her legs to the side. Her legs are bare from mid-thigh down to her bare feet. Altis clearly didn’t think to grab her shoes. The floors are clean on the ship, so I’m not concerned for her safety in the hall, more so just for her comfort.

But as I watch her stand and begin to walk toward the door my worries for her comfort seem to be misplaced. She moves like she’s on a mission. In fact, her speed is the quickest I’ve seen so far, not that I can’t easily catch up.

“Bet you’re having second thoughts about snatching me up, aren’t you,” she says when I fall in step beside her.

“Not at all. I did want to apologize for earlier.”

Her pace falters. “What do you mean?”

“For mind walking without your consent first.”

“Why would you be sorry about that? You did it to help me.”

“Yes, but it’s an intensely personal thing to invade someone’s mind like that. I could have seen things you wanted to be kept private.”

“Did you?”

“I didn’t see anything but you.”

“It’s unsettling, isn’t it? That void of anything within my head.”

“How long has it been like that?”

“Forever.”

“And you get stuck in there?”

“No, never like that. Whatever the Order gives me always stops me from having those types of episodes.”

Walking beside her while I’m fully dressed in my uniform and she’s in only her night clothes makes her feel fragile beside me. A protective need claws at my chest from inside me. I fight it back with logic and reason, reminding myself that no matter how small, how soft, how lovely she is, she’s still just a tool.

My mission is greater than the need for a female in my bed.

Which is why I bite back any questions or further conversations with her. She’s nothing more than means to an end for me. I wait by the door to my quarters as she disappears inside and then go straight to the training center. Even if I can’t spar, I can guide others.

* * *

Icy water laps around me as I swim away my thoughts. Every Zeahiri ship has a pool on board. As a species that evolved from the sea, we all continue to have the ability to breathe underwater. It’s a place we can go to recenter ourselves. It’s why at one end you’ll find benches built into the bottom of the pool floor.

If sparring doesn't ease our frustration, the water always will. Each stroke across the surface soothes the savagery growing within me every time I let myself think about Neev. There's something wrong, a lot of things wrong.

Why is her mind so clear of anything? No memories, nothing but her fear as she laid curled in on herself. Was the Order helping her or hurting her? She seems to be under the impression they were only doing what they could to help her.

But she also doesn't seem to have a concrete grasp of what they actually do there. The way they claim to help, but the price is always to allow them to hoard the knowledge and power they help a species understand.

Despite a deep desire to trust Neev, I have to remind myself to stay cautious. Prior to entering her subconscious, I actually thought she might be deceiving us. Now I'm not sure.

She's a distraction I can't afford to have. Not with the revolution on the line. Each day that passes, the Sovereign gains more power. Power he's held for nearly one thousand rotations.

We have to get the parts for the ship, get back to Zeahiri, and somehow get Neev to the text. If I can avoid being called upon for my High Lord duties, it'd be ideal. Unfortunately, it will be hard to keep my presence in House Aste a secret. I'll be called on for at least several functions.

The sound of someone walking on the pool deck pulls me from my thoughts. I kick off the bottom of the pool and break the surface to find Vynia standing at the edge. She's in her uniform, so I assume she's not here to join me. I grab the edge and pull myself out of the water, landing on my feet in front of her.

"We're approaching the outpost. Just a few hours out from landing." She watches as I

dry off. “When was the last time you slept?”

“Do I look that bad?”

“Yes. Stop deflecting.”

“My sleep schedule is outside the purview of my pilot.”

“I’m not asking as your pilot.” She adopts a familiar stance that means she’s not letting me walk past her without giving her answers. “Are you having nightmares again?”

“Don’t worry about it. I’ll sleep once we’re home.”

“I’m not the only one worried. Altis is too.”

This is the part of having your two closest friends, basically only family, serving under you. No one else on board would dare question me. But these two have never been afraid of me.

“I’m fine.” I drop the used towel into a laundry bin at the door. “I’ll meet you on the bridge in an hour.”

CHAPTER 7

NEEV

* * *

The view out of the window is something I never thought I'd get to see in my lifetime. The planet we're approaching looks barren from the upper atmosphere. The ground is a vast expanse of brown and red land. No green from vegetation or blue from water.

As we descend I can barely make out a city made from tents and mud buildings. All sorts of spaceships dot the landscape surrounding it. There are rocky outcroppings dotted all over the plains. I don't even know what system we're in or which planet this is, but I can't wait to go explore.

I pull my boots on and fasten the buckles. The other night in the crew mess hall, I overheard a couple of the males talking about how Raiz had given them all twelve hours of leave. Hopefully that extends to me, too.

The ship shudders beneath me as it lands on the surface. A cloud of red dust floats up over the windows. I'm not sure where to go to get out of the ship, but I'm assuming there's a cargo bay.

As soon as I step into the hall, I see groups of crew members walking in the same direction. Deciding to follow them is my best bet, I start walking. I'm just rounding the corner when I run into a firm body.

Raiz's hands immediately move to my shoulders, steadying me. "Apologies."

"No, it was my fault. I was just trying to keep up with the crowd. I should have been paying closer attention."

"Following the crowd where?" He frowns.

"To the city. I've never been off Calindrea. I want to explore."

"No."

"No?" I step back and meet his gaze.

"No."

"I thought I wasn't a prisoner here."

"You're not."

"Then why can't I go out there?"

"Commander, good, I caught you." Altis jogs down the corridor toward us but slows when he catches the look we're giving each other. "What's going on?" he asks slowly.

"Good question." I look up at Raiz. "Enlighten me."

"This is a pleasure planet."

"And?"

“It’s not safe.” His eyes narrow. “Are you aware of what types of establishments one finds on a pleasure planet?”

“Brothels. Bars. Gambling dens.”

“Exactly. It wouldn’t be safe for a human female out there.”

Altis’s gaze bounces back and forth between us. “He’s right. There’s slave trading here, too. A human female this far in the outer belt would be worth a large amount of credits.”

“Are either of you going?” Both of them are wearing cloaks with their hoods up, so if I were to guess, I’d say yes.

“On business.”

“I could come with you. I’ll stay out of the way.”

My eyes meet Altis’s and find him open to the idea. “I’d be okay with it.”

Raiz whips his head to his second in command. “You’ll take responsibility for her safety?”

“Yes.”

My lips lift in a smile, and I launch myself at Raiz, wrapping my arms around him in a hug. He stiffens against me.

“What are you doing, human?”

“This is called a hug. It’s a human way of showing gratitude, happiness, love, et

cetera.” I release him. “Thank you.”

“You need a cloak before we go.” Raiz walks stiffly back toward my quarters. “I’ll lend you one of my extras.”

Altis and I follow along behind him. He walks back into the bedroom, and I hear several of the locked cabinets open. A moment later he walks out into the main living area with multiple weapons and a black cloak draped over his arm.

He puts the weapons in various hidden compartments on his body and slides a dagger into his boot. Then he steps up to me and throws the cloak around my shoulders. It smells just like him but hangs down past my knees when the ones they wear hit them just below the hip.

He buckles the collar of the cloak and lifts the hood over my hair. “The rules are simple. Stay with Altis. Do what he says. Don’t speak to anyone. Don’t let anyone see your face.” He steps back and looks me up and down before looking over to Altis. “Does my cloak mask her scent?”

Altis steps forward, bends toward my neck, and sniffs. “It does, but you could scent mark her for extra protection. Who knows what species we’ll be near.”

The two males look at each other intently. The stare down lasts an oddly long time. And scent mark me?

“What the hell is scent marking?”

“Males on our planet scent mark others for protection. It serves as a form of protection.” Altis’s gaze moves from Raiz to me.

“We’re not on your planet, so who is to say that it would work here?”

“It’d be suicide for any being on this planet to scent me on your skin and still approach you.”

“How do you do it?”

“I would have to run my jaw along your neck.” He tilts his head to the side and runs a finger along a spot with differently textured skin.

My eyes are drawn to the jagged scar spanning the front of his neck. Curiosity swells inside me, but now isn’t the time to ask about it.

“Shouldn’t Altis do that if he’s going to be the one with me?”

“No,” they both say in unison.

“I’m the more powerful of us. My scent is stronger.”

Altis nods in agreement.

“Fine.” I pull the hood back. “Do it.”

He steps toward me, his eyes locked on mine. As he moves into my space and breathes deeply, his pupils flare. I’m glad for the uniform and cloak covering my body as goosebumps race across my flesh.

He’s a predator, and I’m his prey.

At least that’s how it feels in this moment. His cool fingers slide along my neck and into my hair, tugging my head to the side. His chest rumbles as he bends over me.

“Don’t be scared, the rumble is part of the process.” His fingers flex against my scalp.

“I’m going to mark you now, last chance to back out.”

His words land like a taunt, and I’ve never been able to resist a dare. I drop my head to the side, offering my neck to him. His rumble increases with the movement. His skin meets mine as he nuzzles against me.

I could swear I feel his lips against my skin when he moves to the other side of my neck, using the hand he has in my hair to tilt my head the opposite way. He makes the rumbling sound again as he begins the process on the other side. His foreign scent floods my senses.

My body melts into his hold. My hands move to his waist, under his cloak. His body is all hard planes and firm muscle against me. I want to surrender to him.

I feel like his.

That thought jars me back to my senses, because if there is one thing in the universe that I am sure of, it’s that I belong to no one.

As soon as he straightens, I take a step back. “Done?” I’m proud of how steady my voice is. Especially considering how much of a mess I am on the inside.

“Yes.” Only narrow slivers of green remain in his eyes, and I swear his fangs look longer. He closes his eyes, and when they reopen, they are back to usual. “Stay with Altis. Remember the rules.”

“Yes, sir.” I respond with a hefty dose of snark.

Altis guides me to the door. “Let’s go,” he says quietly. “I’d suggest not taunting him when he’s just marked you like that. In order to release our scent, we have to surrender to our most base instincts.”

“That explains the teeth and eyes,” I murmur.

“What?” His head snaps to the side, looking at me.

“His teeth, the sharp ones, were longer. And his eyes were nearly black.”

“Were they?” Any of the surprise from a moment ago is erased.

“Is that normal?” I ask as I tuck my hair back inside the hood.

“He’s a powerful male.”

That’s not what I asked, but my questions evaporate when we come to the ramp down to the surface. Red, dusty land stretches as far as the eye can see. Binary stars hang high in the sky, heating the planet to hellish levels. The cloak I wear seems to keep my temperature regulated as much as it blocks the rays from the suns.

“If you want to sneak off for time in one of the brothels or gambling houses, I’ll be fine on my own.” I tell him. “I don’t want to stop you from enjoying your time off.”

“I don’t have any time off. My mission is to gather intelligence on this sector.”

“Oh. That’s no fun.”

“I’ll have plenty of fun once we’re home.” I can’t see his face, but I hear the smirk in his voice nonetheless.

“Are you mated? Married? What’s common on your planet?”

“We mate. And no, I’m not mated. It’s becoming more and more rare to find a true mate bond.”

“Do you have to be mated to reproduce?”

“No. It helps, though.” He’s quiet for a moment. “What about you? Are you allowed to...”

“Mate? Fuck?” I offer when he trails off. “Yes. My friend Torre and I tried to be more than friends. Ultimately, she and I decided we were better off as friends. Though we occasionally scratch the itch for each other.”

“Are you not interested in males, then?”

“No, I am,” I say thoughtfully. “I just haven’t been around any long enough to develop that sort of relationship. Not that humans need love or a mating bond to enjoy sex. I just find that in order to want sex, I have to enjoy my partner on a platonic level, too. I can’t get that by meeting a male in one of the bars on Calindrea when we’re allowed to go to the surface for several hours at a time.”

“That makes sense.” He pauses as we come upon the outskirts of the city. “Stay close. I don’t want to offend you, but these outposts are dangerous, and you are defenseless.”

“I promise.” I step closer to him. “Can you smell Raiz on me?”

“From light years away.” Humor bleeds into his voice. “No one will doubt that you’re under his protection.”

We enter the city through a maze of tents, some completely closed while others are open with types of food and goods from all over the galaxy. There are displays of banned weapons and tables full of illicit drugs, just completely out in the open. I’m beginning to understand why they were hesitant to let me out here.

We get curious glances as we wind our way toward the city center, where the tents give way to ramshackle buildings and a square with a well in the center. A line of beings with empty buckets winds around the open area. A male with two long, curling tusks stands sentry at the front of the line, taking money from those waiting to fill their buckets.

“Water should be free,” I murmur to Altis. “No one should have to pay for the very thing necessary for all life in the universe.”

“I don’t disagree,” he replies. “But be careful what you say here. There are ears all over the place. They won’t hesitate to attempt to make an example of you.”

“I’m not afraid.” I stop as I notice the tusked male pull a knife from his boot and drive it into the belly of one of those in line. “How can you just pass by and not do anything?”

“We have no authority here.”

“Are you not the strongest here?” I bait him knowingly.

“We are,” he growls. “At least from what I see.”

He guides me into a pub. The scent of cheap alcohol and who knows what type of foods combine into a staggering stench. I’m grateful to be shrouded in one Raiz’s cloaks, his scent blocks most of the others out as I shrink back.

“What are we doing here?”

“Gathering intel.” He pulls out a barstool for me before sitting in the one beside it. “Stay covered.” He drops the hood of his cloak back and orders two glasses of galactic whiskey for us.

Even with my translation skills, I have trouble making out any specific conversation. Human hearing is notoriously weak compared to many species across the universe. We are not the weakest or least intelligent, but our senses leave a lot to be desired.

The bartender, a beautiful horned creature, sets our drinks in front of us and walks off, swishing her tail and smiling at the customers to our left. I pick up my glass and bring it to my lips. The familiar burn trails down my throat to my stomach, leaving me warm from the inside out. This particular whiskey was formulated to be consumed by nearly every known species. It's entirely synthetic but gets the job done.

"You should slow down. That pour was for a Zeahiri not a human," Altis says quietly.

I knock the rest of the glass back, just to spite him. I might work for the Omnium Order, but I'm not a member. I can, and do, drink like a woman my age might in any other place in the galaxy.

"Those hands don't look Zeahirian."

My wrist is wrapped in the hand of a Helixian warrior. I attempt to pull my hand from his grasp, but it's too strong. A gust of air passes over my head as Altis punches the male beside me.

He drops my hand, but I feel arms lock around my waist and begin to drag me toward the back of the pub. I throw back my elbow, making contact with a solid wall of muscle. A green hand covers my mouth as I yell out for Altis.

"Shhh, human. Don't involve the male. This won't take long."

My back hits a wall, the air escaping from my lungs at the impact. I gasp, trying to

drag oxygen into my lungs as my body is trapped between the disgusting body of the male in front of me. I don't even know what species he is, but when he smiles at me, his pointed teeth drip disgusting saliva.

“Do you know what we do with humans on the outpost?” His slimy fingers wrap around my throat. “Pass them around until they're all used up and then toss them in the wastes to die like the trash they are.”

He runs his tongue up my cheek. “You smell like a Zeahirian mate, but you don't taste like one.”

I bring my knee up between his legs, hard and fast like Torre taught me. His putrid breath fans over my face as his breath whooshes out of him. I try to wiggle away, but he's too big, too strong, to escape.

My head snaps to the side as he punches me.

“Maybe I'll kill you first, then use your pathetic excuse for a body.” He wraps his hand around my throat, lifting me.

My feet kick as I try to find purchase somehow. Out of the corner of my eye I see, Altis fighting four males on his own. It's clear that he can't help me. I'm on my own.

I ready myself to go completely lax, hoping I can catch him off guard and use the momentum to drop from his hold when four deadly talons erupt from his chest. Blood spurts from the wound as his jaw goes slack.

“You dare touch the female bearing my scent,” Raiz snarls. His fangs have fully extended, and I realize now that the altercation I saw on board was nothing compared to the real wrath and power he can exude.

Before I even realize what he's doing, he has pulled both arms off the male. The body drops to the floor in pieces, viscous orange blood pooling at my feet. As our eyes meet, I see the haze of fury drop from his eyes. His talons retract and he lifts me into his arms.

As he carries me out of the pub, I lock eyes with an older male, a rough looking human. His dark hair is peppered with silver and his blue eyes lined with wrinkles. I can't tear my gaze from his. It feels like I'm locked in a tractor beam until Raiz steps out onto the road and begins to run back to the ship.

Altis joins him, their speed, even carrying me, is incredible. It took twenty minutes to walk this far, but we're back on the ship in what feels like three minutes.

"You can put me down," I say quietly to Raiz as his booted feet stomp up the metal ramp into the cargo bay.

He doesn't reply, just holds me tighter as he walks quickly through the corridors toward the med bay.

"Please, don't take me there again." I put my hand on his chest, imploring him to consider it. "I'm developing a complex by always being taken there. I'm fine."

My cheek stings, but he halts, looking down at me and really taking in my appearance. Instead of continuing toward Hyva's office, he switches directions for my quarters.

"You can set me down. I can walk."

"No."

He strides into my quarters like he owns it. Which actually he does. I'm not set down

until we're in the bathroom, and he lowers me onto the counter. His large hand sprawls over one of my thighs, holding me still, while he reaches behind me and opens a cabinet I didn't even know existed.

He sets bandages and antiseptic wash on the counter, confusing me. "I'm not cut."

"Yes, you are." His words sound more guttural around his fangs. "The Helixian cut your cheek with the spines on his knuckles."

I turn to look in the mirror behind me and, sure enough, on top of the already bruising skin are three parallel gashes. I turn back to Raiz as he unclips the cloak, and it drops from my shoulders. His eyes darken when he looks down at my chest and sees my shirt torn from the collar to my belly button.

My stomach drops. I didn't even feel the shirt rip. The severity of what just happened begins to sink in as both of us look down at my exposed skin.

CHAPTER 8

RAIZ

* * *

Neev whips the remains of her shirt over her head, leaving her bloodied and bruised body on display around the undergarment wrapped around her chest. Our females don't wear such items, but they only develop breasts for feeding young. My eyes catch on a tattoo that extends from beneath the material and downward. Before I can try to puzzle together an idea of what it depicts, I force my eyes back to her face.

Her skin takes on an even paler pallor as she sits there, her eyes becoming unfocused on the wall behind me. She's going into shock. I drag a deep breath in, forcing myself to relax, so my fangs retract as my talons have. I don't need to be hovering over her in a beastly form like that.

She doesn't speak as I wet some cloth with antiseptic liquid. "This will sting." I slide my hand on her unmarred cheek to hold her head still. My chest loosens when she tilts her head into my touch. Even with the vacant look in her eyes, she is giving me her trust.

Stars, she's so small. Her head fits in my hand, and her hair feels like ribbons of silk winding through my fingers. She flinches as I run the soaked material over the first cut.

"I'm sorry," I say, running my thumb over the smooth skin of her other cheek.

“You know,” she says without moving her head, “I almost had him right before you showed up.” The light is coming back in her eyes.

“You did?”

“Yep. Kneaded him really good in the area I assumed genitals were. That’s why he was choking me.” Her voice is a bit rough, likely from being choked. “I’m actually a lot tougher than I look.”

“A fierce, tiny human,” I smirk at her.

“I’m not tiny. From what I understand I’m tall for the average human woman.”

“You’re child size for the Zeahiri.” I dig around in the cabinet for the cream that should quicken healing and prevent scarring. “What do you mean from what you understand?”

She shrugs. “I’ve never met another human. Did you see that there was an older male human in the pub? That was the first look I’ve ever gotten at one.”

“No, my focus was elsewhere.”

“Do you think Altis is okay?”

“Yes. He’s one of the only males who can spar with me and occasionally come out on top. He is fine.”

“It was four on one.”

“He could handle a dozen.”

I grab all the used supplies and toss them into the trash shoot. Neev slides off the counter and walks into the bedroom. She grabs clean clothes and looks at me.

“I’m going to shower off all the blood,” she says.

“Okay.” She looks to the door as if wanting me to leave.

I always forget that humans are more reserved about nudity, so I step out into the living room. But I have no plans to leave my quarters. I have to figure out how I knew she was in trouble before Altis yelled for help down our connection. I was already running for her, a tug from within directing me.

As I change into a clean uniform, I can’t stop myself from trying to figure out an answer to the mystery. Could it be from scent marking her? Did that somehow trigger a connection between us, or at least forge the foundation of one? Her terror hit me with the force of a boulder on my chest. My fangs and talons instantly extending to fight whatever or whoever threatened her. I’ve never reacted like that to anything before.

But seeing her held against the wall like that, her face turning blue, I went into a rage unlike anything I’ve ever felt. I knew I shouldn’t have let her off the ship. Outposts are lawless and attract the worst scourge of the galaxy. At least Cuna has already found what they need and has already begun fixing the drive.

The water stops, and I hear her moving around behind the closed door. My fingers flex on the back of the couch. I might look relaxed, but I’m still pulled so tight I could snap.

She walks out of the bedroom with her damp hair plaited and wrapped on top of her head. She’s pulled on a set of the uniform we wear for training. The black material seems to suck the life from her skin and makes the purple bruise on her cheek stick

out in stark contrast.

“I didn’t realize you’d still be here,” she says, dropping onto the other end of the couch.

“I wanted to make sure you were alright.”

A brief smile lifts the corners of her lips. “I’ll be fine. Were you speaking telepathically with Altis today?”

“Yes.”

“Is that how you knew I was in trouble?”

“He did alert me.” I’m keeping the tug to myself until I understand it.

She nods contemplatively. “How does it work?”

“The mind speaking? Or the mind walking I did with you?”

“Both. Can you do it with anyone? Just read their minds?”

“I can, but I, as you know, find it invasive. Especially the mind walking. Your thoughts are your own unless you decide to share them. Forcing my way inside always feels wrong. But to do so, I just have to close my eyes and place my hand on one’s head.”

“That’s so interesting. Can all of you do it?”

“Not anymore. It’s believed that skill set is from long ago, when we were still an aquatic species and has mostly given way to the force of evolution. My bloodline

remains one of the strongest, and as the heir to the Asterean House I'm gifted with abilities."

"But Altis can?"

"He can communicate with me, as can Hyva and Vynia. They gave me permission to build a sort of channel within their subconscious."

"That's really interesting." A frown settles on her face as she looks past me and through the window.

I find myself wanting to know her thoughts. Yearning for them. "What are you thinking?"

She glances at me. "Is it tempting to just peek for yourself?"

"No." Yes.

"I occasionally feel this sense of emptiness, I guess. Maybe seeing that human man triggered it. I just wish I had the same kind of innate knowledge you have about your history for my own. I spend all my free time watching human documentaries, films, and other forms of media. Or reading books. But it isn't the same as living it."

"I'm sorry."

She shrugs. "It could be worse. At least I had the galaxy at my fingertips within the glass walls of Oculus Nine."

"Do you miss it? The Order?"

"No." The word comes out in a sigh. "Shockingly, I don't. This is the most

excitement and adventure I've ever had." She tosses me a wry smile. "Though I would have preferred not to be stolen from my bed."

"Talk to the Order about that. I asked politely the first time."

"I still don't understand why they told you no." A line forms between her eyebrows. "Other members of the Order routinely travel off Oculus Nine to help."

"Is there some reason they would want to keep you on board? Something special about you?"

"No." She looks at me with sincerity. "I'm completely mundane. The only gift I have is my ability to translate and understand so many languages."

"There are many words I'd use to describe you, Neev. Mundane would never be one of them."

Before she can say anything, Cuna calls me down to engineering. I leave her curled on the couch, looking out at dusk falling over the horizon through the window. It feels wrong to walk away from her while she's upset and pensive, even if her emotional state isn't my business.

I find Cuna with their team, two of which are halfway inside one of the panels behind the drive, legs sticking out as they work on repairs. Cuna looks up from their tablet when I enter the room.

"How long until the drive is fixed?" I ask them.

"We should be able to launch back into space as soon as everyone is on board. After that maybe another hour before we can make the jump back to Zeahiri."

“That’s perfect. I’ll get everyone to their stations.” The twelve-hour leave I granted will be ending in a little over an hour. “Do you need anything else from me down here?”

“No. We’re good. I’ll let you know if that changes.”

* * *

I’ve called all crew to their stations to prepare for atmospheric exit and then our jump to Zeahiri. As soon as I announced over the coms system that they’d be back in their own beds by tomorrow night, I could practically feel the wave of euphoria ripple through the ship. We have been gone nearly a month, some of the crew have mates and families waiting at home for them. I know they’re anxious to get home.

Vynia sits at her console, ready to fly us out of here. Altis sits to my right, Mydax to my left. I didn’t tell either of them that I invited Neev to the bridge to observe take off and the jump. There’s nothing like watching the stars streak by in the seconds leading to being able to bend space and time to the will of your ship.

The lift doors slide open, and all eyes turn to the female who walks into the room. Despite the bruise and cuts on her cheek, she looks completely fine. She moves with a smooth, confident stride, nodding in greeting to the twins. I stand and gesture to my seat.

“You can sit here.”

She glances quickly at Mydax. “Are you sure? Isn’t that your chair?”

“It is. I’ll be fine standing behind you. The first time you experience a jump can be disorienting.”

“Okay.” She doesn’t spare another glance at the male to her left.

“Jump drive is ready, Commander.” Vynia taps a few buttons on her console. “Ready to engage at your mark.”

I lean down and reach over Neev’s shoulder, grabbing the belt and buckling her in. “Just in case,” I say quietly into her ear.

The only tell that she’s nervous is the way her fingers grip the arm rests.

“Engage,” I say to Vynia.

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CHAPTER 9

NEEV

* * *

The world drops from my feet at the sound of Raiz's command. One second I was sitting in the captain's chair. The next my body was weightless, floating in the ether of space and time. Just as quickly, I'm slammed back in my body, my stomach churning at the rapid changes.

When I look out into space, instead of seeing the binary stars of the system we had been in, I see a glowing red star. The crew around me relaxes; it's nearly imperceptible, but I sense the feeling of familiarity and longing sink over them.

Would I feel that way if I could see Oculus Nine? I don't think so. The thought of going back makes me uneasy. I love my work. I miss Torre. But the rest of it? I search my soul for anything resembling longing for my life back there.

I find none. In fact, part of me feels uneasy thinking about it. Having seen more than my home for the past twenty-two years has filled me with a level of excitement I haven't felt in my life. It's only been a short time that I've been outside my cage, but I yearn for more. My eyes drift to Raiz's strong profile, and my soul feels weirdly at ease.

Mydax stands and turns to walk over to one of the crew stationed along the walls of the bridge, but he stops and turns back to me.

“I’m sorry for what happened earlier in the journey. I lost control. It won’t happen again,” he says, his crimson eyes imploring me to trust his word.

“Forgiven.” I unbuckle the belt across my waist and push to my feet, hoping no one sees I’m still a bit unsteady. “We’re all new to this partnership. I’ll do my best to keep my emotions locked down.”

“You weren’t the problem.” Raiz says from behind me. “Mydax, begin docking preparations. Our window between flares is relatively short.”

“Between flares?” I turn to the commander.

“Zeahiri is close to our star.” He taps a few buttons on the armrest of his chair, and a hologram of the system pops up. “Here’s our planet.” He points to one of three orbiting the star. “Due to how close we are, Zeahiri gets hit with radiation storms frequently. Some interfere with our electronics, so we’ll dock the ship on the dark side of the planet at the space station. Then we’ll take transports down to the surface.”

“Are the other planets inhabited?”

“Yes.” His lips flatten into a firm line.

Damn. Clearly not a fan of the neighbors.

“May I stay up here and observe?”

“Of course.”

“I’ll stay out of the way. I don’t want to be a distraction.”

“Don’t worry. This is very routine. The crew is experienced.”

Over the next hour, the space station comes into view. Half of the docks are occupied, all by identical ships to the one we’re on. The planet beneath is completely dark, not a single light shines. It’s the complete opposite of Calindrea, which looks like a veritable jewel box from space with all its lights. I wouldn’t even believe this planet to be inhabited if it weren’t for the fact that I’m on their ship.

I find myself drawn to Vynia, asking her questions as she flies the ship toward the station. She answers everything, explaining the controls and what they’re for. The female is quickly becoming one of my favorite people on the ship. I hope once we’re down on the surface, she’ll still be around.

“We’ll stay back and make sure everything is handled for docking,” Altis says to Raiz. “I’m sure you want to get Neev settled in and go see Kodia.”

Kodia? Is that his mate?

I’m not sure why it didn’t occur to me that he may have a mate. He’s clearly an important and powerful male. Why wouldn’t he have someone waiting for him at home? An unpleasant sensation roils through me at the way his eyes light up hearing the name.

Not that I mistook his kindness for anything other than feeling responsible for my wellbeing. It’s the least he could do honestly, after the violent way he procured my assistance to begin with. In fact, I should take care to remember that regardless of how much he appears to care for my wellbeing, it’s really just self serving on his part. He needs me to translate this ancient text. I’m nothing more than a means to an end for him.

Once the ship has docked, Raiz leads me through the ship to a long tube-shaped

structure, just tall enough for the Zeahirians and wide enough for passage single file in either direction. The crew moves out of his way as I trail behind him. We step out of the tube and onto a large metal platform that connects this level of the station all along the perimeter.

Our booted feet clang against the stairs as we descend to a floor full of transports with Zeahirians moving in all directions. Most of them ignore my presence, only nodding in greeting to Raiz. We cross to an open transport, and Raiz takes a seat behind the controls. I sit on the bench seat behind him and watch as he fires up the small craft.

It's not even been two minutes when Hyva boards and closes the door behind him. "All good to go," he says as he sits down on the bench across from me and stretches his long legs out. "I'm ready for my own bed."

Raiz grunts in agreement as the transport lifts off the ground. "The cloak worked."

Hyva looks at me with a sparkle in his eyes. "I can see that."

"What cloak?" I ask.

"The one that's making you look like a Zeahirian female. Cuna and I worked on it as soon as you were brought on board."

"What do you mean?" I look down, seeing my own hands and body.

"May I?" Hyva points behind me.

"Yes?" I turn to see what he's pointing at.

He reaches to the small of my back and plucks off a small pin. I watch in stunned silence as he attaches the pin to his uniform and suddenly looks like a Zeahirian

female.

“It doesn’t mask your scent, so it’ll only work for short periods like moving from the ship to the transport.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?” I look at the back of Raiz’s head.

“We wanted you relaxed and acting natural.” Hyva leans back. “Mainly so your scent wouldn’t arouse any unwanted attention.”

I think back to the meeting and my fear triggering Mydax’s primal response. I suppose from a logical standpoint it makes sense. I still don’t like being tricked or misled.

“Is my scent really that potent?” I ask.

“Yes.” Both males say in unison.

I look out the window, once again noting how dark the planet is below us. “How long is a day on Zeahiri?”

“Technically, there are no days or nights. Zeahiri is tidally locked, one side faces the star at all times and is incredibly hot. The other side is dark and cold. We live in the terminus, a ring around the planet that is suitable for life.”

“We do abide by the galactic standard of a twenty-five-hour cycle. It makes a standard rotation around the star one hundred and sixteen days.”

Good to know the Zeahiri have the same clock as Oculus Nine. I won’t have to change my habits much, if at all depending on how long it takes me to translate the text.

Turning my attention from the two males back out the window I can begin to see the slightest ring of light over the horizon. As we move lower and lower into the atmosphere a rocky shoreline emerges through the mist.

I lean closer, my heart lurching at the first sight of open water I've ever had. White tipped waves create gorgeous patterns in the sea below us. Is it an ocean? A large lake? Probably an ocean, I assume, knowing they evolved from the water.

The transport loses altitude until it's just barely skimming above the waves. Raiz navigates through towering rock spires jutting from the water not too far from the rocky cliffs to the right of us. I hope I can walk along the water, dipping my toes in and feeling the land beneath my feet.

The transport slows as Raiz steers us into a cave in the black cliffs. He lands the transport on a large slab of rock where a dozen Zeahirians wait in a line. They all wear the same uniform and curious look as I step off the transport behind Hyva.

"I'll see you later," the male calls over his shoulder as he walks off into one of the three tunnels.

"Neev," Raiz puts his hand on my back, ushering me forward. "This is my house staff. Uzold, my house manager, will handle anything you need."

The male steps forward and lifts a hand so I can attach a name to the face.

"Breval," a beautiful female steps forward, "is my chef. She's been researching human dietary needs and will be able to make nearly anything you wish while you're my guest."

He introduces everyone else, and I'm sure I'll eventually memorize their names, but right now I'm overwhelmed by the sound of water lapping against the rock I stand on.

The way the briny scent of saltwater and wet rock fills my nostrils. It takes all my will power not to walk over to the water and run my hand through it.

“Shall I show her to her room, Lord Asterean?” Uzold asks.

“No. I’ll give her a quick tour.” He turns to me, sweeping his hand forward toward a staircase. “This way.”

I follow him up a torch-lit, spiraling staircase carved into the blackest stone I’ve ever seen. In the places where light from the torches dances, I can see the faintest hint of silver and blue veins of another form of rock moving through the black. It’s beautiful, and I swear the stone hums under my fingers as they brush along the wall.

The last thing I expect to see when we reach the top of the steps is a wide corridor with the tallest ceilings I’ve ever walked beneath. Pillars of stone are carved along the walls, each supporting an arch with a chandelier of crystal beneath it. The light from the lit sconces and candles throws rainbows throughout the long corridor.

“This is my office.” Raiz points to a door as we walk past. “The library.” He points at the next door. “The entertaining rooms. The kitchen. The dining room.” He points to each as we walk past. Then we turn down another corridor. “This is where all the sleeping quarters are. Your suite will be right beside mine at the end.”

He opens the door to the largest bedroom I’ve ever seen. The first thing my eyes are drawn to are the double doors overlooking the water. I don’t bother to look at anything else and practically run to the doors, throwing them open and squealing with delight at the large terrace beyond. I walk right to the edge looking down at the churning water as it breaks against the rocks below. The sky is crimson and full of thousands of twinkling stars.

I turn at the sound of his footsteps behind me. “This is the most beautiful thing I’ve

ever seen.” Tears fill my eyes as I look at him, the beauty overwhelming me.

“It truly is,” he says as he looks at me. “Can you swim?” he asks, coming to the railing beside me.

“Yes, they taught me how to swim on Oculus Nine when I was a child. Truthfully, I think my energy grated on the sisters in charge of my upbringing.” I look back over the water. “But I’ve never swum in anything other than a pool.”

“We have tech that will allow you to breathe underwater if you want to join me someday for a swim.”

“Really? I’d love that.”

“I’ll have Uzold take care of it.” He turns his back to the water and points to a set of doors further down the balcony. “That’s my room. I’m right next door if you need anything. Our rooms are the only ones connected to this balcony, so security won’t be an issue.”

That makes my brows scrunch. “Is security something I should be worried about?”

“No. You’re protected here, but there are people on Zeahiri who would feel threatened to find out what we’re doing. I don’t want you to leave the property without me, Altis, Vynia, or Hyva.”

“Are they staying here, too?”

“No, but as high-ranking members of House Aste, they have properties connected to my home. I’ll explain more over dinner, but there are a few things I need to take care of first. I’ll get you in two hours?”

“Okay.”

I watch as he walks into his room and then take one more look at the view before going into check out my own room. A large bed is set against the wall opposite the door with two panels of gorgeous, plush midnight blue material swooped on either side, framing the cushioned headboard. Matching bedding covers the bed. Curtains of the same color and material line the wall with the doors leading outside. Sconces bookend every door in the room to provide light.

The bathroom puts what I had on Oculus Nine to shame. A huge standalone tub sits in one corner with a walk-in shower next to it. There might not be electricity, but at least they have plumbing. I walk around a corner to find the toilet hidden away in the corner for added privacy. Each wall has two to three sconces, and upon closer inspection, I see a knob that controls how much light they give off. At full strength it has a similar brightness to daylight on Calindrea.

Abandoning the bathroom, I wander back into the bedroom and crawl onto the bed. I untie my boots and let them drop beside the bed. The mound of pillows beckons me, so I lay down, deciding to take a few minutes to rest but soon find myself completely drifting off.

* * *

The sound of someone knocking on the door pulls me from my dreamless slumber. It takes me a few seconds to reorient myself and remember where I am before my feet hit the floor. I cross the space between the bed and the door, opening it to the sight of Raiz in a type of clothing I’ve not yet seen him wear.

“Ready for dinner?” he asks.

“Yeah.” I run a hand through my hair. “I’m sorry, I fell asleep.” I’m about to tell him

I'll just need a minute to change but then realize I don't really have anything but the clothes he's given me so this will have to do.

"Is your room to your liking?" he asks as he leads me down the hall.

"Yes. The bed is incredibly comfortable."

"Good. How are you adjusting to the lack of electricity?"

"It's a little strange but not too hard to get used to."

I follow him into the dining room and stop short at its unexpected beauty. The room is long and lined with the same type of doors as the set in my bedroom, leading to a long terrace. Huge chandeliers hang above the long table, large enough to seat fourteen. There are only two place settings, though.

He pulls out a chair for me and then sits after helping me.

"Is it just us?"

"Yes. Altis and Vynia are visiting their parents. Hyva is," a smirk lifts his lips, "out with some females."

"Like a date?"

He blinks at me blankly. "What's a date?"

"Is he courting them or something?"

"Oh." Understanding lights his eyes. "No. Just casual mating."

“Is that common for the Zeahiri?” My cheeks heat at the topic, but I find myself deeply curious.

“Depends on the individual. For Hyva? Absolutely common.”

“And you?” What the hells, Neev? “Sorry. That was improper.”

“Mating is never casual for me.” He says before lifting a glass of deep red liquid to his lips. His tongue traces his bottom lip, gathering a drop left behind. “Try the wine.” He gestures to the full glass in front of me. “It’s strong, though.”

I lift the glass to my lips, the slightly sweet and floral notes hit my nostrils first, and then I feel the wine hit my taste buds. My body sings with joy as I take my first sip. I greedily take another and lock eyes with Raiz. “This is really good.”

“Yes.” He reaches over and takes the glass from me. “Take it slow. The first time I had this, I was passed out on the floor for hours. I’d hate to see what it does to a small human.”

Once again he refers to me as a small human. Before I can say anything in regard to not being small for a human female, Breval comes out with two plates balanced in her hands.

She sets one down in front of each of us. She rambles off what it is, some form of fish I assume and vegetables I’ve never heard of. She waits until he tries a bite and nods before walking off back into the kitchen.

“So you’re Commander Asterean on your ship and Lord Asterean at home?” I ask in between bites.

“Yes.”

“Is the title here passed along your family line?”

“Yes.” He sets his fork down. “My family has called this place home since we left the sea.”

My brows rise. “How long ago was that?”

“Nearly one thousand years.”

“Are there a lot of families like yours?”

“Nine across the planet.”

“And you rule together?”

“The Sovereign rules. The nine houses just manage the citizens and land.” The tone of his voice has shifted from friendly, borderline playful, to serious.

I immediately regret asking, even though I should have an idea of what I’m walking into.

“What about your family? Do you live here alone?”

“I’m all that’s left,” he looks around the space.

“Big place for one male.”

“There’s the staff. Most of which have worked for my family longer than I’ve been alive. Hyva is around a lot, too, as the only member of his line left.”

“I heard that most Zeahiri are born as twins. I’m surprised so many of you seem to be

the last of your family.”

His eyes shutter, and he looks away momentarily. “Half the children born don’t make it past adolescence.”

“So you had a twin?”

“A brother.” He nods.

“I’m sorry,” I say. I want to ask what happened, but the energy of the room is so heavy. I can’t help the desire to completely change the subject.

“Hyva mentioned you would want to see a female named Kodia on the transport. If you want to leave to spend time with her, I can find ways to amuse myself.”

His lips lift in a slow smile. “Kodia is a male.”

“Oh.”

Ohhh.

“Sorry I shouldn’t have presumed you were uh...”

“I was what?” His eyes sparkle as his smile grows.

“I just assumed you were into females. I guess I shouldn’t be surprised, I’m into females. Males, too, probably if I’d had any experience with them. Which I obviously haven’t.” I should stop babbling like a fool. “Anyways. Kodia is male,” my voice squeaks as my face flushes with embarrassment.

His smile has doubled in size. I guess at the very least I’ve entertained him, so he can

count me as an interesting dinner guest. His earlier warning about the wine flies right out of my mind as I chug the remaining bit from the glass. It really tastes incredible.

“Do you want to meet Kodia?”

CHAPTER 10

RAIZ

* * *

As I lead her down the stairs to the grotto where I'll call Kodia in, I can't help but spin her rushed confession around in my mind. The wine is likely the cause, but I'm going to enjoy her adorable outburst regardless. I will have to make sure she's given the pain relief tea before she goes to sleep, though.

She's never been with a male.

The thought filters through unbidden. I was already attracted to her before knowing that. Now the beastly, primal side of me wants to pursue her. Thank the stars I'm a more logical male than one who gives into base instincts to take and plunder.

I step onto the smooth stone landing and motion for her to stay back toward the stairs. "I'm going to call him. Don't be scared." He'll scent her fear just as Mydax did. My tie to him should be strong enough to convey that she's a friend, but her scent is strong.

Kneeling down at the edge of the water, I drag my fingers through the water to send him our signal. I've felt him and his mate close since we've been back. After a minute the water ripples and a large dark form shoots up from the bottom. He knocks me over as he lunges out of the water, landing with a torrent of seawater splash all the way over to where Neev stands, wide-eyed and staring.

I don't scent fear from her at all, though, a surprise as Kodia is one of the largest synapiads I've ever seen. His charcoal-colored body, covered in a dense fur, shines in the dim light. He waddles sideways on his front flippers to bend and nuzzle against me. I wrap my arms around his warm body, squeezing him with all the love I possess.

"What is he?" I'm surprised to hear Neev's voice coming from right beside me.

"Kodia is a synapiad, my soul-tied creature."

He turns to her now, his nostrils flaring as he sniffs the alien beside me. His mouth opens as he chuffs to communicate with his mate. Rows of razor sharp teeth gleam between his jaws, but Neev doesn't step back.

My jaw drops as she reaches out tentatively and lets him smell her hand. My body tenses as I watch, ready to spring between them if necessary. He lowers his head and allows her to run her hand between his ears.

"Hi sweet boy," she says quietly. "I love him," she says as she looks at me.

"You're not afraid?"

"No." She gives him the brightest, most beautiful smile I've ever seen and then looks at me. "Should I be?"

"He's an apex predator on this planet. He could eat you." Probably in one bite.

"No, he's just a good boy who likes getting pets." She changes her voice, making it almost musical in nature and softer.

"We used to ride them into battle."

“And I’m sure you’re both very scary males, riding into battle and coming out victorious.” She continues with the voice, now scratching behind both of his ears. His tongue lolls out the side of his mouth, and his eyes close.

“We would come out victorious,” I say seriously. “He’s not a pet.”

“Could have fooled me.” She drops her hand. “Thank you for introducing us. Does he live here?”

“No. He has a mate who lives on one of the islands we passed by. That’s his home.”

“How did you call him?”

“We’re soul-tied. When I dipped my fingers into the water, he sensed me and came as fast as he could.”

“Does everyone have a soul-tie to one of them?” She smiles as he dives back into the water.

“No. It’s fairly rare and likely only because of my line that I still possess enough of our gifts to have a tie.”

Kodia pops up from below the water and spits a mouthful at my feet, informing me that he wants me in the water now.

“He wants me to get in with him.” I reach behind my neck and pull my shirt over my head, tossing it on the ground.

I look over at Neev whose eyes are locked on my body. Every drift of her violet eyes over my body feels like a brush of tentative hands over my flesh. I slowly reach for the buckle of my pants and the sound of it clicking open pulls her from the daze she

was in.

“I—what are you doing?”

“Taking my clothes off to get in with him.”

“Naked?” her voice lilts upward.

“Yes.”

She spins and gives me her back as soon as she sees me hook my thumbs in the waistband of my pants, readying to push them down.

“I’ll, uh, see myself back to my room.” She waves awkwardly over her shoulder, not turning around until she hears the splash of me jumping in the water.

“Neev,” I say from the rock I’m standing on.

She turns, her eyes moving from my eyes down to the planes of muscles along my stomach, the V between my hips that disappears beneath the dark water. I don’t say anything until she’s had her fill of looking at me. Mainly because I can’t recall another female so openly appraising me like that. A different scent wafts through the air from her, a headier, muskier scent. I drag a deep breath of that magical scent in before speaking again.

“Sleep well.”

“You, too.”

* * *

The sound of the crashing waves lures me out onto the balcony beyond my room. Going out into the deep water with Kodia and his mate tonight was exactly what I needed. We can build deep pools on each of our ships, making the water identical in terms of chemistry and temperature as our ocean, but nothing compares to the real thing. Feeling the pull of the current, hiding in the kelp forest from Kodia, seeing the thriving schools of fish.

I spent hours out there today. The guilt of leaving Neev to entertain herself is what draws me over to her side of the balcony. At least that's what I tell myself.

She's left the doors open but pulled the curtains closed. As I draw closer her scent hits me first. It's a mix of the cleansing salts I instructed to be left near her bath and the same sweet, musky scent as earlier tonight. My blood sings at her scent, my body becoming aware of everything around me on a molecular level but only focusing on her.

A breeze parts the curtains, and I catch a glimpse of her in the center of the bed. Before I can think better of it, I reach out and grab the curtain, holding it back just enough to watch as she writhes in the center of the bed. Her breathing is heavy; if it weren't for the scent of her arousal, I'd think she was having a nightmare.

This is no nightmare, though. Her body is covered by the sheets, but I can tell her legs are parted by the way her knees are raised on either side of her body. One of her hands is at her breasts while the other works between her legs.

I shouldn't be here.

I shouldn't be watching her like this.

But the monsters of the deep couldn't drag me away from the sound of her panted breaths. Could I draw those noises from her? Does she taste as delicious as she

smells?

My cock thickens, seed dripping as I watch her back arch off the mattress. The hand between her legs moves faster and faster. Stars, I wish I could tear that sheet away and see exactly what she's doing.

I want to learn how to bring her this type of pleasure if she ever were to allow me the honor. There must be some sort of resources on bringing humans carnal pleasure. I'd go to the ends of the universe to learn just to experience her pleasure.

She cries out, louder this time with her head thrown back in the pillows. The movement causes the sheet to drop, exposing one of her breasts. A perfect mound of pale skin topped by a piqued, pink nipple.

Fuck.

My fangs elongate at the sight of her long, slender bared neck, jarring me enough to let the curtain fall closed again and walk to the edge of the balcony. I can still hear her cries of pleasure as they come faster and faster but can't bring myself to give her the final vestiges of privacy by going back into my room.

My body is alive with need. The brush of the wind against my skin does nothing to settle the roar awakened within me. My most primal form claws at my chest, eager to go lay claim to the female pleasuring herself so boldly.

With one last look over my shoulder, I tear my clothes from my body, leaving them in a pile at my feet and jump over the edge into the churning water beneath me. I don't call for Kodia, knowing he's resting as I should be. Instead, I dive deep into the darkness. My gills form immediately on either side of my neck.

I swim right to the edge of the continental shelf and sit with my feet dangled over the

side. The quiet of the sea down here soothes my raging need. I watch the deep, careful to keep an eye on the shadows swimming beneath me. I'm a predator, but there are bigger threats down here than I could ever be.

Maybe that's why I've always loved it here, sitting on the edge of this vast chasm. I've been dominant in every facet of my life after the blood ritual that killed my brother. When I killed him.

He wasn't a good male. He would have continued the traditions of the Sovereign without a second thought. I know for a fact he wouldn't be plagued with nightmares like I am of the moment I was forced to kill him.

Stars, how many times have I woken with the phantom feel of his blood coating my skin and the taste of it running down my throat. If Neev knew what I did to him, my own brother, the being I shared my mother's womb with, she'd run. I wouldn't blame her.

Our traditions are vile.

Vynia and Altis were only spared because of her missing limb. Had she been able bodied, they would have had to perform the right. Either of them could have won, and it would have driven them mad with guilt like it does me.

If anything could calm the storm raging in my blood for the female I brought into my life, it's thoughts of my brother. This is the whole reason for Neev being brought here. The doubt I have in everything we've been taught.

The Sovereign has ruled for three times our usual lifespan. With each passing year he becomes more bloodthirsty, demanding sacrifices be made of all families. More death at his hands.

By the time I stand and turn back toward home, I'm reminded of the end goal. Ending the reign of the Sovereign and the horrific atrocities committed in his name. There's no way this is how our ancestors wanted us to live.

Uzold is waiting for me as I emerge from the sea. He holds out a towel after I shake out my muscles.

"There are rumors about a human being on the planet already circulating. Just thought you'd want to know."

"Thank you." I gesture for him to walk with me. "Where did you hear that from?"

"The market and then again when I dropped your weapons off at the armory for cleaning. It doesn't seem like anyone knows why she's here, or even that you have her, but you know how much humans go for on the illegal trade markets. She'd be a prize."

"I know. Double security while she's here but keep them out of the house. Only essential workers are allowed within the walls."

He hangs back as I enter my room and close the door behind me. Anger courses through me at the thought of something happening to Neev. She's too important to my plans for anything to go sideways. There's no one else who can do what she can. At least that I know of.

That's why I feel so protective of the female.

CHAPTER 11

NEEV

* * *

How long have I been on this planet? The fact that the sky never changes makes it nearly impossible to tell the time without a clock. I should look for Uzold and ask for one to be brought to my room.

I'm so grateful for the tea that Raiz had delivered before I fell asleep last night and the cup that was ready for me upon waking today. He wasn't lying about the strength of that wine he served last night.

And, stars, last night was oddly intense. I find Raiz to be so much more relaxed down here than he was in space. His quiet humor is disarming. Then seeing him nearly naked. The firm and toned muscles that cover his body. Do all Zeahirians look like that? Surely not. The stars couldn't be so unfair to sculpt a species to sheer perfection like that.

But the best part of the previous night was meeting Kodia. The giant synapiad with a sweet smile has already wormed his way into my heart. Raiz said they were soul-tied. I wonder what that means specifically. I didn't have a chance to ask, but I'll definitely look into it.

Breval brought breakfast to my room, some sort of food that tastes like eggs and spiced meat, along with several varieties of fruit to try. She asked that I tell what I

liked the most, and to be honest, everything was equally as good.

I haven't seen or heard from Raiz, but he made it clear I was welcome to explore his home as much as I wish. I want to check out the room he called a library. Leafing through books in his language should help when it comes time to translate their text.

My bare feet carry me silently down the hall, stopping occasionally to peer inside empty rooms. Everything is immaculately clean, but a feeling of emptiness pervades the space. It's lonely and quiet.

I finally make it to the library and push open one of the doors. Soft rugs cover the floor, plush enough that my toes sink into them. Three of the walls are covered in bookshelves from floor to ceiling. The final wall has four sets of doors to another large patio. This one overlooks a quiet cove where the sound of waves lapping gently filters through one of the open doors.

A cool breeze filters through, blowing the curtains, but I ignore that for the time being. I drag my fingers over the spines of thick war strategy books lining one shelf. No, thank you. The next shelf holds what looks like autobiographies. I pull a few and surprise, surprise, they're all military heroes. Pass. I pull out another that looks promising only to realize it's a business book. Boring.

I need a natural history or fiction section. Even a few Zeahirian classics would be amazing. Or a biology text. Anything.

"Sister Neev," Uzold says from the doorway. "Can I help you find anything?"

"Yes, actually." I run through a list of books I'd be interested in, and he quickly walks to the opposite wall, pulling three out for me.

"This is a biological history of our evolution." He hands me a thick tome and then

sets two much smaller books on top. “And these are two of our more popular fictional stories.”

“Thank you.” I smile at the tall male.

“Can I help you with anything else?”

“Could you start a fire for me? Perhaps bring a blanket?”

“Of course.” He walks over to the fireplace and gets a fire started. There are no logs, just flame and some sort of burning mineral. “I’ll be back with a blanket.”

I sit and curl into an oversize chair, at least oversize for me. It would probably fit Raiz perfectly. I set the fiction works aside to focus on learning what I can of the Zeahiri. It doesn’t take long until I’m lost to the knowledge I’m gaining.

I barely register Uzold setting a warm, woven blanket beside me. At some point Breval brings in a tray of food and some hot tea. I munch absentmindedly and absorb page after page of information about them. I had no idea they are an older species than humans by nearly a million standard rotations, as is their planet. It makes sense having a red dwarf star at the center of their system.

Warmth from the fire combined with the soft blanket tossed over me lulls me into a relaxed state, and before I know it, my eyes are drifting closed. The only sounds are the gentle lapping of waves outside and, occasionally, the call of some kind of bird, if I had to guess. A few minutes of rest won’t hurt.

* * *

My eyes fly open when I sense someone watching me sleep, a large hand coming to rest on my knee. As soon as I see it’s Raiz kneeling before me, I relax. How can the

sight of the male who kidnapped me make me instantly feel safe?

I blink several times to clear my eyes and set the book from my lap onto the table beside the chair I'm sitting at.

"I didn't mean to startle you." He picks up one of the books, his brows rising as he glances at the title. "What made you pull these?"

"I told Uzold what I was looking for, and he pulled these works for me."

Understanding shines in his eyes as he sets them back down. "That makes sense. He and my mother used to read these together and discuss them."

"I hadn't gotten to the fiction books yet, I drifted off reading this one." I hold up the thicker work. "There were a few words I couldn't figure out the translation for. Do you mind if I take it to my room to look through tonight? It'll help hone my skills."

"You can take anything from this room you need or want. From any room in the house, actually. I've been called away tonight to help settle a dispute. Vynia will come to dine with you. I'm sure she'll be happy to help with anything you need."

"Okay, that'd be nice. I really enjoyed getting to know her on the ship, I'd love to continue outside her official duties."

"Good." He stands and holds out a hand. "Join me on the terrace?"

I look up into his bright green eyes and slip my hand into his, allowing him to help me to my feet. He's wearing a pair of loose-fitting pants and a shirt that stretches tightly across his chest, hugging the muscles that I'm now all too aware of. Just like me, he's barefoot, and I can't help but stare down at the differences and similarities between us.

Where my foot is small with five separated toes, his are twice the length and he only has four toes, which are connected by a thin membrane. He must notice my attention because he lifts a foot and spreads his toes. “These help when we swim.”

“Makes sense. Like fins or flippers.”

“Exactly.”

“Humans have myths about sea creatures called mermaids and sirens, which are half human, half fish beings. Sailors used to sing songs of being lured to their death by them.”

“Really?” He chuckles quietly. “Maybe it wasn’t a myth.”

“Every day I learn something new, the thought of mermaids being real doesn’t seem so far out there.”

“Do you know a lot of human lore?”

“Yeah, it’s basically my only hobby.”

“Do you know any self-defense, or do any athletics?”

“Torre taught me some basics of self-defense after I was mugged on Calindrea one of the nights I went down to the surface. Otherwise not really. I’m more of a bookworm. Why?”

He leans against the railing and looks around the cove. “I’m hearing more chatter regarding you being here. I want to make sure you’re safe, as safe as possible when I or anyone from the crew can’t be with you. Will you be okay with Vynia teaching you a few things?”

“Of course. The thought of being hurt doesn’t sound fun, so anything you can teach me is welcomed.”

“Good.” He turns to me again. “But please know, if you’re with me, there is nothing that will happen to you. You don’t need to worry about your safety. Despite the circumstances of our first meeting, you will always be safe with me.”

“I trust you.”

Maybe it’s naive, ignorant even, to do so, but I can’t change the fact that I do. It’s not just that I trust the male, I enjoy our time together.

“Thank you. I’ve had more clothes brought in for you, so you don’t have to wear our uniform the entire time you’re on the planet.”

“Oh, good. Not that there’s anything wrong with them.” I glance down at my body clad in the black and charcoal pants and shirt. “They’re functional which is really all that matters, but it’d be nice to have something more casual.”

We fall into several minutes of silence, just watching the stars above us.

“What’s the beach like down there?” I ask, pointing at the sliver of black sand.

“It’s nice, though too small to enjoy.”

“Is there a way down?”

He points to where the terrace wraps around the side of the cliff. “There is a set of stairs there. You’re welcome to come and go as much as you’d like.”

“Thank you.” I smile over at him. “I’ve never been on a beach before.”

“Is that so? We’ll have to change that while you’re with us, then.”

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CHAPTER 12

NEEV

* * *

Vynia joins me right as Raiz leaves. I watch him walk down the corridor, noting the drastic change in his appearance and demeanor as he steps out as the Lord of his house. Of all the versions I've seen of him, the casual, barefoot, at-home version is my favorite. Though, it's hotter than it should be to see him with two swords crossed behind his back.

"Two swords? Is that really necessary?" I ask just before he exits.

"If you knew these two families, you wouldn't think to ask me." His voice is dark with amusement.

"Who is it?" Vynia asks.

"Xyetol and Zrygen."

Vynia's wince at the names is all the response I need to take his word for it.

"Be careful," I say quietly, knowing he'll hear me.

He gives me a feral smile over his shoulder. "I'm not the one who should be worried."

When the door closes behind him, I find Vynia looking at me oddly.

“What?” I ask the female.

“Nothing.” She holds both hands up. “You ready to train before we have dinner?”

“Lead the way.”

She takes me down a level to a large room, the rock of the cliff the home is built into remains jagged and raw down here. There are no polished carvings lining the wall like the living spaces. Only a soft layer of sand covers the floor. Racks of various weapons line two sides of the space. Lights flicker on overhead as she hits a switch.

I look over at her, confused. “I thought you didn’t have electricity?”

“This room is completely underground and insulated from any flares or interference from our star. The lights run off a generator.”

“Interesting.” I look around, even with the lights it’s still pretty dim for my comfort. “Can you make them brighter?”

That’s one thing I hadn’t thought of until my research earlier; I had obviously noticed all the lighting on the ship was dim, and then in the house everything was as well. I just assumed it was because of the permanent twilight they live in. And it is to an extent, but their vision has evolved to be best in low light conditions.

“I can.” She grimaces as the lights brighten for my benefit.

“Is that too bright for you?”

“I’ll adjust.”

She pulls her shirt over her head, leaving her in a tight-fitting vest and a pair of pants similar to what Raiz lounges around in. Her exposed skin has the same patterning as Raiz's, with alternating stripes of lighter and darker gray across her back fading to a pale gray on the front of her body. Her long black hair is plaited down the back of her head. She's nearly as tall as the males of her species, but where they are bulky, she's lithe.

I pull my hair back, tying it into a ponytail and fastening it with a small piece of leather Uzold found for me. Vynia meets me in the center of the room, appraising me in a way that makes me nervous.

"Having your hair like this gives your opponent an easy way to grab you." She tugs the ponytail free and steps behind me, quickly styling it like hers. "Do all humans have hair like this?"

"What do you mean?"

"It's so soft. And the color under the lights, I didn't realize there were hints of blue and violet and green in your hair."

"There's a range of colors and textures for human hair, just as there is for you. But from what I've seen my hair and eye color are not normal. At least not from all the human media I've watched and read over the years."

"Right." She nods. "I forget that you weren't raised by other humans." She finishes and moves in front of me. "Raiz said you have some training from one of the Order's guards?"

"Yes. I'm not sure how helpful it'll be against one of you, but it's something."

"Doesn't matter. I'm going to take what you know and build on it by showing you

Zeahiri weaknesses to exploit.”

That’s exactly what she does for the next couple hours. She shows me every weakness, where to aim my hits, how to use my lower center of gravity to take her down. I might be shorter and weaker, but there’s no shame in fighting dirty to stay alive.

I’m a sweaty mess by the end. She drops down beside me on the floor and pulls her pant leg up to release her prosthetic. I watch as she cleans the grains of sand that managed to work their way into where it attaches. I want to ask her about growing up with that in a society that values physical strength so deeply, but I keep my questions to myself. I don’t want to make her uncomfortable or be ignorantly rude.

“Do you really think I’ll have to defend myself here?”

“If the wrong people find out what Raiz is doing? Yes,” she answers seriously. “But you’re safe here. Everyone on Raiz’s house staff is trained and has orders to protect you.”

I wince. “That’s embarrassing. To be seen as some weak female, in need of protection.”

“Don’t think of it that way.” She reattaches the prosthetic. “We grow up beating the hell out of each other. Violence is in the marrow of our bones. You are smart, far more intelligent than most of our species. That’s dangerous on an entirely different level. Out of thousands of systems in the galaxy, Raiz sought you out. That says a lot.”

“When you put it like that.” My lips lift in a small smile.

“And you’re not completely helpless, physically. I didn’t know you’d be quite so

strong when you look so soft.”

“Thanks,” I say sardonically as I knock my shoulder into her.

We stand and brush the sand from our clothes. I tell her I’m going to take a quick shower before dinner. I’m sure I smell awful, plus standing beneath the punishingly hot spray sounds incredible for my already beginning to ache muscles. Maybe I’ll ask Uzold to show me how to work the tub later tonight.

After my shower I find even more clothing options have been added to the armoire in my room. There are even a few cloaks hanging inside, lightweight and heavier. It makes sense I’d need warmer clothing considering the temple where the text is on the dark side of the planet.

I find Vynia in the kitchen, sitting on the counter talking to an irritated-looking Breval. “Please make the sweets, Breval. No one does them like you.”

“Because I’m the best.” She answers as if there’s no other option.

“Exactly. I’ve traveled the galaxy and haven’t found anything better. I know you hate making them but look at Neev. She’s barely eaten food with any taste before. Think of the joy on her face when she takes the first bite.”

“What are you talking about?” I ask, fighting a smile at the look of exasperation on Breval’s face.

“Breval used to make us these sweets when we were little. I can’t think of a human equivalent, but they’re sweet and delicious. It’s been forever since we’ve had them.”

Breval was cooking for Raiz’s family when he was a kid? How old is she? She doesn’t look much older than him or Vynia.

“Go bother someone else,” Breval dismisses us. “I need to cook, and I can’t do that with you taking up all the space on my counter.”

“Only because I love you,” Vynia slides off the counter and then tucks her arm through mine leading me out of the kitchen. “And I want those sweets.”

“What is Altis doing tonight?” I ask as we settle into chairs on the balcony.

“He’s with Raiz. He’s not only his second on the ship, he also serves as an advisor to the High Lord.”

“What exactly does all that mean? Raiz gave me a very brief explanation of the hierarchy but no details.”

“Did he explain the Houses?”

“Yes.”

“Okay, each house encompasses a different part of the Terminus and the Lords of each house enforce the rules of the Sovereign. They’re also charged with protecting the citizens, collecting taxes, and mediating issues between families.”

“How was the Sovereign chosen? And the Lords?”

“None of them were chosen. The Sovereign has held power for so long, I don’t even know for sure his history. Lord is the title passed from the strongest to the strongest in a family line.”

“They don’t teach you any of that when you’re young?”

“They teach us what they want us to know, the truth as they need it to be to retain

power.”

“Is that why I’m here?”

She nods.

“Why hasn’t he taken me there yet?”

“It’s not as simple as getting in a transport and flying there. The temple is deep into the dark side of the planet. It’s too cold above ground, so you’ll have to travel through a network of tunnels. We’ll need guides who know them and can be discreet.”

A feeling of foreboding settles over me as the true danger of what I’m helping them with settles over my shoulders. I believe in the changes they want to make, though. And I trust them.

* * *

After dinner I’m walking Vynia to the door when heat suddenly flashes through my body. Searing pain cuts through my head, and I fall to my knees on the stone floor. I’m vaguely aware of her dropping to my side and calling out for help from Uzold.

My stomach roils with nausea, and I lose the battle to keep my dinner down. Uzold lifts me into his arms with zero hesitation and carries me to my room with Vynia on his heels. I don’t want to succumb to unconsciousness because I know what waits for me.

The whispers.

The nothingness.

The terror.

Unfortunately, for me I can't fight it back.

* * *

Just like in real life, I fall to my knees, my hands covering my ears as the whispering voices, millions of them, seem to intensify with each breath I take. As far as my eyes can see there is nothing near me, just an endless, white space filled with so much nonsensical noise I can't even think to fight it back.

I drop my head to my knees and cover my head with my arms, rocking back and forth to soothe myself.

It feels like an eternity passes and then I feel a hand on my back and the whispers stop. I look up hoping to find Raiz like the last time, but instead it's a man I've never seen before. I shuffle away from him quickly.

He crouches down, hands outstretched as if he means no harm. For the longest time we just look at each other. He's wearing normal human clothing, dark pants and a sweater that hugs his frame, hinting at the muscles beneath. His hair is dark, but his eyes are violet like mine.

"It's incredible," he says quietly. "You look just like her."

I move a step back as he moves forward.

"I won't hurt you. I'm here to help. I know this is overwhelming, hearing everyone."

"Who are you?" I ask.

“My name is Eryx. What’s yours?”

“Neev,” I answer quietly, so relieved that the whispering has ceased.

“Nice to meet you.” He looks around, as if he can see more than I can. “Neev, I want to help you, but you need to tell me where you are. I can’t help if I can’t get to you.”

“This is my subconscious.”

“Yes, it is but it’s also so much more. I can teach you how to use it, you just have to tell me where you are.” Something flashes in his eyes, and he looks over his shoulder. “We don’t have time. Tell me now.”

My instincts scream not to say a word about where I am. He hasn’t answered any of my questions. Something about this is wrong. Is it even real? Did I fall all the way asleep? Am I dead?

My eyes drift shut at a phantom touch on the side of my face. Warmth and comfort spread through me, and when I open my eyes, the strange man is gone, and Raiz is kneeling beside me. The phantom touch turns corporeal as fingers drift along my check, tucking a strand of hair behind my ear.

“Are you okay?”

“There was a strange man here. Did you see him leave?”

“Here?” His brows rise as he looks around us. “Inside your mind?”

“Yes. A human man.”

“You’re the only one I see.” His green eyes hold mine as he grasps my hand and

helps me to my feet. “I’m going to pull you back through again, okay?”

“Yes.” I nod and let the male lead me back.

CHAPTER 13

RAIZ

* * *

N eev's eyes flutter open seconds after mine. Her body is tense as she looks around the room, but then her gaze lands on me and her body melts into the bed. The beat of her heart slows back down to a more normal tempo.

“That’s never happened before.”

“What?”

“The man that was there. He, it didn’t feel right.”

“Did he threaten you?” I fight my talons' natural instinct to emerge at the thought.

She starts to sit up, but Hyva sets his hand on her arm. “Lie down for a while longer.”

“No, he didn’t threaten me, at least I don’t think he did. When did you get here? How long was I out?”

“We came as soon as Vynia called me.” I pull my hand from her hair. “We were already on our way back.”

I look over at Hyva and speak into his mind. “ Can humans mind walk?”

“Not that I’m aware of from my research.” He frowns. “ But if they possess that gift, it could be something they keep hidden.”

“Don’t do that.” Neev pushes herself up into a sitting position further away from both of us. “Don’t have conversations in your minds about me when I’m right here.”

“Apologies,” I say, immediately chagrined.

Hyva’s eyes meet mine. “ This female is feisty.”

“You’re right,” he tells her. “We were just trying to figure out if humans could mind walk.”

“Clearly they can if he was able to be there.”

“Are you sure you weren’t in distress and that caused you to believe he was there?” Hyva asks.

“Yes. He touched me. I felt his presence just as I felt Raiz.”

Her eyes widen as a snarl rips from my chest at the thought of another male in her mind, touching her. Shame follows in its wake for scaring her, but before I can apologize again, she scoots forward and puts her hand over mine. It’s so soft and small in comparison to mine.

“It’s okay. I know how you feel about entering others’ minds. Thank you for scaring him away.”

Truthfully, I’m not sure if that snarl was about him being in her mind so much as it was putting his hands on her. It came from an inner, primal place I’ve never explored within myself. From the look on Hyva’s face, I can tell he’s thinking the same thing.

“I’m going to leave you with this.” He sets a bottle on the bedside table. “It’s a medication that should help with the pain from these episodes, perhaps even stop them. Though, I think we can all acknowledge that these aren’t regular headaches.”

“Probably not headaches at all,” she agrees.

“I’m staying in the guest quarters for the time being. Let Raiz know if you need anything from me, otherwise I’ll come check on you in the morning.”

She nods. “Thank you, Hyva.”

He grabs his scanner and exits with a look in my direction that I don’t have to be inside his mind to decipher. We’ll be discussing the snarl as soon as I get her settled.

“Will you show me how to use the bathtub? I couldn’t figure it out earlier.” The sound of her voice pulls me from my spiraling thoughts.

“Of course.”

I watch her closely as she scoots to the edge of the bed. Because it’s made for Zeahirians, it’s tall enough that her feet don’t touch the ground, so she has to slide off. It’s probably her size that makes me feel so protective and nothing else. How can a good male not want to protect a creature he’s bigger than?

I follow her into the bathing room and tap the lip of the tub. I lift the lid containing the pad with buttons for all the options for salts and temperature. She can read the language, but I explain the differences in the salts and why we bathe with them. Once she settles on a relaxation blend and tells me how hot she wants the water I turn it on. Water pours from the ceiling above.

“Oh.” She smiles as she looks up. “That explains why I didn’t see a faucet.” She

gives my arm another casual squeeze. “Thank you.”

“Will you be okay getting in and out?”

“Yes. I feel much better now.”

I leave her and close the door behind me. We’re supposed to get hit by strong flares tonight, so I cross the bedroom to the balcony doors and pull them firmly shut. Once the locking mechanism is engaged and the screen that blocks radiation is closed, I leave. The sound of water sloshing gently in the tub is all I hear from her.

Instead of walking down the guest wing to find Hyva, I slink off to my own room. I can’t deal with the lecture I’m sure I have coming my way from him. My room is dark and empty as I close the door behind me.

“We need to talk about that mating snarl.” Hyva’s voice comes from behind me as soon as I light the sconce.

“Why are you hiding in the dark?” So much for time and space to sort my thoughts.

“Because I knew you weren’t going to come to me so we could talk about this. Instead, you were going to lay in bed and brood. Probably spin a bunch of lies to yourself about the snarl not meaning what it means.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Bullshit.”

This is the problem with surrounding yourself with those that have known you your whole life. I can’t lie to them; they see straight through it. Stars, they won’t even let me lie to myself.

I busy myself locking up my room the same way I did Neev's. He sits in the chair beside my desk and crosses his leg, content to wait me out. His foot swings back and forth patiently as he watches me.

“What?” I growl in his direction as his quiet presence grates on my nerves.

“Nothing.” He grins.

“I'll remove you from the medical team.”

“You could, but you won't. And you know you can't get rid of me that easily, regardless. It's not a bad thing to be pulled to the female. I think she returns the feelings.”

“Humans don't have mates.”

He taps his chest. “This doesn't care.”

“The timing is terrible.”

“It is.” He sits there, swinging his foot and watching me. “Fate doesn't care about the timing.”

“How long have you known?”

“Since you lunged at Mydax. Your scent changed. It was subtle, but having experienced a life of your odors, I immediately knew.”

“Do you think Altis and Vynia know?”

“Probably not. Like I said, it was subtle.”

“They’ve known me as long as you have.”

“They don’t have the same training as me.”

I grunt in acknowledgement. His sense of smell is the strongest of us all due to his medical training. I sit down in the chair opposite him and brace my elbows on my knees, bending to run my hands through my hair.

The problem with us being mates is that the harder I fight it, the more intense it will be for me. The drive to claim her will make me irrational. I don’t want to force this bond on her, but I don’t want to fall into insanity, either.

“Do you think if she leaves me after this is all done, I’ll be able to maintain my life as is? Could you find some sort of antidote for the bond?”

“Do you really want that?” He frowns and leans forward. “What if the feelings are returned on her end?”

“What if they’re not, but she feels guilty? I don’t want her to feel obligated because some stupid, primal piece of me decided she was meant to be mine.”

My fangs drip with need as the words she was meant to be mine fall from my mouth. I swallow, erasing the taste of the toxin that would bind us forever if I were to mark her. My cock thickens at the thought of my fangs sinking into her flesh while I rut into her. What sounds would she make underneath me?

“That’s not how it works, and you know it. Let’s at least be honest with ourselves.”

I’m done with this topic. “Who do you think was in her mind?”

Hyva gives me a look that he clocks the reason for my abrupt change of subject but

doesn't push me. "I don't know. There are few species that resemble humans throughout the galaxy but none that look identical."

"And that's even if he showed up in his true form. What if he was able to change what he looks like?"

"That would be serious power."

A frightening amount of power. My gifts are among the strongest of Zeahiri. To think there could be beings out there with powers that make mine seem like a child's is unnerving.

Hyva sits with me in silence, both of our minds whirling with thoughts and plans. After he takes his leave, I strip out of my clothes and get in bed, fighting the desire to go check on her at least once. But that's the mate bond talking. She's fine, I'll know if she's not.

I force my eyes closed and hope there's enough going on to distract myself from the nightmares that plague me when I'm home.

* * *

Xarloc, my twin stands over me, talons out and fangs extended. His eyes, a mirror of mine, narrow with rage as I kick his stomach to dislodge him. All around us adults watch from the safety of outside the ring. He races toward me, and I sidestep but not fast enough as his talons scrape along my ribs.

Blood oozes from the wound. The metallic scent of it fuels the bloodlust of the crowd. Even our father has fallen as a feral victim to it. Only our mother watches on in horror as her only two children battle to the death in order to take over the family line.

The last thing I want to do is kill my brother, regardless of how evil he is. He's half of me, but I have no choice. It's him or I, and I know what I want to do to make sure this horrific custom ends.

I let him get me back onto the ground, acting as though he's gained the upper hand again and right as his talons sink into my abdomen, I arch my neck and bite his throat. The rip of skin, muscle, and tendons reverberates down my spine as his hot blood splashes onto my face.

When his body collapses lifeless on top of mine, I feel nothing but soul-crushing guilt. I never liked him, but I never wanted him dead. This is wrong. I want to throw up, and when my head falls to the side, I lock eyes with Neev.

Her violet eyes are big and round as her jaw drops. Tears pour from them as her hand covers her mouth. She's horrified. She looks at me like I'm a monster. I am a monster.

I reach for her, crawling across the blood-soaked sand, but she takes off running. I can't speak, my mouth and throat too full of gore. My father hauls me to my feet, a disgusting pride shining brightly through his eyes as he claps me on the back.

"I always knew it would be you."

* * *

"Raiz." Gentle hands nudge my shoulder. "Raiz, wake up. You're having a bad dream." A firmer push. "Raiz."

I shoot into a sitting position, reaching for the dagger I keep hidden beside my bed. When I turn my head, I see Neev sitting on her knees beside me. My heart slows as I drop the dagger back into its place.

“I’m sorry.” My hand drops onto her leg. Stars, she’s warm and her skin is so soft.
“Are you okay?”

“I’m not the one who was having a nightmare.”

“You are the one who I almost stabbed my dagger into, though.”

“You wouldn’t have.” She says the words quietly but firmly, like she knows I’d never be capable of hurting her. “You’re not that kind of male.”

If she only knew the horrific things I’ve done. She only sees the Commander and the Lord. She hasn’t seen how hard and vicious I had to be to get here. I don’t want her to see it.

“Do you want to talk about it?” she asks.

“No,” I rasp. “You’re brave to come in here and wake me.”

“Figured I’d return the favor when you save me from my own mind.”

Her hair is pulled up and piled on top of her head with a few strands of hair loose. It’s the first time I’ve seen it like that. The graceful column of her neck is exposed and the desire to pull her toward me and bury my face against it is so strong I have to dig my fingertips into the mattress on my other side.

I should say something. But all I can do is stare at her.

“I should probably go back to my room.” She catches her lower lip with her teeth.

“It would probably be best.” My hand is still on her leg. I should move it, but I can’t bring myself to.

With a quick smile she shifts her body from my touch and slides off my bed. “Lay down,” she directs me.

“Why?”

“I’m going to do what humans do for each other when they need comfort.”

My mind goes places it has no business going.

“Not like that,” she laughs. Stars, her laughter kills me. “Just trust me.”

“Do you trust me?” I ask as I follow her orders and lie down.

“Probably more than I should.”

She lifts the covers up and over my torso, tucking them around me. Then she wraps her arms around me in an embrace. Her head fits perfectly between my jaw and shoulder, like this is where she belongs. My blood roars with the need to claim her, heat and desire battling with all the control I can muster.

“Your heart is still racing.” She puts a hand over where it beats against the cage of bone protecting it. After too short a time, she sits back up. “I used to have a small toy bear, which is an animal on earth, that was fuzzy and soft. I’d sleep with it every night, and it always brought me comfort. Too bad I don’t have anything like that for you with me.”

“Too bad,” I manage to say. The words I actually want to share are that she brings me all the comfort I need. Especially the thought of her curled beside me in my bed. “How’d you get the bear?”

“My father left it with me when he dropped me off on Oculus Nine.” She opens my

bedroom door. “Sleep well, Raiz.”

“Sleep well,” I reply.

I don't move, too afraid to displace her scent hovering in the air around me. Fuck, she smells good. I drag in greedy breath after greedy breath, hoping it'll sate my ever-growing appetite for her.

CHAPTER 14

NEEV

* * *

C l ouds once again cover the crimson sky, but the thought of staying inside another day makes me want to peel my skin from my bones. Grabbing one of the shorter cloaks from my armoire, I throw it over my shoulders and head for the balcony with stairs down to the beach. The stone beneath my feet is wet from the rain, but my feet are going to get wet when I wade into the sea anyway.

Who knows when I'll be able to spend hours a day next to the ocean again. If I end up back on Oculus Nine, it definitely won't be anytime soon. I step onto the beach and my feet sink into the black sand. This planet is so different from the busy ecumenopolis that is Calindrea.

Frothy, small swells wash ashore beckoning me toward the water's edge. I dip my toes in cautiously, not knowing how cold the water is. It's chilly but not as cold as I was expecting so I step out further. Tiny, purple fish swim past my legs when I'm knee deep. I don't want to risk going out any further when the current pulls the sand from beneath my feet with each wave.

"Watch out, those bite." Raiz points at the fish still swimming near my legs.

"The purple ones?" I look over my shoulder at him. How he got down here without me hearing him is unsettling. "They're so small."

“Their jaws extend?—”

“Ouch,” I cry out before he can even finish his sentence.

“Told you.” He holds a hand out to help me out of the water and crouches down to look at my leg. His hand wraps around my calf as he inspects the bite with a troubled look on his face. “This is bad. They inject a parasite into your veins, and it works its way up to your brain.”

“What do you mean?” Panic surges within me. “Get it out. Can Hyva get it out?”

He runs his thumb over the wound, wiping my blood away. When his eyes meet mine, they sparkle with mischief as he licks my blood off his skin. “Just kidding.”

“Uh! You jerk,” I say as I push his shoulders and knock him over onto the sand.

His chest shakes with laughter, a full, rich sound that makes my stomach flutter. It’s unfair how handsome he is, even rolling around undignified in sand laughing at my expense. The smile that takes residence on his face softens him, making him look younger.

“I wasn’t aware that you had a sense of humor,” I say dryly.

“Stars.” He pulls himself together and stands. “Your face was hilarious.”

“I don’t think it’s that funny. I mean, I don’t know what could kill me on your planet.”

He sobers. “I’d never let you be in danger. I hope you know that.”

“You let me get bitten.” Now that he’s standing again, I have to tilt my head back to

look him in the eye.

“You’re right.”

I cry out when he bends and scoops me into his arms. “What are you doing?”

“Taking you inside to clean it.”

“I can walk.” Why does he smell so good? I have the biggest urge to run my nose along his neck and inhale his scent.

“Your short human legs are too slow.”

He is walking faster than I could be able to keep up, so I go completely limp in his arms. Let him carry my dead weight then. One of the corners of his lips lifts in an irritating smirk at my petulance. He carries me up the stone stairs and into the library. Uzold stops in the hall and watches as Raiz walks right past him.

“Is Sister Neev okay?” he calls out once the surprise is gone.

“I’m fine,” I tell him. “Some sort of fish bit me.”

“Syplits,” Raiz calls over his shoulder.

“Is that the name of those fish?”

“Yes.”

“They’re pretty.”

“You should see them fully grown. Gorgeous but deadly. The school you saw had

probably just hatched within the past day.”

I lift my leg and look at the bite which is still bleeding at a moderate pace. “A baby did that? How big do they get?”

“Up to twice my size.”

Stars.

“That’s big.”

I swallow nervously as he carries me through his quarters and into the attached bathroom. It’s identical to mine, which I didn’t think about last night when I came to wake him from his nightmare but is strange now that I think about it. Wouldn’t he have bigger rooms than where he has his guests sleep?

He sets me on the counter beside his sink and reaches below for several little pots of salve. I watch as he deftly removes all the caps and then wets a rag with warm water. He wipes the blood away and frowns.

“Do all humans bleed so easily?”

“Yes. Do Zeahirians not?”

“It certainly takes more than a newly hatched Syplits bite to make us bleed.” He applies pressure to rag over the wound and lifts my foot to rest on his hip. “You’re so delicate.”

He absentmindedly caresses my leg with his other hand, causing goosebumps to erupt over my skin at the soft touch. He stops and looks up at me, his green eyes alight with curiosity.

“What are those?”

“Goosebumps.”

“Do they hurt?”

“No. Humans get them for several reasons, it’s basically a reaction to stimuli. Sometimes we get them when we’re cold. Other times they can happen when something feels good,” I answer softly.

“Are you cold?”

“No.”

A wicked expression flashes across his face as he begins to gently circle his fingertips around the back of my calf. “So that means this feels good? You like to be touched like this?” The circles move higher, behind my knee and to the back of my thigh.

Heat pools in my center as I nod. I’m about to let my thighs drop open because it’s been a really long time since my body has responded like this to anyone. I swear I hear a thrumming coming from his chest.

A knock on the door jolts us both out of the haze we’d fallen into.

“Come in.” Raiz’s voice is husky. At least I know it was mutual.

“Uzold told me that Neev got bitten by a syplits. I brought a healing balm that works well on her.” Hyva steps into the bathroom and immediately halts, his gaze on the way we’re positioned. His eyebrows rise when he looks at Raiz. “I’ll take over from here.”

Their eyes lock in a silent battle. It feels like the standoff lasts for hours when I know it's been less than a minute. Their bodies seem to expand even as they stand facing each other preternaturally still. For the first time since Mydax lunged for me, I feel their predatory nature, and it makes me want to shrink into myself.

"Thank you," I finally say to cut the tension.

It works, and they both look at me. Raiz gently lowers my leg and steps back, allowing Hyva to come examine the wound. He cleans it quickly and methodically.

"I formulated this in my office on the ship. It's made with compounds specifically beneficial for healing your fragile human flesh." He gives me a cheeky wink as he slathers some onto the cut. "It'll work for contusions, too."

I roll my eyes and hop off the counter. "I'm not fragile."

"You are compared to us."

Stars save me from these males. How they can be overprotective knowing they literally kidnapped me from my own bed in the middle of the night is beyond me.

"I'm going to go back to my room."

"The reason I went down to the beach to find you is because we're going to have to go out tonight. I think I found someone to guide us to the temple."

"Oh, good. The sooner the better." I don't really mean that. The sooner I do the translation for them, the sooner I have to go home. I don't know if I want to do that.

"I wanted to see if you'd like to join us this time. I know you've been bored staying alone lately."

“Yes, I’d love that.” A shiver of excitement courses through me as I leave his quarters.

* * *

I take everything Vynia has told me into account about the fashion culture of Zeahiri when I piece together what I’m going to wear tonight. I’m sure that Raiz doesn’t want me pulling undue attention to myself, although seeing as I’m a human, I’ll stick out like a sore thumb regardless. I settle on an all black ensemble of black pants and a soft top. The outfit manages to completely cover me and yet leaves nothing to the imagination in terms of my shape.

As Raiz steps into my room that last sentiment is confirmed. I feel the intensity of his look from my head to my toes. Including places I have no business feeling him. My body doesn’t catch the hint, though, as my nipples bead under his appraisal.

“Is this okay?” I gesture down my body. “I assumed you would want me inconspicuous.”

“Yes, it’s fine.” His gaze lingers on my body like a phantom touch.

“Should we go then?”

My question breaks his trance. “You’ll need a cloak, too. The village is on the surface.” He walks to the armoire and riffles through the few cloaks, finally pulling one that matches those I’ve seen him wear. “This one will work.”

“Thank you.” Our fingertips brush as I take it from him.

“I’ll need to scent mark you again. My scent will ensure no one pays too close of attention to you.” He watches my face as he tells me, looking for something in my

expression.

“Okay.” I take the few steps necessary to put me right in front of him and tilt my head back, giving him access to my neck.

That thrumming noise comes from his chest again as his eyes become those of a predator. Heat floods my body when his large hand cups my cheek, his fingers threading through my hair, and he lowers his body over mine. He envelops me, and my hands find his waist for balance.

Stars, he’s so solid against me.

A shiver rolls through me as his skin brushes mine. This feels different from the first time, I swear I feel the slightest graze of his lips against the column of my neck and it makes me melt against him, to leave my own mark. My fingers dig into him, as my body bows closer to his.

Goosebumps roll across my body when he pushes my hair behind my shoulder. The action opens the other side of my neck to him, causing the thrumming to increase. Without realizing it, my hands have moved around his waist to his back, pulling myself closer.

As he begins to straighten, my eyes find his again. His pupils, normally an elongated oval shape are blown, the black nearly eclipsing the green. As odd as it sounds, I could swear his fangs look a bit longer, poking free from his lips. It should be a terrifying sight. Instead, I’m imagining those sharp points on the soft curves of my body.

“You guys ready?” Hyva’s voice breaks our trance, and we step away from each other.

“Yes,” Raiz answers roughly. He tosses the cloak around my shoulders and pulls the hood up. “You should keep this up tonight. Not just to help hide your identity but also because of possible radiation. All our clothing is repellant but only to a point. The more layers, the safer you are.”

We once again find ourselves trapped in Hyva’s curious gaze. He taps an impatient hand on the door frame. “Let’s go.”

Once we get to the front door, we follow a polished stone stairway up to the ground. I take in the wide expanse around us. The path we travel winds between rocky hills. Everything is a shade of gray or black from the rocky soil to the little bits of vegetation dotting the ground on the sides of some hills. The landscape is severe and violent but in the most beautiful way.

I gasp when we round a corner into a small valley between the hills. Small flowers blanket the ground with black stems and pale pink petals. I bend down and reach out to run my fingers over one. I manage to stop myself first, looking up at Raiz and Hyva.

“Can I touch these?” I remember from my reading that some of the plants on this planet are poisonous.

“Yes,” Hyva answers.

The petals are so soft under my fingers. With each touch a soft fragrance wafts into the air. It’s completely foreign, I can’t even find a comparable scent to describe it. Much like I can’t for Raiz. Both males wait patiently while I take in their home planet. I can hear them murmuring to themselves, a quiet conversation not meant for me.

As soon as I push back to standing, we begin to walk again. They flank me on either

side as light from the village shows over the horizon. A field full of strange four-legged creatures grazes beside us, looking up curiously before dismissing us and going back to eating. There are no fences, which strikes me as odd.

The village is surrounded by a low rock wall. Tall torches line the streets, in front of the dwellings and businesses. Set up wise, it doesn't look too different from ancient human settlements I've watched documentaries on. The juxtaposition of the seemingly archaic town and way of living on the planet versus the incredible tech that they have is fascinating.

How did they manage to evolve with these circumstances?

"Stay close to one of us," Hyva says, stepping closer to me as we walk into the town.

"What was that? I didn't catch it the first one hundred times you two told me."

"Human sarcasm is such a joy," he deadpans.

The cloak was a good call; everyone is wearing one. It adds a spooky ambiance to the village, seeing all these tall beings walking around in black cloaks like wraiths. If I weren't a solid foot shorter, I would blend in perfectly. It doesn't help that I'm walking sandwiched between two of the tallest males I've ever seen.

The buildings that line the streets are all uniform, only the signage changes. People gesture with a closed fist over their chests as Raiz walks past. All he does in response is incline his head toward those doing it in acknowledgment. I feel their curious looks as they see me. The hood covers enough that it shadows my face entirely. I'm not sure that it's clear I'm not Zeahirian.

They lead me down several blocks and into a pub. Tables fill the space with a bar along the entire back wall. Scones burn every few feet along the wall with a large

fireplace also helping to light the dim room. Altis and Vynia are waiting for us at a table in the far corner. They look up at the same as we all take a seat.

“Las isn’t here yet,” Altis says.

A female with long silver hair and a dress that leaves little to the imagination walks over to the table. “What can I get for you, Lord Asteran?” Her voice is throaty and smooth as she smirks at him. I don’t have to be Zeahirian to understand the invitation in her eyes.

It makes me irrationally upset.

Instead of paying any attention to how the conversation between them evolves, I turn to Vynia. She’s also wearing a dress. The neckline drops deeply down her chest. The deep blue fabric looks incredible against the pale gray skin of her chest and neck.

“You look beautiful,” I tell her.

“Thank you. Las has a thing for females who show a lot of skin. We thought it might help tempt him into taking on this job if I lean into traditional feminine fashion.”

I look around the room and see that it’s mostly men sitting around the tables but, of the females in the room, many are dressed similarly. And they’re all so gorgeous. Tall and slender, with toned muscles like human ballet dancers.

I rarely feel insecure about the way that I look, it’s honestly not something I grew up being aware of on Oculus Nine. But right now, comparing my shorter, softer body to the Zeahirian females, I feel like an ugly creature. My stomach is rounded and soft, my hips and ass as well. And my breasts, ugh. They’re annoyingly heavy and full. It’s probably a good thing I’m fully covered.

“And what would your pet like?” The purred words from the female taking Raiz’s order draw my attention.

“My guest will have the same thing I’m having.” His answer is clipped and sharp, a verbal rebuke of her rudeness.

I wait until she slinks off to say anything. “Your pet, huh? Should I roll over and let you pet my belly?”

He’s pulled the hood of his cloak back, his silvery white hair gleaming in the light from the scone behind him. He leans over to say something, devilish intent obvious in his eyes. My heart races in my chest as his gaze zeros in on my lips.

“Just ignore the female, Neev,” Altis says, jarring us out of our standoff. “She’s jealous of you, especially when you’re covered in Raiz’s scent.”

I lower my head and sniff. I smell like him a little, but nothing that I would say was overpowering. Not as strongly as he smells when he marks me.

“Really? I only faintly smell him on myself now.”

“That’s because you’re not Zeahirian. If our relationship with him wasn’t as strong it is, we wouldn’t be able to even look at you for long.” Hyva motions around the pub. “Do you notice how all the males are careful to look away from you? It’s because he’s ‘claimed’ you, and as the dominant male here, no one will challenge him.”

“What if they did?” I ask, fully curious about this aspect of their culture.

“Then I would kill them.” Raiz taps his fingers on the table quietly.

“No, you wouldn’t.” I gape at him. “It’s just pretend.”

“Nothing about my desire to keep you safe is pretend.”

That shouldn't turn me on. When Torre used to get overprotective of me, I'd get so pissed. Never once did any of her actions make me flush with need. I don't even know if this is a reciprocated feeling.

CHAPTER 15

RAIZ

* * *

I can just barely make out Neev's violet eyes beneath her hood. I'm so glad she chose to wear what she did because if I had to watch any of the males lust after her the way they are the other females in the room, I'd lose my mind. As it is, my thrumming is so loud I'm shocked that no one hears it.

Maybe they do, and they're just too considerate to say anything.

You need to get yourself under control before Las shows up. Hyva says into my mind. If he hears the thrumming and puts together how important she is to you, it'll put her in danger.

As if I don't know that already. I know. And had I known that her presence with us would send my protective need into overdrive I would have had her stay back. Probably with Hyva, so he could have kept her busy.

I just couldn't stomach the thought of being away from her another night, making her stay exiled on my estate like some prisoner isn't what I want. Not that I have a clear idea of what I actually want.

Besides her.

I want her.

I feel the need grow with every passing day. Stars, every passing minute, if I'm being completely honest.

"Here he comes," Altis says quietly as the male we've been waiting on finally enters the pub.

He walks with a noticeable limp, probably from an injury from one of his missions in youth. He was a Commander before I was even born and fought in several of the Brotherly Wars. Basically, petty squabbles between houses over land and water rights. He pulls out a chair between Hyva and Altis, sitting without greeting anyone.

"Thank you for coming, Las." I give him a nod of greeting. I set a small box on the table and hit the button on top. It's a noise barrier to keep our conversation from being overheard. Thank fuck for alien tech that isn't nullified by electromagnetic storms.

The male hates being out in public, much prefers to spend his time underground exploring. It's one of the reasons he's the best to lead us through the caves and tunnels to the temple. He's mapped out nearly half the continent, helping to find places fit to build underground cities as our population grows.

"What exactly are you hoping to find inside the temple? I'm not interested in helping you loot."

"We don't want to loot." I lean forward. "We just want to look at several of the old texts, see what they say about the Bak'hura."

His eyes narrow as he examines me. This is the part about letting him in on the plan that's the most dangerous. He could stand up and go to the Sovereign right now, tell

him I'm looking into things I shouldn't be, and I'd be executed on the spot. The Bak'hura is our most vital and horrendous tradition. The blood rite that decides which child will lead their house and which will die. I want it to end.

As our society has ventured further out into the galaxy and come into contact with more civilizations, it's become increasingly obvious we need to leave that tradition behind. Multiple people have approached the Sovereign with the sentiment, but every time they leave ready for a funeral pyre.

I care too much to advocate for it when I have no one to leave my house to. Not to mention all those I'm responsible for. I've heard rumblings that the Bak'hura had been suspended for centuries before the Sovereign brought it back during my grandparents' time. In the hundreds of years since, it's been normalized, and most accounts differing from accepted history have been wiped from our records.

It's a risk to bring someone I don't know into the fold. But from what I've heard, he's no supporter of the Sovereign. Still. It takes every drop of my will power not to hook my foot around the leg of Neev's chair and pull her to my side as Las stares me down with an inscrutable look on his weathered face.

Fuck it.

I do just that, ignoring her yelp of surprise as the chair scrapes across the floor.

"All those texts are written in the ancient languages. No one knows them anymore."

"That's not a problem."

"How many will go?"

"Just those you see at this table." They're the only ones I trust to do this with me.

“Payment?”

“Twenty-five thousand credits paid tonight. Seventy-five thousand upon return.”

Las stands abruptly. “I’ll give you my decision in three days.” He points at Neev. “And I suggest you get her out of here quickly.”

Altis is on his feet and heading for the door to check things out before I can even say something into his mind. Hyva and Vynia radiate tension as they glance around the crowded room. If Las’s quick departure and warning have done one thing, it’s eased my mind that he can be trusted because if I had to guess, what’s coming our way is no good.

“A band of the Sovereign’s inspectors is headed this way,” Altis says into my mind. “I’ll slow them down while you get Neev out the back door.”

Why the fuck is he sending his inspectors here? It’s never happened in all my time as Lord. I’ve occasionally asked for their assistance when I’ve been off on missions. Otherwise, enforcement of laws and traditions is up to each Lord. The inspectors shouldn’t be here.

“Come.” I grab Neev’s hand, helping her up. “I’m taking her home. You stay inside and help Altis if he needs it,” I say to Hyva and Vynia.

Neev trails behind me, her hand clutching mine just as tightly as it does hers. Her fingers are small and warm against mine. Any other time I’d wonder over them, but not now. I can’t risk engaging in mate-like behavior. I pull her out through the back exit and into one of the dank alley ways.

“One inspector just broke away and is heading for the back alley.”

I look around, searching for anywhere to stash Neev where they won't notice her. But there's no alcoves and only one exit, which is where the inspector will be any second now. There's only one thing to do, and while I know I'm going to enjoy it, I don't know if she will.

"Play along." I stop us and lift her into my arms. "Wrap your legs around my waist."

Her eyes are round as I back her against the wall. "What's going on?"

"No time to explain." I pull my cloak around her and hope she forgives me for this.

Just as the inspector rounds the corner, I crash my lips to hers. She gasps against me, and I use that opportunity to slide my tongue between her soft lips. My fingers dig into her round ass as she moves from shock to participation. Footsteps slowly approach us, so I angle my body to block sight of her while never letting my lips leave hers.

She tastes so good. Better than any sweets or wine I've ever tasted. My chest thrums deeply when her hand slides over it.

I hear the inspector coming closer, but I can't stop. Now that I'm locked in this moment with her nothing else matters. There's only her, and the stardust she's crafted of. Her tongue runs along my fang, and my cock hardens against her heat.

"Break it up." The inspector comes to a stop beside us.

I really thought he might just leave. Most would. The Sovereign wants us procreating.

"We're busy." I turn my head, making sure to keep blocking his view of Neev.

I'd rather he not see my face either, but I will drop my hood if I need to exert power

in this situation. As Lord of House Asterean, I technically have more power but to push that in a delicate situation such as this would be risky.

Neev's heart beats wildly against me, every pulse matched by my own. Her scent, the same one that called to me that night on the patio, fills my nostrils. I'm teetering on the precipice of losing my temper knowing that this random male can scent her like this.

"Step away from the female."

Neev leans into me, her fingers tightening into my shirt. Now instead of the scent of her arousal filling the air, it's the metallic tang of her fear.

"You're scaring her." I pull us away from the wall, and she drops her legs from my waist.

"Nothing to be afraid of, female." He turns his attention back to me. "Take your hood off."

With one arm still around Neev, I do as he asks. Recognition flashes over his face as soon as he sees me. "Lord Asterean, I didn't realize it was you."

"Now you do," I say dismissively. "Take your leave."

"I can't do that until I see your pet."

Neev stiffens against me.

"This is my female, not a pet."

"Whatever she is, I have to see her."

“Why?”

“The Sovereign wishes to ensure there’s no humans on the planet.”

“I haven’t been informed of that decision.”

“It’s new. Representatives of Oculus Nine are on the way to retrieve a stolen human. Said she was taken by one of us.” He strolls toward us. “Apparently she’s their most important treasure.”

Neev stiffens against me, not a breath leaving her lips.

The inspector’s arm whips out fast as lightning and pulls her hood back. My talons are out before he can part his lips to speak. He signs his own death warrant when he reaches out and touches her hair.

He. Touches. Her.

A red mist coats my eyes, fury singing in my blood. My talons tear through the flesh and bone of his neck before he even registers my movement. Blood arcs through the air, splattering on the ground and walls as I lift him off the ground. His legs kick once, twice, while he weakly smacks at my hand.

I don’t hear anything.

I don’t see anything.

All I know at this moment is brutality. I must protect her at all costs.

“Raiz.” Neev takes a step back as I lower my arm and let the inspector’s body fall limply to the ground with a loud splat. “Why did you do that?”

“He touched you.” I bend and use his cloak to wipe his blood off my talons. It’s callous, but I can’t bring myself to care. No one touches my mate without her permission. Ever. I grab her hand. “Come on, we have to go before they find you.”

I open all the bridges I have between my mind and Altis, Vynia, and Hyva. I just killed one of the inspectors. We’re taking the emergency tunnels below to get back home.

Neev shakes her hand free of mine and plants her feet. “You just killed him.”

“He was going to send you to the Sovereign. We don’t have time to argue about this.”

“You can’t be sure.”

“He touched you.” I reach for her, a pang in my chest at the anger in her eyes.

“You can’t kill anyone that touches me.”

Watch me.

“We must go now.”

When she makes no move to leave with me, I bend and throw her over my shoulder and start running. I need to make it two streets over to the hidden entrance of the tunnels. Neev wiggles against me, but she’s no match for my strength.

It takes half the time to make it to the tunnels as it would have with her running. Once I traverse the steps, I could set her down. But I’d rather have this conversation at home, not where anyone could overhear, so I leave her over my shoulder and begin to run.

My feet splash through the puddles that line the smooth obsidian walls. This particular tunnel used to be a lava tube, about half of the tunnels on the continent are old lava tubes. The underground is also dotted with hundreds of hot springs. It makes traveling through them a bit more comfortable.

“How can you see anything?” Neev asks as she bounces on my shoulder.

“My eyes are made for this.” That makes me think, I should ask Cuna if they can fabricate some sort of lenses for her to wear underground. We’ll obviously have torches, but, if something happens and they’re put out, it would help for her to be able to see like we can in the dark.

I make it to the door leading to my estate and type in the code to unlock the door. As soon as it swings open, I set Neev on her feet and close it behind us. I take a deep breath and ready myself for the onslaught of her anger.

“Don’t ever do that again.”

“Save your life?” I ask.

“No.” She throws her arms wide. “Kill for me with no regard.”

“It’s the same thing.”

“It’s really not.” She strides toward me, poking me in the chest with her blunt, harmless fingernail. “You have no idea what his intentions were.”

“I know the Sovereign. That’s all there is to know, because his intentions are never good.”

“You are the most infuriating male I’ve ever met.”

“I’m not too offended as it’s a short list.”

She scoffs and turns around, walking down the tunnel toward the house as if she knows where it leads. She’ll figure it out when she gets there but still. Frustrating human. “Don’t look for me tonight.”

As if I can’t smell her from rooms away. Or hear her. I’m so attuned to her, to everything about her that even the sound of her beating heart is easily identifiable to me.

* * *

Sitting across from Hyva, Vynia, and Altis two hours later, I still can’t tear my thoughts from her. Even when the stakes have never been higher. They managed to get rid of the inspectors, even finding the body of the one I killed. From what they were told, it isn’t just my sector that they’ve been going to. Unrest is growing in all corners, and this is the Sovereign’s attempt at quelling it, sending out bands of inspectors to make his presence known.

Could he know I’m planning something? Does he believe Neev is with me or hiding under my protection? Surely the Order wouldn’t have told him that I had her. They would have to know that would put her at risk, and if they’ve come this far to get her, there must be a reason.

She’s more than a linguist and transcriptionist. When I cut the connection between the ship and Sister Andria, she was mid-sentence. What were they hiding about Neev? The bigger question is does Neev know what it is? Is she keeping secrets?

Not that it matters. She’s my mate. Even if she rejects the bond, I’ll do anything to keep her safe.

“Raiz.” Hyva smacks his hand on my desk, jolting me from thoughts of Neev. “Have you been listening?”

“Yes.”

The glare he shoots my way makes it clear that he doesn’t believe me.

“What are we going to do about the fact that she’s your mate?” Altis asks.

“What do you mean, do about it?” I turn my attention to him. “There’s nothing we can do about it. What’s done is done.”

“Does she know?” Vynia asks.

“No.”

“Don’t you think you should tell her?” She gives me a pointed look. “She probably doesn’t even know what it means.”

“The thrumming will only get louder until the bond is joined,” Hyva adds. “Has she noticed it?”

“I believe so. She seems to be drawn to it.” Like the way she melted into me on the way back from the beach. “It’s happened a few times when she’s needed me.”

“She hasn’t asked about it?” Hyva stands and walks out of the study before I answer. He’s back within seconds, holding one of the books she’s been reading to familiarize herself with our history and biology. “I think there’s a section on mates in the back of this book.” He busies himself skimming the pages.

Talking about her makes me desperate, the need to pull her onto my lap and secure

her to me is overwhelming. If I close off all my senses and focus on her, I feel her as she sits in her room. An ache spreads within me starting in my stomach and radiating through my limbs. An overwhelming yearning to go to her settles over me. Something feels wrong, but she told me not to seek her out tonight.

I look to Vynia. “Will you go check on her?”

“Now?” She tilts her head as she looks at me.

“Yes. Something feels off, and she told me she doesn’t want to see me tonight.”

“Okay.” She pushes to her feet. “Why doesn’t she want to see you?”

“She’s angry that I killed the inspector.”

“Why did you kill him?” She’s asking out of curiosity, not judgement.

“He touched her.” That’s the true, most important reason, but not the only one. “And he put together who she was and would have told the Sovereign.”

She inclines her head. “Fair enough. I’ll go check on her.”

“Do you think the Order is really coming for her?” Altis asks after the door closes behind Vynia.

“I hope not.” Because they won’t like how that ends. Neev with me and their ship in shambles. “I’m more concerned about the male that was speaking to her in her mind the last time she had an episode than anything else.”

“I still haven’t found anything that says humans have that type of skill,” Hyva says without looking up from his reading.

“What if she’s not just human?”

That forces his eyes up from the text. “Genetically her DNA is all human. Nothing mixed was identified by my scans.”

“Could they be hiding something from the IGC?”

Humans are a relatively newer group to the InterGalactic Council. The IGC mandates that every species shares an extensive history of civilization and genetics in order to join. It’s why Zeahiri hasn’t joined. The Sovereign doesn’t want to share our customs.

“That’d be risky,” Altis says.

“But there’s definitely a reason they might want to keep this ability quiet,” Hyva replies.

“Do you think she can mind walk?” Altis asks me.

“Not that I’m aware of. I’ve stayed out of her mind as much as possible.” The more often I go inside it, the more likely it’d be for me to form a permanent connection. Mate or not, she deserves to be able to consent to that. It’s an intimate thing, the bridge between minds, and shouldn’t be abused just because I have the power to do so.

“I only see one way through all this,” Hyva says.

“What’s that?”

“You’re going to have to tell her. Everything.”

CHAPTER 16

NEEV

* * *

Two hard raps at my door manage to momentarily distract me from the stabbing pains in my pelvis. It's been years since I've had menstrual pain like this. It didn't even occur to me to mention this to Hyva. I've been taking medication to control my cycle since I was fourteen. I completely forgot about it until I went to relieve myself and saw blood.

"Come in." I don't move from the fetal position I'm in. I know from the knock that it isn't Raiz.

"What's wrong?" Vynia walks around the bed and looks down at me in concern. "Are you bleeding?" She sniffs loudly and looks me over.

"Please tell me you can't smell it?" I groan.

"I smell blood. Are you injured?"

"No." I sit up. "I have my cycle."

"Cycle?" She gives me a confused look.

"How often do Zeahirian females go through a fertility cycle?"

“Every two to three years on average.”

Damn. Must be nice.

“A human’s cycle is twenty-eight days. We bleed on the first day and for several days and then release an egg a couple weeks after that. I’m currently bleeding.”

“Is it painful?”

“Yes. More so for some than others, from what I learned as a girl. Unfortunately, I’ve always suffered from intense cramping. The Order started suppressing my cycles when I was an adolescent because of the pain. Do you have anything that does that?”

“No. Because our cycles are rare, we don’t ever try to suppress them. It’s not easy for Zeahirian females to become pregnant, so everything regarding our fertility is treated with great care. I’ll call for Hyva.”

“Using the mind speaking?”

“Yes.” She sits down beside me and runs her fingers through my hair. “It’s convenient in times like this.”

“That feels good.” I miss the camaraderie of female friendships. “But I should warn you, Raiz killed that inspector because he touched my hair.”

“That’s not the only reason, I’m sure,” she says. “And I’m not afraid of him. I know all his secrets.”

“I don’t know why he cares so much to begin with.”

Her fingers pause. “I’m sure you must have an idea why he cares.”

“What?” I sit up. “Not really.”

I mean he did kiss me. An amazing kiss, actually. If I close my eyes, I can still feel his mouth slant over mine, his tongue plundering inside mine. But he was doing it to make it seem like the inspector had just caught us in an intimate moment. It was just a cover story.

Another knock at the door interrupts the conversation.

“Come in,” I say.

Hyva walks in, hand in his pocket and looks at the two of us, sitting side by side in bed. “What’s wrong?” His nostrils flare when he comes closer.

“I have my cycle.” I hold up a hand. “Please don’t tell me you can smell it, too. That’s just too much for me to handle right now.”

He stops in his tracks and looks at Vynia. “Is this why you called me in?”

“Yes. She’s in pain.”

“I can deal with the pain. I actually need to know if you have any products to use for the blood. A medication to stop my cycle would be best, but I’m assuming you don’t have anything like that based on what Vynia just shared with me.”

He looks taken aback that I’d even suggest the latter. “No to anything to stop your cycle. What exactly do you mean, products for the bleeding? Zeahirian females don’t bleed, so this isn’t an issue I’ve come across.”

“Do you at least have something I can take for cramps?”

“Yes. I have a tincture for them. I’ll go grab it from my bag.”

“Explain what you need, and I’ll try to figure something out,” Vynia offers.

“Well, there’s multiple things humans use when they have their periods, that’s what we call them. Some insert a small device that collects everything. Others wear absorbent padding.”

“Like a bandage?”

“Not exactly. The padding attaches to your underclothes.”

She looks around, perhaps even more confused.

“I’ll show you what I mean.” I walk to the armoire and pull out a pair of panties and show her where it would go.

Her eyes brighten and she stands. “I have an idea. I’ll be back soon.”

My shoulders drop as another wave of pain swells within me. A bath sounds so good right now. Or a heating pad. Instead I wander back over to the bed and this time crawl under the covers.

I don’t know how much time passes before I hear a light knock on the door and Hyva enters. He sets a small container on the bedside table and pulls out his scanner.

“May I pull the covers back and run a diagnostic?” he asks.

“Sure. But it’ll tell you I’m fine. This is a natural part of humanity.”

“I’m sure you’re right, but it’ll make me feel better. Not to mention the hulking male

pacing outside your door.”

“Raiz? He’s in the hall?”

“Wearing a path in the rug as we speak.” The scanner beeps as he hovers it over my body. He makes a humming sound when several alerts go off. “You’re slightly anemic, which is new. In significant pain.”

“Yes, both of those make sense.”

“We have a few plants high in iron. I’ll have Breval add them to your meals this week. Take the tincture now, and I’ll bring more in the morning.”

I do as he asks, shivering at the bitter taste of the liquid sliding down my throat. “Tell Raiz he can come in.”

I don’t want him out there worried when this is a totally normal thing. Depending on how long he needs me, it could happen again. He’ll have to get used to it.

He steps inside when Hyva holds the door open. I have to fight the urge to toss the covers over my head when I see his nostrils flare as he scents my blood. That’s so unsettling. I don’t want to walk around with everyone in sniffing distance immediately knowing what’s going on.

“Are you okay?” he asks, approaching me slowly like I’m a wild animal.

“I’m fine. This will happen on a monthly basis if I don’t take anything to stop it.”

He runs a hand through his silvery white hair, setting the strands askew. “Is it always painful?”

“Depends on the person, I believe. For me they are.”

The soothing thrumming begins to sound from his chest again as he takes another step closer to the bed. He’s out of the clothes from earlier and back in the casual ones he prefers to wear around the house. I swallow past a lump forming in my throat as he takes another slow step toward me and the thrumming becomes louder.

“What is that sound from your chest?”

“It’s meant to comfort.” He’s right beside the bed. “Does it bother you?”

“No, not at all. It is comforting, actually.” I frown, knowing I shouldn’t let him get so close, but all I want is to be held. By him.

“Give me your hand.”

He holds his outstretched for mine. I reach over and place my palm in his. At the contact between us, his shoulders drop, and he releases a long breath. He places my hand on the center of his chest where the vibration comes from, and warmth floods my body. A comforting warmth, not one of desire but safety.

My fingers splay over the muscles of his chest, feeling his breath and heartbeat where we’re in contact. I want him in my bed. He feels like safety and home.

“I know I upset you today, but would you permit me to comfort you?”

“Yes.” My answer comes out hushed.

A slight smile lifts the corners of his lips, and he reaches behind his neck and pulls his shirt off. I scoot over and pull back the corner of the covers for him. He leaves his pants on and climbs behind me. One of his arms snakes under the pillows while the

other wraps around my belly.

Being cocooned by such a large male is a new experience. I feel small and safe. Truthfully, that alone makes me uneasy. I wasn't raised to need this type of comfort, but I can already feel it settling into my bones as I let myself melt against him.

His fingers move in gentle circles over my belly. Part of me wants to push them away, especially now that I know most Zeahirian females are slender and toned. What must he think of my soft, squishy flesh? I'm far from what I believe their beauty standard to be. The only thing that stops me from stopping him is the fact that his movements feel more reverent than anything else.

The tincture from Hyva starts to kick in, and that, mixed with Raiz's gentle thrumming, lulls me into sleep. Right before I drift off, I swear I feel the ghostly touch of his lips on my shoulder as he pulls me closer to him. But maybe I'm just imagining it because of the vibration of his chest against my back. Either way, I'm more relaxed than I can ever remember being in my entire life.

* * *

At some point in the night, I rolled over and tucked myself against Raiz's chest. He must be asleep; with every exhale his breath softly blows a piece of hair against my temple. One of his legs is wrapped around me, and a hand has made its way up the back of my shirt.

It feels innocent, though. As if this was the most natural way for us to wind up in each other's arms when sharing a bed. Part of me wants to touch him in not innocent ways. To run my fingertips over the planes of muscle on his body.

I tilt my head back a bit to check and make sure he's actually sleeping before I go exploring. He's touched me a lot, carried me, entered my mind. I should be okay to

check his body out, just for science. Collecting data.

His skin is warm under my fingers. It's smooth when I run them down but slightly rough when I move them back up. I trail my fingertips down to the waistband of his pants and feel what I assume is his cock harden between us.

Oops.

"Enjoying yourself, human?" His voice is thick with sleep and laced with humor.

"I am, actually." For some reason I don't feel the need to stop touching him now that he's awake and I've been caught. "Your skin is different than mine."

"Oh, I'm aware." His hand strokes up and down my spine. "You're so soft. I have to wonder if every inch of you feels this good."

"I've never had any complaints." My breath catches as he brings his hand to my side, cupping my ribcage and stroking his thumb back and forth. If he moved his hand up just a tiny bit, he'd be brushing the bottom of my breast.

"How did you sleep? Are you feeling better?"

Everything comes crashing back to me. He frowns when I scoot away from him, sadness flashing in his eyes. Or maybe it's not sadness, what do I even know about his emotions? It just feels like sadness somehow.

I sit up and know that I can't get out of bed until he leaves the room. On the bedside table is a stack of cloths, a folded piece of paper, and another small bottle of the tincture I took last night. I wonder when Vynia and Hyva came back, I didn't hear them.

“I’ll go so you can get cleaned up. Let me or Uzold know if you need anything.” He tosses the covers back and stands. I watch as he stretches his arms over his head, his muscles rippling with the movement.

Stars, he’s beautiful.

Instead of going out into the hall and to his room that way, he walks out onto the balcony. I watch as he pushes his pants down his hips, exposing his sculpted gray ass, steps onto the banister, and dives down into the water. If he hadn’t mentioned doing that in passing before, I’d be worried. He’s probably going to take a swim with Kodia. I doubt I’d make it if I were to jump from this height, but it’s good to know he can.

I push the covers off and check to see how messy the sheets are. There’s not too much, but I’ll definitely have to strip the bedding. After tossing back the tincture, I open the note from Vynia. She crafted some clothes into makeshift pads until we figure out how to get me on medication to suppress my cycle. Or until I go back to Oculus Nine.

The thought brings the familiar heaviness with it. I don’t have much of a purpose here, clearly less than I have back home, but it feels better here. Although, they don’t seem to be receptive to humans on this planet outside of Raiz and those in his house or under his command. I wonder if I could start over on another planet. Or maybe even find a space station to find work in. They always need translators there.

I send a longing look at the bathtub when I start the shower. Hopefully the heat and steam from the shower will soothe the aches as well as a bath or heating pad would. I drop my clothes to the floor and step under the water. It does help, and the herbal-scented hair and body soaps also help ease the tension.

So much has happened I haven’t even really had time to think about the kiss we

shared yesterday. I understand why he did it, but I didn't expect to feel it through every inch of my body. Everything about that kiss made me want more.

It's never been like that for me. I could have spent hours exploring his mouth, running my tongue over the tips of his sharp fangs. Would he lose himself to the moment and bite my lip, licking the blood away?

My nipples bead just thinking about it. Is he aware of the feral little sounds he made? Did I make them, too? Maybe I should let myself explore these desires.

No.

I know myself. It'll end up with me getting attached and being sad when it's time to leave. Although, I wasn't sad when things with Torre didn't work out. Why do I think I'll be sad if I explore a physical relationship with Raiz?

If he even wants one. He could have kissed me out of necessity only. Though he was stroking my skin this morning. And then there's the thrumming. It put me right to sleep last night. I remember nothing after his arms wove around me and he pulled me to him, I just fell into the most peaceful night's sleep I've ever had.

Steam fills the bathroom by the time I step out of the shower. I walk over to the sink and run a comb through my hair. The hair he killed a male for touching. There was more to it than that but still. I can barely look at myself in the mirror thinking about how a tiny part of me wasn't entirely appalled by it.

I'm not sure what it says about me that part of me was thrilled by the intensity of his protectiveness over me. It could be as simple as never having felt that cared for before. The group of females who took it upon themselves to raise me within the Order are wonderful. They made sure I was fed, clothed, and educated. All my basic needs were met. They cared for me, but did they love me? No. I certainly don't think

any of them would have put their life on the line for mine.

But I feel that Raiz would. He has no problem crossing moral boundaries to keep me safe. I know he needs me; I'm a means to an end for him. That should make me question his motivations. It doesn't. It only makes me question myself because I like that he is so protective. Even when he's irrational, a small part of me preens under his attention.

Is this what it feels like to be cherished?

CHAPTER 17

RAIZ

* * *

It's been nearly three days, and there has been no answer from Las. At this point, desperation is gnawing at me. The longer we wait, the more likely we are to be discovered. I've sent Altis and Vynia out to find Las. Or someone else to guide us.

Hyva's been subtly keeping an eye on Neev the past few days while also trying to replicate the medication she normally takes to suppress her natural cycles. I had no idea how often human females could become pregnant. Then on top of how frequently they become fertile, they're also compatible with sixty percent of known species within the galaxy. It's no wonder they're sold at such a high rate in the dark markets.

Yet another reason to protect her at all costs. Aside from being my mate, the danger she could face out in the galaxy on her own is frightening. Despite being adult in age, she was so guarded by the Order that she's naive to so much. It's frighteningly easy for her to fall into the wrong hands.

I've been reading everything I can get my hands on about human psionic abilities, but there's not much aside from their own planetary folklore. They generally don't believe in these abilities, though there are humans who proclaim to be gifted in various ways. Mostly speaking with the dead or precognition.

It wouldn't be beyond the realm of possibility that the man Neev saw in her mind was a manifestation of precognition. The problem with that is she said he wanted to find her. To help her. My instincts say it was an outside force, not something she came up with.

I haven't seen her yet today, and as is becoming a habit, I reach out with my mind to brush against hers. I never invade her space, I just like to check in and make sure she's okay.

I find her on the library terrace. She feels a bit melancholy, the slight sadness I sense has me walking down the hall before I can think better of it. I don't know what excuse I'll use to be near her, but I can figure something out on the fly.

Her tiny, human feet are bare while she leans against the railing and looks out into the water. She doesn't jolt when she hears me walk out beside her, and I'd like to think that's because she can sense me as easily as I can her. Even though she's human and the mate bond will feel less intense to her, she should be able to feel the tether between us, regardless of whether she knows of its existence or not.

"What's it like out there?" she asks quietly. "Under the waves?"

"It's peaceful. Even with them churning above you, the deeper you go, the greater the peace you'll feel."

"Even on Kodia's back?" She turns and meets my gaze.

"Well, no. Kodia and I enjoy moving fast through the water, pushing our limits."

She smiles, but it's sad. "I bet that freedom feels amazing."

"It does." I want to erase the sadness from her eyes and replace it with joy. Before I

can think better of it, an idea flies from my lips. “Want to see for yourself?”

“Really? He’d let me ride him?” Her brow furrows.

“Yes.” I actually have no idea. I’ve never asked him to carry more than me. “I have one of the devices that will allow you to breathe underwater and keep your body temperature stable.”

The sadness in her eyes lessens just the slightest bit at the offer. I want nothing more than to permanently erase it. “Come with me.”

I turn and head for my study. I have to rifle through a couple drawers before I find what I’m looking for, but once I have the disc in hand, I pass it over to her. She looks at it quizzically.

“How is this going to help me breathe underwater?”

“May I?” I take it back from her and point to the back of her neck, visible because of the way all her hair is piled on top of her head.

“Yes,” she says hesitantly.

I take a step closer to her and wrap my hand around the back of her neck, setting the disk at the base. I press the top and step back to watch the tiny nanotech suit ripple over her body. Each small cell locks the eight around it, forming a thin barrier. I stop it from covering her mouth and nose just yet.

“Oh my stars,” she says, looking down at her body which is now covered by the suit. “It’s all over me.”

“Yes. It spreads under the clothing you’re wearing and once we get in the water, I’ll

activate the head piece which will filter the oxygen from the water allowing you to breathe as usual.”

“Do you use these?”

“No. My skin is still made for the water, and once submerged my gills open.”

Her lips part in surprise. “I didn’t even realize you have gills.”

“I don’t right now.” I finger the material of her shirt. “Take your clothes off and let's go for a swim. Kodia has been wanting my attention anyway.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes.” I grab her hand, linking our fingers as if it’s the most natural gesture in the world and begin pulling her toward the door.

She follows and doesn’t try to shake my hand off, so I leave it. The battery-operated motion lights I had installed for her on the staircases light up as we walk down the worn stone stairs to the stone transport landing. She keeps back while I walk to the edge of the water and tap the surface a few times, calling for him.

I wait, and within a minute Kodia breaks the surface. His black eyes alight with happiness and what could only be called a toothy grin stretched across his face. I’m sure he looks strange to her, maybe even frightening, but he’s just a playful animal. I can’t ask his permission the way I’d like, but as scratch behind his ear, I look over my shoulder at Neev.

“Come here,” I tell her quietly.

She takes slow, measured steps and then kneels beside me.

“Hold your hand out to him.” I place my hand on the small of her back in encouragement.

The two of them look at each other for a moment and then Kodia makes the first move, pressing his nose against her palm. Whatever he smells, likely the mate bond between her and I, makes him immediately look at me. In his eyes I see his absolute acceptance of her. I know if I’m ever gone, and he can protect her, he will. His black tongue snakes out of his mouth and licks her.

“Is that a good sign or does he think I’m dinner?” she asks me.

“He accepts you.” I stand and begin to strip out of my clothes. “Take your clothes off.”

She looks down at herself and follows my instructions. The nano suit covers her like a second skin so as she strips down, I have a vague idea of how she would look naked. It’s enticing enough to make cock harden in its sac.

I turn quickly and look down at Kodia. The last thing we need is my cock to extend outside my body. It’s bad enough it did so the night I shared Neev’s bed. Once I have my desire back in check, I turn to her again.

“Are you okay with me speaking into your mind while we’re underwater?” Neither of us will be able to speak normally, so it’s this or nothing. “Before you answer, I do need to tell you that the more you allow me into your mind, the easier it is for me to enter at will.”

“What do you mean?” She tilts her head.

“Think of it like a path. The more often it’s traveled, the easier it is to traverse. It’s how I can speak so easily to Hyva, Altis, and Vynia. I don’t even have to try

anymore, and they've given me full access to come and go as needed with the understanding that I won't cross any boundaries."

She catches her bottom lip between her teeth and silently considers it for a moment. "Okay." She looks up at me. "I trust you."

My chest warms.

Thank you, your trust means everything to me. I smile down at her as I speak the words into her mind.

You're welcome. "Did you hear that?" she asks.

"I did."

I push my pants past my hips, and she quickly averts her eyes. Her skin is flushed and warm when I reach behind her neck and press the top of the disc, engaging the mask. The rapid increase of her heart rate has me reaching down and gripping my hand in hers.

It's okay. Get ready to jump.

She nods and grips my hand tighter.

Three.

Two.

One.

We both jump off the side of the landing and into the cool darkness of the sea. Kodia

swims under us, and I slide down onto his back. I tuck Neev in front of me, locking my thighs around her.

Grab hold of his spines. I demonstrate, my chest flush against her back as I lean forward and grab two of the spines that run down his neck. He moves fast through the water so hold on and lean as close to his body as you can.

Okay. This is so weird, being able to breathe underwater.

Good weird? I smile against her shoulder, fighting the desire to run my lips over the delicate curve of her neck.

Definitely good weird.

As soon as he feels us secured, Kodia takes off, leaving the grotto and jetting into the sea. He dives deep, cutting through the kelp forest and around the huge boulders dotting the sea floor. A dark shadow cuts through the distance as he carries us out into the open ocean.

What's coming toward us? Her question is laced with uneasiness.

That's just his mate. She's harmless. To us.

She comes alongside us, her dark eyes catching on Neev with a keen interest. Then she's spiraling through the water, her barrel rolls creating a spinning vortex behind her. I barely have time to lock my body around Neev's and instruct her to hold on tight before Kodia begins doing the same thing.

Her silky hair flows over my shoulder as she relaxes her body between Kodia's and mine. I can feel his joy through the bond I share with him as clearly as I can feel hers. Never in all my life have I felt this level of happiness.

If I could keep us down here forever, I would.

Once they begin to slow down to normal speed, I recognize the reef they're taking us to. It's beautiful and full of creatures that Neev's likely never seen before. Unless of course she saw them in one of the books she's spent every free second reading.

Are you okay? I loosen my grip on Kodia but keep Neev tucked against me.

Yes, that was incredible. Where are they taking us?

To a reef they like to hunt near. They'll likely let us off to explore while they go find something for dinner.

Is it safe to be without them?

You're always safe with me. There's very little that can hurt me underwater. And there's not a chance in hell I'd let anything dangerous near her.

As soon as we get to the reef, I drift off the side of Kodia, taking Neev with me. This part of the ocean is teeming with life because we're closer to the side of the planet with constant light. The sunlight filters down through water, the rays scattered into beautiful beams that dance over the sandy seafloor.

I swim alongside Neev, pointing out all the flora and fauna as we pass by. The colors of this reef are some of the most vivid I've seen on our planet or any other I've visited. Bright orange corals and pink underwater flowers are so stunningly contrasted by the aqua blue water around us.

There's one more place I want to show her before we have to go back. I grab her hand and lead her down into a rocky cave. I go through a narrow opening first and then turn to help guide her through and then watch as she takes in the sight around us.

Oh my stars. She spins in a circle taking the sight around us in. What are they?

Bioluminescent sea worms.

Ew. Worms? She moves closer to the cave wall to get a better look. Thousands of the worms drift in the currents as half their bodies hang out from cracks in the walls.

Careful. They're venomous.

She pulls her hand back but keeps looking around the small space. There's just enough space for me to stand and not hit my head. I watch her take everything in and then turn back to me. She floats up until we're face to face and cups my neck. Her hand runs over my jaw as she looks at me. Into me.

Thank you for showing me all of this.

Her eyes dip from mine down to my lips, and my heart picks up its pace. Before I can do anything, she's pressing her lips against mine. It's a chaste kiss since she's covered by the suit. That doesn't change the fact that it's the most intimate exchange I've ever had with a female.

I don't know if it's a good thing we're underwater or a bad one, because if we were on land I'd have her pressed against the nearest surface while I kissed her senseless. What happened between us in the alley of the village would look tame compared to the way my hands would rove all over her body.

She releases me, and I immediately miss her soft curves and warmth pressed against me. But I can wait. I will have her eventually. There's not a doubt in my mind.

She's mine.

* * *

The need to steal more time with her is one that won't release me. We don't have time to hide away from our responsibilities, but it doesn't stop me from taking her hand and pulling her toward the hot springs hidden away in the caves around the estate.

"Where are you taking me?" she asks, leaving her hand clasped in mine.

"Are you cold?"

"Yes, a little."

"There are a few natural springs tucked away down here. They're heated by geothermal vents and full of minerals that will help soothe your muscles from all the swimming."

I grab a torch from the wall as the light dims the further back we go. She falls in step beside me.

"If I wasn't with you, would you need the torch?" she asks.

"No."

"How's that going to work for the tunnels?"

"Hyva has found lenses for you to wear over your eyes that will make your vision equal to ours. So as long as you can tolerate the feeling of them in your eye, you should be good."

The air becomes heavy with heat and moisture as we step into the cavern with the hot

springs. The sound of the water gurgling up from below and lapping at the edge of the stones echoes off the walls. I release her hand and walk around the pool closest to us, lighting the sconces hanging from the stone walls.

She stands on the edge of the pool, looking around and taking in the space. The walls are made of the same stone as those inside the estate, just in the raw form. The veins of silver and white sparkle against the black in the dancing firelight.

I step down into the water, barely suppressing a moan of pleasure at how good the heat feels. She hesitantly dips a toe in before bringing her eyes to mine. Part of me wants to invade her mind, to know every thought hidden behind her violet gaze.

“You should remove the suit before getting in.” I know she’s uncomfortable with being nude, although she seems to handle me being naked well.

Watching me through wary eyes she reaches behind her neck. “Will you turn around?”

Disappointment settles over me at her discomfort, but I immediately do as she asks. I don’t turn back around until she tells me she’s ready. My breath rushes from me in a whoosh when I see her. She’s piled all her hair up on her head again, so the entire length of her neck is visible. If I look closely, I can see the flutter of her pulse beneath her pale skin.

The swell of her breasts rises and falls with each breath she takes. She sinks down into the water until her shoulders are submerged as her eyes drink me in. I’m standing where the water is waist deep, hitting just at my hips and leaving all the muscles of my body on display.

“What do you think?” I finally ask.

“Of?” Her eyes dart to mine from my abs.

“The hot springs?” I smile at her slowly.

“Oh. They’re nice. Good and hot.” She smiles back at me nervously.

“If this one isn’t to your liking, the far spring is cooler.” I point to the back of the room. “And the one right beside us is hotter than this one.”

“Like Goldilocks.”

“What’s Goldilocks?”

“It’s an old earth fairytale. A story that parents would tell their kids at bedtime. It’s about a little girl who walks into a family of bears’ house looking for the perfect place to rest. She tries everything in threes, too cold, too hot, just right, etc. I honestly can’t even remember the rest.”

“I see. Do earth animals have homes like humans?”

“No. Just a fictional account. Don’t you have anything like that? Something you tell the young to make them want to follow the rules or be good Zeahirians?”

“No. We don’t tell our children made up stories.”

Now is the time to open up to her about the Bak’hura. Not that I want to. The risk that she’ll find out what I’ve done and hate me for it makes me want to carry her out of here and fly off into deep space. I can barely handle the truth, how can I expect her to do so? “Our childhoods are not full of love and warmth.”

“Oh?” Her head tilts as she waits for me to continue.

“Brutality is our religion, violence our language. That’s ingrained in us from the very beginning. As you know, we’re almost always born with a twin.”

She nods, following along with my story.

“When we become adolescents, usually around the age of twenty-five rotations, we enter into a blood rite called Bak’hura. It’s a battle to the death in order to serve at the head of your house.”

She inhales sharply as the words settle in. Her eyes turn glassy as she watches me.

“It’s barbaric. No one should have to kill their sibling, yet we’re all forced to do so. It’s why I brought you here. To translate our oldest texts and find a way to convince the Sovereign to end the practice.”

“What if he doesn’t want to do that?”

“Then I’ll start a war. It has to end. The Bak’hura is horrendous. Evil.”

“But what about Altis and Vynia?”

“Vynia was born missing half her leg. The Sovereign doesn’t count her as whole.”

Neev scowls. “I don’t know how to feel about that. On one hand it’s offensive and wrong. But on the other hand, they didn’t have to participate.”

“She’s proven her worth over the years. Not that she should have had to do so.”

“Hyva?”

“He was born as a single. Rare.”

“Your twin?” she asks quietly.

“We fought. It was vicious and brutal.” I tilt my head back and point to the scar running across my neck. “He gave me this right before I tore his throat out. I nearly bled out alongside him.”

I expect my words to repel her. To show her the truth of the monster she sits across from. If she had any sense, she’d run from me. No matter how much I hate that I did it, if I had to do it again, I would. For the reason that he would not be looking for ways to better our world. It makes me just as much of a monster as him, but I won’t ever regret it.

To my shock, she crosses the distance between us and wraps her arms around my neck. I sit in stunned silence for several beats of my heart and then wrap my arms around her.

CHAPTER 18

NEEV

* * *

I throw my arms around his neck, completely forgetting that I'm currently naked. That we're both naked. He wraps his arms around my back, pulling me against him with no hesitation. I press my face into his neck, feeling the start of the jagged scar near my lips.

He stiffens in my arms as I gently kiss it, my hand cupping his neck and running along the other side of the scar. "I'm glad you're here," I whisper against his skin. "But I'm so sorry you had to do that."

His body shudders against mine. One of his hands travels up my spine and into the hair at the nape of my neck while the other pulls me onto his lap until I'm straddling his legs. He pulls my head back and searches my eyes, then drops his gaze to my lips.

My heart beats rapidly in my chest as we move closer, drawn together like two colliding stars trapped in each other's orbit. As soon as our lips meet, he begins to thrum from deep within his chest again. I move my hands over his pectorals, letting the vibrations travel through the contact and into my own body.

One of his hands stays tangled in my hair, holding my face to his as his tongue slides into my mouth, grazing mine. His other hand moves to my hip, kneading my skin. The space between my thighs aches with emptiness.

His thumb ghosts along the crease where my thigh meets my hip so tantalizingly close to where I crave it the most. He smiles against my lips when I inhale sharply as he does it again, inching closer to where I need him. I drag my nails down his chest lightly while I bite down on his lip.

“Do you need something, Neev?” He pulls back just enough to peer down at me.

“Yes.” I nod. “Touch me. Please.”

He takes a shuddering breath and slides his hand between my thighs. “Touch you here?” He drags a finger along my slit.

“Yes.” My hips rock against his hand.

He slides a finger inside me. “Stars, that feels so good.”

“I’m glad to hear it,” he replies in my mind.

Normally I’d be embarrassed, but all I can think about right now is how fucking good it feels to have his finger gliding in and out of me. He adds his thumb to my clit, circling it with the perfect amount of pressure.

My fingers dig into his shoulders as I ride his hand. “Raiz,” I moan his name. His speed increases. How does he know how to do this so well?

I feel him harden beneath me. It’d be so easy to push his hand to the side and slide down his length. If I had been with a male before, I wouldn’t hesitate. But as I reach down between us and wrap my hand around his girth, a healthy dose of trepidation settles over me. He’s bigger than any toy Torre and I used on each other.

As if sensing my thoughts, or hell, maybe he’s listening in, he slides another of his

thick fingers inside me. He crooks them inside of me, hitting the perfect spot that sends pleasure erupting from my core like a shockwave through my body. My head falls back, exposing my neck to him, and he takes the opportunity to cover it with hot, open-mouthed kisses. The sensation of his fangs grazing the delicate skin while his fingers wring the explosive release from me nearly sends me careening into another orgasm.

He withdraws his fingers as the tremors subside and pulls me closer to his chest. I melt against him. Too sated from his touch to do anything as he holds me.

“Have you been with a human female before?” I ask quietly.

“No.” He runs his hands up and down my back in soothing strokes.

“How did you know how to do that then?”

“I read about human anatomy and pleasure.”

“Why?” I ask as I sit up.

He smirks. “Isn’t it obvious?”

“Not really.” Surely, he isn’t implying that he read them because of me.

“Raiz,” Hyva says from the cave entrance. “Las wants to see you.”

Raiz sighs, his fingers kneading my flesh before he answers. “Thank you. I’ll be right there.”

“I brought towels and clothes.” I peek over Raiz’s shoulder at Hyva who gives me a knowing smile. “Although I didn’t realize Neev was with you.”

I try to move off his lap, but he tightens his grip on me. “Just another moment.” He quickly presses his lips to mine. “Share my bed tonight?”

I nod. “Yes.”

He kisses me one last time and then sets me beside him. “You can stay and enjoy the hot springs for a bit longer if you wish. Can you find your way back?”

I watch as he lifts himself out, the muscles of his backside flexing with each movement. The varying shades of gray that alternate along his back, mottled and blurred together look so striking in the dim light of the cave. But out in the water, it all made perfect sense, his body blended in seamlessly.

Before turning around, he tucks his cock into the internal sac that protects it. Yet another part of Zeahirian anatomy that makes them dangerously well adapted. Their muscles, their fangs, their talons, everything is perfectly designed to be the apex predator on this planet.

I set my arms on the cool stone ledge in front of me to watch while he dresses. He notices my attention while he fastens his pants. The smile he gives me sends butterflies fluttering inside my belly. The flash of fang sends a different sensation through me. I don’t know what it says about me that I love the sharp and scary parts of him just as much as the sweet words he says.

“I’ll be back as soon as I can,” he says.

“Be safe.”

* * *

Hours later and I still can’t get over how easily he brought me pleasure. I really wish

Hyva would have waited another five minutes so he would have answered my question about when he read up on human pleasure. If I were grading him, he'd be top of the class.

Once again I pull my attention back to the book I'm reading. Uzold pulled it for me and said it was one of their classic pieces of literature. It's not something I'd normally choose, but as I'm trying to help them, a broader understanding of their culture is key. Literature is obviously a cornerstone in that manner.

I've really come to enjoy the time I've spent with the elder male. He's sat with me late into the night in the library when Raiz has been occupied and Hyva was out. I've gotten good insider information on how they were growing up. All the trouble young Zeahirian adolescents get into. Tonight, he's doing a few household chores but has told me he'll join me in the library when he's finished.

My stomach swoops when I hear a loud crash from down the hall. More thudding and muffled voices pull at my curiosity. I stand up and walk into the long hallway that leads to the front door and see two huge males beating Uzold.

They hear me, and Uzold yells for me to run. One of the males begins to charge toward me. He's already near the stairs leading down to the armory and the grotto, not that I could fight either of them off. So I turn and run, the sound of metal slicing through flesh follows me and then silence. I don't have time to look behind me, but I steal a glance as I turn down the hall toward Raiz's quarters.

My stomach roils at the sight of Uzold's head feet away from his body. Blood is everywhere. And I'm all alone.

I slam the door closed behind me and flick the lock, not that it'll hold these males back. They're huge. Bigger even than anyone on the crew of Raiz's ship. I look around his room, hoping to find something, anything, to give me a fighting chance at

survival. There are two daggers on a bedside table and a sword leaning against the wall on the other side of his bed. The sword looks heavy, so I go for the daggers and hide behind one of the curtains.

The door flies open and one of the males walks in. He doesn't speak. The helmet he wears is similar to the one that Raiz wore the night he took me, but there's an insignia on the side that's not familiar.

I hold my breath as he moves through the room thoroughly checking in the bathroom, the armoires, and even under the bed. With an irritated grunt he throws open the doors to the balcony and walks through them, the curtains fly up in the breeze. His head turns, and even though I can't see his eyes, I know I've been spotted.

I don't hesitate. I aim the first dagger at his side, right where Vynia showed me to go for in a killing strike. He easily bats it away and grabs my wrist, yanking me from my hiding spot and backhanding my face so hard I see stars. Blood trickles from my temple, but I know I have to try again.

This time I lunge and manage to tear open his uniform. He looks down at the blood oozing from his side and kicks me in the chest. My head cracks against the stone floor when I fall. The room blurs around me as I'm lifted off the ground, carried onto the balcony, and thrown over the side.

Time slows as I realize this is how I'll die. Even if I survive the drop into the water, the waves are crashing against the rocky cliff. Even the best human swimmer would have trouble in this turbulent water.

Somehow my body manages to right itself into a foot-first position, so when I hit the water, I don't die on impact. But everything is shades of blue and gray and white. My wrist is broken, yet somehow, I manage to find my way to the surface and drag a deep breath into my lungs.

Maybe I'll make it. Maybe Raiz will hear me. Or Uzold called out for him.

Any hope of help coming for me dissipates when a wave crashes over me. I'm pulled under the surface, tugged by a current too strong for me escape. As the water thrashes around me, I lose track of what's up and what's down. Another wave pushes me into the rocks, and this time everything goes black.

CHAPTER 19

RAIZ

* * *

The emptiness of the connection between Uzold and my mind has me pushing my body to its absolute limits. Hyva and Altis run alongside me, easily keeping up. I reach out a mental connection for Neev, but because I've been so careful to keep a barrier between us, I can't quite breach it.

If anything happens to either of them, I will lose my mind. Our booted footsteps echo down the tunnel as we run through the shortcut back to the estate. Instead of winding through the rocky hills lining the cliff, the tunnel is a straight shot.

Each breath I take is a breath closer to having her back in my arms. That knowledge keeps me from devolving into nothing more than a beastly shadow of myself. She hasn't seen what we are at the most fundamental level, nothing more than monsters capable of nothing but destruction.

I want to protect her from ever seeing that.

The front door hangs from the hinges when I get to the house. My heartbeat roars in my ears as I run inside and nearly lose my footing on the massive pool of blood under my feet. Uzold's body lies against one wall, and his head rests at the other side of the corridor. An arc of blood drips down the walls. Grief briefly grips me at the sight, but I bury it just as quickly as it comes. I'll grieve later, first I have to find Neev and

make sure she's okay.

"There's two sets of footprints," Altis says as he pulls his sword off his back. "I'll follow the one down to the grotto."

"I'll go with," Hyva says. "There's nothing I can do here."

"I'll follow the other." I withdraw my sword and move as quickly but quietly as I can down the corridor toward the bedrooms.

A fire still burns in the hearth of the library, but it's empty. Neev was probably reading as she does most nights. I don't want to call out her name on the slim chance the intruders are still here. As I come around the corner, I see my door kicked in. The metallic scent of blood, fear, and anger lingers in the air as I approach.

My stomach drops at the thought of what I may find as I enter. My eyes are immediately drawn to several puddles of blood on the floor. One is Zeahirian and the other human. Both the daggers I keep on my bedside table are on the floor, one blade covered in Zeahirian blood.

My chest fills with pride that she was even able to draw blood. My feisty mate wouldn't go down without a fight. I worry though as I look through more of the room and out on the balcony when I don't find her. I'm about to enter her bedroom when Hyva reaches out to me.

"Get down here now. Kodia and his mate are protecting Neev's body. I can't get close."

I drop everything and race back into the house, running down the hall and taking the stairs three at a time down. Nothing can prepare me for the sight when I come down into the grotto.

Kodia is standing protectively in front of his mate, who has her front flippers splayed on either side of Neev's unmoving body. Both of them have their teeth bared and the spikes around their necks fully flared.

I move in front of Hyva slowly with both my hands up. Kodia tracks my movement with narrowed black eyes. I crouch down before him to show I'm not a threat and remind him I'm his soul tied. When the bond manages to overcome his primal need to protect his mate, his spikes relax, falling back down against his body.

I briefly touch my forehead to his, breathing out in thanks that he found her and protected her just as I hoped he would. Then I turn my attention to his mate who hasn't relaxed a bit. Her razor-sharp teeth gleam in the dim light as she watches my every move.

Kodia turns and approaches her first. He presses the side of his head against hers and purrs. The sound reverberates through the room, and her eyes close softly. As her body relaxes over Neev's, I move closer carefully.

I would know if Neev was dead; I would feel it. But while I don't feel that loss, I also don't feel her the way I do when she's conscious and healthy. We need to help her now. Impatience wars with respect as I watch Kodia slowly bring his mate down.

I crouch low before her when her eyes fly open. Bowing my head in submission feels beyond wrong, but I can't risk angering the beast. Kodia waddles off the ledge and dives into the water, coming back to the surface and calling for his mate. She looks at me and growls a warning before moving off and following him.

Hyva rushes over and pulls out the scanner that Altis ran and grabbed while I dealt with calming the animals. He runs it over her body while it beeps constantly with alerts and readings. He swears under his breath and looks up at me.

“I can’t help her down here. We need to get her back on the ship.”

“I’ll arrange it,” Altis says before running off.

“What’s wrong?”

“At this point the list of what isn’t wrong is shorter. Miraculously she’s breathing, but she’s got multiple broken ribs, a concussion, and likely a brain bleed. Her wrist is broken, as is a bone in her face. I need to close the wound by her eye, or we risk her losing it. I can stabilize her here, but we don’t have long.”

It’s the worst part of being on the surface, the lack of access to technology. It’s why the only hospitals for the planet are all located on the dark side of the planet in orbit. So the radiation from our star doesn’t interfere with the life-saving technology.

We could call for an emergency transport to one of them, but I trust Hyva more than any other doctor, and our technology is more advanced anyway. I follow all the directions he gives me as I assist him in stabilizing her.

It’s a challenge to compartmentalize my emotions from the goal, but I spent my life learning to do so as the Lord of House Aste and as I rose in the military ranks. I still have to put every single thing I learned to use, though. When I look down at her bruised and bloodied body, I want to tear the world apart until I find who did this. I want to rip the perpetrators limb from limb and peel their skin off. I want to bathe in their blood and listen to their screams of agony on repeat.

When I find them, they won’t have an honorable death. They will die crying and pissing themselves in complete fear and regret for ever touching my mate. They won’t receive death rites, they will be left to rot in a heap like the garbage they are.

* * *

We got her to the ship in record time due to Vynia calling in favors from one of her former lovers. Because we keep a skeleton crew aboard the ship on a ten-day schedule, Hyva has assistance from two of his medical crew. Vynia stayed behind to lead the investigation on the surface.

I'm torn between wanting to go and hunt those responsible down and the need to be here, sitting bedside in med bay waiting for Neev to awaken. The desire to place my hand on Neev and enter her mind is one I have to fight second by second, but Hyva reassures me that she's not in distress.

In the past day I've mapped each of her bruises, each mark indelibly etched into my mind. When I find the male who did this, I'm going to shred him apart slowly peeling his skin from his muscles and his muscles from his bones. I'm going to bathe in his blood and wear his talons around my neck.

"You should get some rest," Hyva says from behind me.

"No."

He sighs as he pulls over a rolling stool. Shadows linger under his eyes, likely nearing the severity of what I'm sure mine look like. We sit side by side in silence, watching Neev's chest rise and fall with each breath she takes.

"At least let me make up one of the extra beds for you, so you can sleep."

"I'll sleep when I know she's going to be okay."

He pulls out a tablet and sets it between us. "From everything I see, I'm hopeful she'll make a full recovery. I've reset her wrist and injected her ribs with the serum to speed their healing. We saved her eye, and her brain patterns are normal."

“When do you think she’ll wake?”

“That is one of the only things I can’t tell you.”

“Then get used to seeing me right here. I’m not moving until those gorgeous violet eyes of hers open.”

Altis walks in carrying two trays of food for us. He sets them on a rolling table and moves it behind where we’re sitting. I might not want to rest, but I know I at least need to continue to eat and fuel my body for the bedside vigil I’m keeping.

“Any word from Vynia?”

“Two inspectors were seen outside the village last night. They didn’t visit any businesses or homes.”

It’s worrisome if those who attacked my home were sent by the Sovereign. If he’s somehow aware of what I’m trying to do, it would make sense he’d try to take Neev out. I failed her by not providing more protection.

This is all on me.

Who knows if she’ll even want me when she wakes, knowing how I let her down and allowed her to fall into danger like this. I don’t deserve a mate. I don’t deserve her.

“Stop that.” Altis hits me in the chest with his fist. “Stop blaming yourself.”

“How can I not?” I look over my shoulder, hoping for a change but knowing she’ll still be laying there unconscious. “I shouldn’t have left her alone.”

“She was with Uzold.”

“An elder with minimal training.”

Hyva presses his lips together in a disapproving line. “Don’t do that. You know damn well that Uzold, despite his age and occupation, was more than capable of keeping her safe in almost any circumstance beyond confronting highly trained operatives. It tarnishes his memory.”

Shame washes over me. He’s right. Uzold taught the three of us so many things. It’s disrespectful to claim he wasn’t capable of protecting my mate.

“Feeling up to a spar?” I ask Altis.

“Yeah, I could go for a few rounds of kicking your head out of your ass.”

We finish eating, and Hyva and Altis give a minute alone with Neev. I sigh heavily and lean my forehead against hers, wishing I could trade places. Tucking a piece of her hair behind her ear, I brush my lips lightly over hers.

“Come back to me. I promise no harm will ever come to you if you just wake up.”

I watch her for a moment, willing something to change but turn when it doesn’t. Altis is waiting for me. I welcome the physicality of the fight and each strike as the penance I owe.

CHAPTER 20

NEEV

* * *

A soft hand lands on my shoulder, gently shaking me awake. My eyes flutter open to the distinctively empty and bright white space of my inner world. Eryx kneels beside me, a look of deep concern mars his face. His fingers trace the side of my face, even his light touch sends a shock wave of pain through me. I try to sit up, but shooting pains rip through my side at the attempt.

“Don’t move,” he says quietly. “Just lie back and relax. How did this happen to you?”

“I was attacked.”

“By whom?”

“I don’t know. I couldn’t see anything identifying.” I look into his eyes, such a weird mirror image of my own. “How are you here?”

He shrugs. “It’s your mind. You tell me.”

“Are you real?”

“As real as you are.”

“What are you?”

He gives me an enigmatic smile. “Many things. Mostly concerned for you at the moment. Where are you?”

“I don’t know. Am I even alive? Last I knew I was drowning at the bottom of the ocean.”

“You are alive.” His eyes narrow. “What ocean?”

“How do you know I’m alive?” Two can play the answer a question with a question game. I haven’t forgotten Raiz’s response to knowing this person was in my head. I don’t trust that he’s actually concerned about me, whereas I know Raiz cares.

“We don’t have much time. Tell me, where you are.”

Eryx glances over his shoulder, as if someone is drawing his attention. It’s not Raiz, I’d know his presence anywhere.

“I promise you, I’m not trying to hurt you,” his voice implores me, what feels like sincerity infused into every word. “I’m trying to help you. Tell me where you are.” A muscle ticks in his jaw when he looks back over his shoulder.

“I’m not telling you anything until you tell me who you are.”

He moves his hand down to my jaw and runs his thumb under my lower lip. The movement is so attentive, so caring, for a moment I’m disarmed. I feel like he might be telling me the truth. Maybe he does just care about my safety.

But why would he? And if he did, why not be honest about who and what he is? The cagey responses don’t inspire trust. Especially when Raiz has earned my trust

completely.

“You need to be careful, Neev. Remember that whoever has you, isn’t taking care of you the way you should be.” He stands and holds a hand out for mine. As he pulls me to my feet, I realize how tall he is. “I’m going to find you.”

* * *

The dim red backlighting of the med bay comes into focus as I open my eyes and look around. They must have had to bring me back on the ship to treat me. How did they even find my body? My fingers brush against something soft, and I realize with a start that it’s Raiz’s hair. His head rests on the bed near my hip while he dozes.

I don’t see Hyva or anyone else, so I run my fingers through the silvery white strands until he wakes. He blinks a few times and then looks up, realizing I’m awake. He straightens, wincing the slightest bit.

“Hi.” My voice is scratchy from disuse. “How long have I been out?”

“Three days.”

My brows shoot up. “Really?”

He nods and moves closer to me. “Hyva kept you sedated while he reset your broken bones and gave you a stimulant to speed healing.”

“Am I good as new?”

“I’ll go grab him,” is his response. He stands and looks down at me, relief easing the lines of tension on his face.

While he's gone to find Hyva, my mind drifts to whether I had another episode or if it was just a dream, seeing Eryx again. I didn't feel the panic or hear the whispers that usually coincide with it. Should I tell Raiz?

He was clearly concerned about me. Do I risk upsetting him further or just hold back until I figure out whether it was real?

"Hello, Neev." Hyva crosses the room and scrolls through a few readings on the monitors before pulling out his handheld sensor and running it slowly over my body. "How are you feeling?"

"Stiff and sore."

"That sounds about right for fighting off an attack and then falling into the sea." He hovers over my ribs and frowns. "Take a deep breath for me."

Pain shoots through my chest as I inhale. Tears prick my eyes as I freeze and try to work through the pain. Raiz joins us on the other side of the bed and reaches down, threading our hands.

"Kodia and his mate pulled you from the water. I think you might have a soul-tied bond forming with her. She barely let me approach you, she was protecting you so fiercely." Raiz shares the story so nonchalantly, as if it's an everyday occurrence.

I look up at him. "Is that possible?"

"The soul tie?" His thumb strokes over my knuckles. "I don't see how it wouldn't be possible. They choose us, not the other way around. Kodia's mate has never interacted with me before you were in the water with me. I had a feeling she was drawn to you, but her protectiveness confirmed it."

“Does she have a name?”

“No. We only name our soul-tied creatures. It’ll be up to you to give her a name.”

My attention is jolted away from Raiz when I feel a sharp prick in my side. I look up at Hyva who gives me a brief tight-lipped smile. He sets aside the needle and wipes an antiseptic pad over the place where he injected me.

“What was that?” I ask.

“The serum to boost bone healing. For Zeahirians it usually only takes one dose, but you might require one or two more for your ribs.”

“Can you remember what happened?” Raiz sits back down beside me while Hyva pulls a rolling stool over.

“I was in the library and heard a loud noise coming from the hall. When I stepped out to check I saw,” my voice cracks as I remember everything with Uzold. The sight of his head resting in a pool of blood, severed from his body. Tears stream from my eyes. “I saw...”

“If it’s too hard to talk about, you don’t have to,” Raiz wipes a tear from my cheek. “We know what happened to Uzold.”

“Did you see who did it?”

I shake my head. “They were covered in all black head to toe. They had on helmets and gloves. I don’t remember seeing any skin at all. Who even knows if they were Zeahirian, although they were as big as you.” I look at Raiz. “Maybe even taller.”

“They were Zeahirian, based on the blood sample I pulled from a blade in Raiz’s

room.” Hyva’s gaze meets Raiz’s over me.

“Good. I aimed for the spot Vynia showed me. Where you are vulnerable to attack.”

Raiz smiles down at me, pride gleaming in his eyes. “Good job. You saved yourself.”

“He still managed to throw me over the balcony. I don’t know if that counts as saving myself.”

“We’ll never know for sure, but had you not put up a fight, undoubtedly you would have been killed.”

Heaviness washes over me as I think about how Uzold put up a fight and he’s still not here. It doesn’t seem fair that I lived and he didn’t. Especially when he was truly fighting back, not whatever it was that I did with barely any training. How could luck have been on my side and not on his? He was such an honorable and kind male.

Whether it’s weariness or a side effect of the medication Hyva just gave me, my eyelids begin to droop. I blink slowly a few times, trying to stay awake knowing I’ve been out for days. Hyva’s hand falls lightly to my shoulder and squeezes.

“It’s okay to fall back asleep. You need to rest while the serum speeds your healing.”

I nod forcing the movement even though my head feels heavy. Hyva glances at Raiz and walks off toward his office leaving us alone. Raiz stands and cups my cheek, his thumb tracing my cheekbone as he stares into my eyes.

“I’m proud of you, little human, for being such a fierce fighter. You bring honor to your kind and family.”

“I don’t have a family.”

“Yes.” He presses a light kiss to my lips. “You do.”

My eyes drift closed before he even pulls his hand from my face.

* * *

The next time I wake, Hyva is sitting beside me, his feet resting on the empty bed beside me and his back against the railing of mine. In his lap is a tablet that he’s scrolling through, lines of text that I can read but not understand pass as he flips through the document. I shift my weight, trying to move to a more comfortable position, and he immediately turns his head.

“You’re awake.” He drops his feet, sets the tablet aside and stands over me. “How are you feeling?”

“Groggy.” I try to sit up, but he stops me with a hand on my shoulder.

“Here.” He presses a button, and the back of the mattress lifts me into a reclined but upright sitting position.

“Thank you.” I draw a deep breath, bracing myself for the pain I experienced last time but nothing happens. “That didn’t hurt.”

“Good. The serum must have worked.” He grabs his sensor. “I’m going to take a look, is that okay?”

“Yes.”

He pulls the sheet covering me down and slides the gown I’m wearing to the side, exposing my side. A greenish bruise covers the side of my body from my ribs to the curve of my hip. He frowns, pulling the sheet up to just below my belly button and

shifts the gown until my entire abdomen is bare. I wince when he presses against my ribs, and a growl reverberates through the room.

Hyva's lips twitch at the sound, but he doesn't stop. "Sorry," he says to me. "How bad does it hurt? Compared to before?"

"A lot less." My eyes meet Raiz's gaze from over Hyva's shoulder.

Raiz glares down at Hyva's hand on my skin. He looks as though he could tear him apart for hurting me. Warmth travels through me at how protective he is after only knowing me a short time. It speaks volumes about the type of male he is.

"Can't the readings from the scanner do a better job than poking at her yourself?" he asks.

"Nothing is better than the touch of a medic." Hyva winks at me, thoroughly amused at his friend's irritation.

"It's okay. It doesn't hurt much."

"Is that normal for humans?" Raiz points at the bruises. "The color changing skin?"

"Yes. It's blood pooling beneath my skin from broken blood vessels. It happens rather easily."

"From what I've read, it's as she says," Hyva confirms. "Humans are delicate, but there's an intriguing resilience to them as well. The fractures are all healed. I'm going to go grab a couple things from my office, and then she could probably move back into her quarters for a few more days of rest in a more comfortable environment."

Raiz takes his place as he walks away. His hand settles over the bare skin of my

stomach, his fingertips tracing small circles over my skin. Goosebumps ripple out from where he caresses me, and his eyes move from them to my eyes.

“Are you cold?” His voice is low.

I shake my head. “No.”

“Does this tickle?” His lips lift in the slightest of smiles.

“I wouldn’t call it a tickle, it just feels good.”

The way he looks at me, so much like he did when I straddled him in the springs, makes heat flood my body. It starts at the point where he makes contact with my skin and spreads out from there. His nostrils flare, and he yanks his hand from my flesh. He turns quickly on his heel and strides into Hyva’s office, closing the door behind him.

I’m left behind, reeling, as the effects of his touch on my body linger. I press my thighs together and take a deep breath. I’m literally laying here in a med bay and just the touch of this male has me thinking and feeling dirty thoughts. I can see Raiz through the window as he paces, his hand running through his hair while Hyva smirks at him.

I wish I could hear what they’re saying. I know it has to be about me. He’s probably stressed out because I’m so easily turned on by his touch. It’s a problem. One we’ll have to find a solution for before it comes time for me to leave.

As always, the thought of leaving forms a pit in my stomach. It’s like my body rejects the idea of being parted from him. In fact, the first thing I looked for upon waking was Raiz. He’s who I seek in every room, and I don’t even remember when it started. Maybe the first moment I woke after being taken?

That can't be right, though, can it? It doesn't make sense. The pull I feel to him must have an explanation that makes sense. I just have to figure it out before I get attached.

* * *

My entire body aches with the effort of walking to my quarters on the ship. Raiz wanted to carry me, but I told him it wasn't necessary. Had I realized that being vertical would differ so much from laying on a bed in med bay, I might have reconsidered. But it's too late now, I don't want him worrying anymore about me than he has been.

As it is, I can feel his eyes on me as he paces himself slowly beside me. Hyva is on my other side, but he isn't hovering like Raiz. The two of them lead me down to Raiz's quarters where I stayed while on the ship.

The doors slide open with a quiet whoosh as we cross the threshold. Everything looks the same as it did when we docked last week but now every surface in the room holds arrangements of the beautiful wildflowers I saw on the surface of Zeahiri. The long black stems and pale pink petals bring a softness to the room that I didn't realize it was missing.

"Are these for me?" I look up into Raiz's vivid green eyes with wonder.

"Yes."

"Thank you." I tip my nose into one bundle of blooms and inhale their light scent. I don't even have a frame of reference for what they smell like. Thank the stars for the dim lighting on board because I know I'm blushing. This is the sweetest thing anyone has ever done for me.

"I'll help you get settled in and do a quick vitals check before I go for the night."

Hyva takes my arm and leads me into the bedroom.

Raiz follows us in and pulls the covers down for me. He draws them over my legs as I lean back against the headboard and then moves away for Hyva. Once I'm given the all clear and Hyva says goodnight, I turn my attention toward Raiz.

"Do you have any information on who attacked me? Or why they did it?"

"No, Altis and Vynia are scouring the territory but haven't gotten any specific information, just rumors and thirdhand sightings."

"Are you going to go back down and help them now that you know I'm okay?"

His eyes darken briefly. I can't tell if it's anger about the attack or wanting to get down there and figure out who is responsible. Either way, I don't want him to feel like he has to stay with me while I heal. He has so much on his plate, I don't want to be a burden for him.

"I trust them to investigate on my behalf," he says.

"So you're going to stay here?"

"Yes."

Relief rushes through me. I know it shouldn't. I should encourage him to do what he needs to, but I want him here. With me.

"Is that alright with you?" he asks when I don't say anything.

"Yes, of course." I pick up the glass of water Hyva left on the table and take a drink.

"Where are you sleeping?"

“Wherever you want me to.”

Instead of answering out loud, I reach over and pull the covers on the other side of the bed down. His lips lift into a smile as the thrumming from his chest begins to fill the air. He pushes off the wall he was leaning against and walks over to me. I feel his long fingers move lightly over a bruise slowly fading on my cheek.

“Let me get cleaned up and then we can go to bed.”

I watch him as he walks into the bathroom. His broad shoulders barely clear both sides of the doorway. I hear the water begin to run and roll onto my side, wincing at the pain it puts on my ribs.

Closing my eyes while I have a moment of solitude, I rack my brain for something, any clue, to help figure out who was behind the attack. What did they want? Were they there for me? Did someone find out what Raiz is planning on doing?

I hope not because that would mean he was betrayed by someone he trusts. In all likelihood, someone who works on this ship. From what I understand, everyone on board knows the ultimate goal and agrees. Vynia explained how carefully curated the crew is, how meticulous Raiz has been in choosing who is promoted onto the ship.

The male who chased me down was entirely covered, head to toe, in the same type of clothing Raiz wore when he abducted me, so it stands to reason it had to be a Zeahirian male. Although, that could be a cover. If it wasn't a Zeahirian male, then it had to be someone of a similar species due to the size.

Could the males who attacked have had something to do with the one who keeps entering my mind? He's much smaller than a Zeahirian but who is to say that's actually what he looks like? He could be changing his appearance. At least I assume he could, if he's strong enough to enter my thoughts from afar unbidden. But the

thing about that doesn't entirely make sense is that he's extremely concerned with my safety. He wants to know where I am so he can come rescue me. Or at least his people can.

I just don't know what to think right now.

The door to the bathroom opens, and Raiz walks out in a cloud of steam. A towel is wrapped low on his hips showing off his muscular physique, including two lines of muscle running in a V shape before disappearing beneath the terrycloth. He walks over to one of the armoires and pulls out a pair of the lounge pants he regularly wore around his house.

I'll never get used to how casual he is about nudity. But I am going to allow myself to enjoy it. In fact, now that I've given myself permission to stare and study his body, I realize that just above his waist he has a small fin-like shape protruding along his spine.

"Do you have a fin on your back?"

He looks over his shoulder. "Yes. They're of no use, really." He reaches back, his long fingers stroking over the tip. "They'll probably be gone in a thousand years since we're mostly land dwellers now."

I turn my head as he bends to pull his pants up. My cheeks warm at the thought of him catching me checking him out. Though, he did admit to reading up on human pleasure, so maybe I shouldn't worry about it.

I shouldn't have let my mind wander down that road. Now I can't stop thinking about how good it felt to ride his fingers. How natural losing myself to him came to me. Especially when the orgasm he milked me from was the strongest I've ever felt.

Instead of just my cheeks warming, now my core is pulsing with heat. His body goes rigid while he pauses what he's doing. Then he slowly turns, his eyes a burning green when they lock on mine.

"You should stop thinking whatever it is you're thinking about." His voice is low and raspy. "Otherwise, I'm going to have a hard time keeping my hands off you."

Maybe I don't want you to.

I bite my lip as soon as I think it. I hope he didn't hear that. He said he blocks me out when he doesn't have permission to listen in on my thoughts. I trust him.

"I don't know what you're talking about."

He tilts his head and inhales deeply through his nostrils. "Yeah, you do."

I melt back into the mattress, wishing it could swallow me whole. How did I forget he can smell when I'm turned on? "That's an unfair advantage. Not all of us have superior senses."

"I wouldn't be superior if everyone else did." He slides under the covers beside me, warmth radiating from his body.

I pat around the bed between us. "Is the bed going to be big enough for you, your ego, and me?"

He flashes one of his rare full smiles, drawing my attention to his pointed incisors. "I'm glad you're feeling well enough to joke with me."

"Who says I was joking?" I roll onto my side before I think better of it and wince at the sharp pain in my ribs.

His demeanor changes instantly. He sets his hand over my hip, gently pushing me onto my back again. “Should I call Hyva?”

“No.” I take a slow breath. “I’m okay, just forgot I shouldn’t lay on that side.”

“When I find who did this to you, I’m going to tear them apart. Limb from limb until they beg for mercy which they will never receive.”

“That’s intense.”

“My desire to keep you safe is intense.”

When our eyes lock it feels like all the air has been sucked out into space. It’s just him and me connected by an electric current of attraction. The way that I crave him, the call to be near him is confusing. When I’m healed, before I decide where I’m going to, I know one thing for certain. I’ll be fucking Raiz Asterean until we get whatever this is out of our system.

He turns to shut off the lights, breaking the gaze held between us first. With that freedom I can breathe again. I let my eyes drift closed, knowing regardless of the danger I face, I’m safe as long as he’s by my side.

CHAPTER 21

RAIZ

* * *

The sound of Neev sleeping beside me eases all the strain from the past few days. Listening to her joke with me was a balm to my soul. The thrumming from my chest started quickly after she dozed off, and I believe the continued vibration and sound are helping soothe her into a peaceful sleep.

I indulge my instincts and move my body closer to hers, allowing the heat from our bodies to be shared between us. Someday soon we'll share more than a bed. I might not have any certainty about our future, but I do know she wants me. Every time she looks at me, desire scents the air.

It makes me want to bury my face between her legs and taste every inch of her body. I want to memorize every swell, every fold, every hole. I want to drown in her juices. The book I read on human pleasure was a wealth of knowledge, from sex organs to procreation. I might know more about her body than she does.

Knowing that I'll be the first male to be with her makes me want to beat my chest in the most depraved, primal way. My cock hardens at the thought. I reach down, squeezing it tightly and willing it to relax back down. She's not in a position to even be considering fucking. I have to remember to take care of her first, physical release comes last.

A whimper draws my attention to her face where her eyebrows are pushed together. Her body shakes as she whines and shakes her head slightly. I watch concerned as her eyes move back and forth behind her eyelids. I don't know what to do but cup her cheek out of instinct and whisper her name.

She doesn't respond, just keeps shaking beside me.

"Neev," I say a little louder this time as a tear rolls down her cheek. "Wake up." My chest tightens as I catch the tear with my thumb and wipe it away. Zeahirians don't leak from their eyes when they're sad like humans do.

Her eyes flutter open and she blinks a few times to orient herself. "Thank you. I was having a nightmare."

"About the attack?"

"Yes." Her voice is meek as she rolls away from me. "Will you hold me?"

I thrum for her as the mate bond awakens. She feels safer with me near her, and nothing in all my life feels as fulfilling as that. I slide my arm under her head and mold my body against hers. Being meticulously careful I put my other hand over her hip where I know she has no injuries.

"Is this okay?" I ask once I'm settled.

"Yes." She kisses the arm that's curled under her. "Thank you, Raiz."

I wait to even attempt to fall asleep until her breaths even out. The warmth of her body pressed against mine seeps into me. If it were up to me, this is how every night of the rest of my life would be spent.

With her.

There's nothing more important to me. Even when I consider how much work there is to do to save my people. A part of me could walk away from it all, just to have a chance at life with her.

We have to figure out who wants her, and why. Even with everything that's happened down on the planet, I can't stop thinking about the man she's spoken with in her head. The way she describes his eyes as being identical to hers doesn't make sense. Humans generally don't have violet eyes from what I and Hyva have read. Her seeing someone with such a unique feature makes me wonder if whatever form he's taking isn't just mimicking her own.

There are a lot of beings across the galaxy that have that skill, though none are able to mind walk that I know of. But the galaxy is vast, and there are portions we still haven't explored yet so who is to say it isn't possible. Anything is possible when there are so many stars in the sky left to travel.

By the time I finally drift off, I know I'll only have a few hours of rest before Altis and Vynia arrive to debrief me. The best I can hope for is a deep and dreamless slumber with my mate snug in my arms.

* * *

The next morning I'm sitting at the table finishing a late breakfast when Vynia and Altis arrive along with Hyva. I asked Mydax to join us as well, but he hasn't shown up. I've closed the door to the bedroom so Neev can continue to rest, but Hyva goes in to check her vitals quietly while he's here.

"Are the arrangements made for Uzold?" I ask while it's just the three of us.

“Yes. The pyre will take place the night before we leave for the temple.” Altis pulls out the chair across from me and sits.

The guilt of not informing his family myself, as well as making all the arrangements for his pyre, has been weighing heavily upon me the past few days. As the Lord of House Aste, as well as his superior, it falls on me to take responsibility for all those tasks. But I can’t leave my mate to fend for herself, even with those I trust the most. It goes against my nature as a male, a warrior and provider, to not be here for her.

“How is Neev?” Vynia shoots a worried look toward the bedroom.

“She slept well and seems to be in good spirits when she’s awake. Hyva gave her several shots of the bone healing serum. Hopefully when she wakes the residual pain will be gone.”

The door opens, and Mydax enters. He greets me with a salute which is customary, but as far as I’m concerned unnecessary in this scenario, so I wave a hand for him to sit and relax.

“How is everything on the bridge?” I ask.

“Nothing to report.”

I nod. “The way I like it.”

Hyva appears, quietly closing the door behind him and taking a seat next to Vynia. “She’s almost back to new. All her bones have mended, and her concussion has healed entirely.”

My shoulders drop in relief as the heavy weight of the unknown evaporates from my shoulders. I have to dig the tips of my talons into my thigh to hold back the

thrumming building in my chest. If Mydax weren't here, I'd feel comfortable releasing it. He doesn't need to know that she's my mate, I'm not sure he'd be able to keep the news to himself. Nor would he know how to act around her.

I'm not going to tell her until after our mission is completed. We need to have her translate the tome as soon as possible. Especially now that we know someone is on to us. The quicker we do so, the safer everyone will be. I refuse to lose anyone on my watch this time around.

"Go ahead and share everything you know," I instruct Altis.

He gives a run down, most of which I already knew. He's sent two of our most trusted intelligence officers out into other territories to see if there is word of what happened to Neev floating around on the surface. So far no one is talking about the attack.

None of us can figure out if that's a good thing or a bad thing. It brings comfort to know that no one knows exactly who Neev is or why I have her. At least they don't seem to even want to find out. But that leaves the question of who the two males worked for.

I hear movement from the bedroom seconds before the door opens and Neev steps out. She pauses when she sees us all gathered around the table. Her eyes meet mine in question, and I give her a slight nod, letting her know she's welcome to join us. Aside from the mate bond, there will be no secrets between us ever.

She slowly walks over to the table and pulls out the chair between Vynia and Mydax. Pride fills me as she shows no fear, even with Mydax's earlier attack. It was only a few weeks ago but somehow feels like a lifetime. It's as though I've never lived a life without her. The strength and speed and depth of my feelings for her is overwhelming in the best possible way.

Mydax inhales, and his eyes flare, his gaze shooting to mine questioningly. My scent is all over her, and, whether she'll ever be able to tell, our mate bond is, too. It will give her protection and the same level of deference and respect I'm afforded as she is now my equal in all things. I give him the slightest of nods to confirm while Vynia leans over and speaks softly to Neev.

The rest of the meeting goes swiftly. Plans for our journey to the temple are confirmed. Altis will remain on board the ship with Mydax on the off chance the ship is needed by the Sovereign. Hyva and Vynia will accompany Las, Neev, and myself to the temple. No one outside of the six of us at this table knows about our ultimate goal.

Neev stays seated as the rest of the group files out. She's quiet and looking out into space.

"How do you feel?" I pull the chair beside her out and sit.

Her lips tilt upwards in a smile, but it doesn't reach her eyes. "I'm good. I barely have any pain left, it's miraculous."

"But?"

"Are you reading my mind?" She gives me a wry grin.

"No. I don't need to when I can see your worry written all over your face." I use my knee to spin her chair until she's facing me. "Tell me what's wrong."

"I guess I'm just wondering what happens to me once I finish translating."

"What do you mean?" Hope surges within my chest. Is her melancholy because she doesn't want to leave after she finishes? "You can go back to the Order. You can

stay. We can help you find a new place to go.”

“You’d want me to stay?” Her eyes search mine.

Stars, yes, of course I want her to stay.

But I don’t want her to feel obligated. Staying with me has to be her idea. I drag in a deep breath before answering.

“I want you to do what feels right. I support you entirely, whatever makes you happy. Staying with me, with us,” I motion around around the room, “is something you are absolutely welcome to do.”

“What would I do?”

“I’m sure we could use your expertise on missions. Universal translators only work on verbal communication. Your skillset is invaluable.”

“And if I stayed, what would become of us?” Her cheeks flush pink, but she holds my gaze.

“Anything you want.” My answer hangs in the air between us.

“What if what I want is you?” She moves toward me, pulling that electric current that connects us.

I grab her hips and lift her into my lap. “You have me.”

Her arms wind around my neck while her eyes dance back and forth between mine. “Good, because you have me, too.”

My chest wants to burst open with happiness as her lips meet mine. She shifts her weight, rocking her hips forward. The heat of her core settles over me while the scent of her arousal fills the air. I want nothing more than to push my pants down my hips and release my cock for her to ride, but I don't want to hurt her.

"We should slow down, you're injured." I manage to get the words out as her lips travel across my jaw and down my neck. My fingers flex against her hips when I feel her teeth nip my skin.

"I feel almost as good as new. The only part of me that aches is the emptiness only you can fill. Listen to my thoughts if you need. They're yours as far as I'm concerned."

I'm undone by the trust she gives me. My hands scoop her up, kneading the globes of her ass as I carry her into the bedroom. Our lips meet once again in a tangle of tongue and lips. I never realized how sexy kissing someone could be, and now I can't stop. I don't want to.

She lowers her legs and slides down my body. My cock is already out, pushing against the stiff fabric of my pants. I can't wait to slide inside her body.

"I need to feel your hands on me." She speaks into my mind as she pulls her shirt off.

The peaks of her nipples poke through the thin material holding them in place. She gasps when I run my thumb over one of them. I watch as she reaches down and pulls the tight garment over her head. Her heavy breasts bounce free in a display that makes it hard for me to remember my own name.

Three black, elongated markings sit between her breasts. I run my fingers over her inked flesh. Goosebumps ripple over her soft skin under the caress.

“I lost a bet and had to get them when I was younger,” she says, watching me.

“I like them.”

She runs her fingers through my hair with a lopsided smile. “I’m glad you do, because I don’t. I should have found something with meaning instead of a random, meaningless design.”

I look up into her eyes as I slowly move forward, my lips taking one of her nipples into my mouth. Her violet orbs darken as her head tips back when I nip at one of the tightened buds. I flick it with my tongue and then move to the other side, repeating the same touches. Her breasts are so full and perfect in my hands. I could spend hours just worshipping them alone.

My fingers hook in the waistband of her pants and tug them down her legs until she stands before me in nothing but her beautiful, perfect flesh. The heady scent of her arousal fills the room around us. My lips cover each newly revealed patch of skin, my tongue swirls over her skin until I’m kneeling and pressing my face into the apex of her thighs. I look up, my eyes seeking permission even as I lift her leg and set it over my shoulder.

She captures her lower lip between her teeth and nods her consent. A small patch of soft, dark curls sits atop her mound, but the rest of her is pink and perfect as I run my finger along the seam of her sex. Her arousal coats it as I find her clit and circle the nub the same way that made her moan before.

Needing more, to know all of her, to see all of her, I lift my other hand and spread her open. Seeing her pink petals open isn’t enough. I need to taste her. I lean forward, inhaling her sweet scent and dragging my nose along her folds. A deep, feral moan comes from my throat as her flavor explodes on my tongue when I flick it over her clit.

The most beautiful cry of pleasure fills the room as her fingers slide through my hair. Her hips arch toward me like an offering as I fight through my haze of pleasure to remember everything I read. There are places within a human female that bring immense pleasure, so I slide my fingers deep within her.

“Yes.” Her fingernails scrape along my scalp, the ferocity of the movement pulling my beast closer to the surface. “Stars, yes.” Her hips buck against my fingers and face as she chases her pleasure.

CHAPTER 22

NEEV

* * *

I've never felt pleasure like this before. My legs shake with the effort of keeping me balanced and upright. Raiz is so strong he lets me lean against him even as he licks my clit and curls his finger along the front wall of my pussy. I can barely catch my breath as he continues to bring me closer and closer to release.

White, hot heat builds within my center, the sensation building in my core and ready to explode outward. I've done everything we're doing right now before, but something about this encounter is heightened.

Raiz, I'm going to fall over. I say the thought internally, and before I can begin to pull away from him, he's lifting me up and dropping me on the bed without ever pulling his face from my cunt. Embers of desire catch fire within me when he sucks on my clit. Pleasure erupts inside me, pulsing through my veins in waves as I melt into the mattress.

As my senses return, I look down at Raiz to find him staring at me in awe. His lips and chin shine with my juices which, together with his mused hair, makes him appear positively animalistic.

"I'm not done yet." I notice his fangs are down as he speaks.

“Good.” I watch him as he stands and reaches behind his head, pulling his shirt off and tossing it aside. “I’m not done yet, either.”

The smile he gives me is positively feral while he pushes his pants down his hips. It’s the first time I’ve gotten to see his body fully nude and hard. His cock juts out from his pelvis proudly. It’s intimidatingly large with a round head and long shaft. I sit up and move down the bed for a closer look.

It’s right at eye level for me sitting on his bed. I reach up and wrap my fist around him, sliding slowly up and down the length. There’s a knob at his base, it’s unfamiliar from any of the books I’ve read or porn I’ve seen. I look up at him, anxious to know what he’s thinking while he watches me.

His eyes are the deepest green I’ve ever seen. Almost like the old rainforests on earth. He tracks me as I lean forward, his eyes laser focused on the tip of my tongue as it extends to the tip of his cock.

His chest shudders as I open my lips and take him further down my throat. He tenses when his tip hits the back, and I choke, but when he tries to withdraw, I grip his fists.

I want you to take your pleasure from my mouth.

Stars, it feels fucking incredible. Don’t stop. He pulls back and thrusts forward slowly. My pussy clenches as I start to bob up and down on his length.

He cups my cheek and stares down at me, his lips parted as he fucks my mouth. Soon he’s driving himself deep in my mouth, and I love every second of it. I’ve never done this before, but it may be my new favorite thing.

Are you okay? His internal voice even sounds breathless as his abs contract.

I nod around him and hollow my cheeks over his length. Grunts and groans mix with his thrumming and my whimpers. I want more. More of him, more of us. I want to taste every inch of his skin. To mark it and own it. He's mine.

His body goes rigid as jets of his hot seed coat the back of my throat. I swallow every drop he gives me, obsessed with how perfect he tastes. My fingers run along the knob at his base and find it vibrating along with the thrumming.

He inhales sharply as I drag my nails over it.

"Sorry." I pull my hand away quickly.

"Stars, don't apologize. That felt incredible."

"This?" I run my nails back over it again.

"Fuck," he groans. "Yes. That." His cock stays hard despite just emptying.

"Why are you still hard? I think human males soften after release."

His answering grin turns feral as he crawls over me, his arm sliding beneath my body and dragging me to the pillows with him. "Zeahirian males have supreme stamina."

I drop my knees to the side, making room for him to settle at my core. He lowers his lips to mine and kisses me slowly, deeply. I run my tongue over his sharpened canines and feel his cock twitch against me. A rush of power flows through me when I do it to the other side and the same thing happens.

I love learning the secrets of his body. I like finding ways to tease and torment him. Ways to pleasure him. It makes me needy for more. More of him, more knowledge of him.

He breaks the kiss, trailing his lips along my jaw to just below my ear. A growl rumbles from him as I bare my neck to him. I feel the sharp points of his teeth run along the delicate skin. A blast of fear mixes with the desire I feel for him. I know he could bite down and end me. Feeling that type of fragility should be frightening. Instead, it makes me feel powerful, knowing this strong, beastly male could end me so easily but instead holds back to keep me safe.

I reach down between us and wrap my hand around his cock. We both moan as I drag his tip through my folds, up and down, teasing myself while coating him in my desire. Stars know I'll need all the slickness I can get to take him. He's bigger than any toy I've used.

As soon as I have him positioned at my entrance, he takes over, sliding inside me in one fluid motion. My fingers grip his waist, nails sinking into his skin as he spears me. My body stretches around him, welcoming in as though it was where he was always meant to be.

He cups my breast with one large hand and toys with the piqued nipple. Heat begins to burn in my core, each drag of his length along my walls sends a pulse of desire flooding through me. I open my eyes and find his gaze locked on my face. His beautiful green eyes are nearly black as he thrusts into me.

I gasp as he rolls us until I'm atop him. My body sinks further down him, my clit resting against the knob on his base. The vibration from his thrumming sends a shock wave of pleasure crashing through me. My hands fall to his chiseled chest as I begin to ride him. With each rock of my hips, my clit meets that spot on him that makes me mad with need.

He lifts both of his hands to my breasts, fondling my nipples and cupping the ample mound in his palms. I come with a cry when he pinches them between his fingers. My body drops to his chest, as wave after wave of my orgasm ripples through me.

I drop my forehead to his chest as I realize he's still hard. There's nothing I want more than to make him come one more time. His hands wrap around my waist as he moves to get more leverage. Then he begins to pound into me with hard, deep thrusts. I push myself up until I can look down at him. The veins in his neck throb as he continues to move inside of me. I wish I could taste them, trace them with my tongue until I have them memorized.

His body seizes beneath me, his fingers sinking into my full hips as he spills his seed inside me. Each hot lash of his cum feels like a gift. Something I didn't have to earn and will never let go of.

I love the way he looks up at me. As if he's in total awe of me. Like he'll never let me go. He pulls my face down to his and kisses me thoroughly. I whimper against his lips when his cock slides out of me, and he rolls us onto our sides.

"How are you?" he asks as he barely pulls away from our kiss.

"Good. I'm going to feel you tomorrow." I press a chaste kiss to his lips. "Possibly even the entire week."

"I like that." He grins.

"Can I ask you something?"

"You can ask me anything you want."

"When I bared my neck to you, it made you growl. Why? Or was it something else. Was it a good growl?"

"Did it scare you?" Concern is etched onto his face.

“No. Not at all, actually. I liked it.”

His body relaxes against mine. “Showing your neck is the ultimate sign of trust to the Zeahiri. Mates will do it instinctively. Plus, you know I ripped my brother’s throat out with my own teeth. Showing me yours was such an act of trust. One I don’t take for granted.”

“I see. I do trust you. I always will.” I scoot my body toward his, wrapping my arm around his waist and running my nails in little circles over his back. “What do you want to do when I finish translating the book for you?”

“What do you mean?”

“Are you going to let me go, take me back to Oculus Nine?”

He reaches down and cups my face, tilting my head back until my eyes meet his. “I’ll do whatever you want me to. But if I had my way, I’d never let you go.”

A different kind of warmth fills me hearing those words. Knowing he doesn’t want to let me go validates every feeling I’ve been having for him. But there’s still uncertainty. “Are you allowed to be with me? Someone who isn’t Zeahirian?”

“I don’t ascribe to outdated rules about who the heir of a house must take as a partner. I want you, Neev Kaesong, and nothing is going to change my mind.”

* * *

Whispers roar in my ears as my consciousness awakens. As always I can’t make sense of what they’re saying. It’s a language I don’t know or maybe even just so many that I can’t make out one word from another. Either way, I don’t want to be here. I want to be with Raiz.

“There you are.”

I open my eyes not to the familiar face of the male I fell asleep next to but to Eryx. He’s bent over me as I lay in the white void of my mind. His forehead wrinkles with concern as he dusts the back of his fingers over the bruises on my face.

“What did they do to you?” Fury overtakes his features.

“Nothing. It wasn’t the people I’m with, it was their enemies.”

His lips flatten into a thin line. “Are you so sure about that? Did they not steal you away from the only home you’ve ever known?”

“How did you know that?” I sit up and scoot away from him. “Did the Order send you?”

“The Order?” A light flashes behind his eyes. “The Omnium Order?”

I don’t answer for fear I’ve already given away too much. “Who are you? Where are you from? And why are you able to enter my mind so easily?”

I’m not answering any more of his questions until he answers mine.

“I’m Eryx, we’ve already had introductions.”

I hold his gaze, set on not speaking until he answers me.

“Where are you right now?” he asks.

I roll my lips inward, pressing them firmly between my teeth.

“All I want to do is help you, Neev.”

“I don’t need help.”

“Your face says otherwise.” He looks down at me, his eyes searing a path along my body. Before I can react, his hand grips my ribs and squeezes, right where the broken bones were. I hiss a breath out through my teeth.

“You want me to believe you’re trying to help me by hurting me?”

“I didn’t hurt you. I’m simply pointing out that at best, someone let you get hurt. At worst, they’re behind your injuries.”

“Get away from me.” I push myself to my feet. “I trust them. I don’t trust you.”

For the first time since I started having these episodes, I walk myself out of the empty, white, cavernous space. The peace and warmth of Raiz’s embrace calls me home, like a balm to my soul. I wondered if Eryx would attempt to stop me, but he doesn’t. I just feel the heat of his stare at my back.

* * *

When my eyes open, I feel Raiz’s warmth surrounding me. The distinctive ocean fresh scent he carries with him soothes my anxiety. His solid arms wrapped around my waist ground me.

I roll over and watch him sleep. His lips are slightly parted and his face fully relaxed. He’s so handsome. Sometimes I don’t understand how he’s lived over one hundred rotations and has managed to avoid any meaningful relationships. From everything we’ve spoken about, my relationship with Torre seems to have been deeper than anything he’s ever had.

I catch the time when I glance over his shoulder and decide to slip out of bed first. He rarely sleeps in, or sleeps well, so I want him to have it while he can. Luckily, it's easy enough to move out from his embrace without waking him.

I enjoyed my time being on Zeahiri and living in his home, but the lack of electricity and other modern amenities was sorely felt. I switch the light and floor heaters of the bathroom on as I ready myself to take a luxuriously long shower.

A moan slips from my lips as the steady spray beats down on my skin, the water hot enough to turn my pale skin pink. Sleeping with Raiz was incredible. The best sexual experience of my life, but I'm feeling the ache he left behind in my core. I think I'll stay in here as long as possible to let the heat soothe those delicious aches away.

Puffs of steam rise in the air as I wash and condition my hair. I can't help wondering what they use in their shower and bath products that make both my hair and skin so soft and moisturized. On Oculus Nine I had to have a special filter added to my plumbing to achieve the same thing.

I hope I didn't endanger the Order by accidentally mentioning them to Eryx. I might not want to go back to them, but that doesn't mean I want any harm brought to them. It's been my home and all I've ever known. I'll always feel loyalty to the Order and the females who raised me, but I just don't fit there. I never really did, if I'm being honest.

The question is, do I fit here? I have strong feelings for Raiz, and his friends feel like they could become mine, too. He wants me to stay, that much is clear from last night. Could I be his partner? He mentioned it last night before I drifted off, but it wasn't like he was asking me for that type of commitment. He was just speaking in generalities. At least that's what it sounded like.

I'm contemplating sitting on the shower bench and aiming the water to beat over me

there when the door opens and Raiz steps into the room. He halts for a second, looking at all the steam but then moves toward the shower. He pulls open the door and steps inside with me, his body taking up most of the space.

He hisses as the water hits his skin and jumps back. “How can you have the water so hot, female?”

“It feels perfect like this.” I step back into the spray, blocking it from hitting him. “The hotter the better, I always say.”

He reaches around me to the control pad and a nozzle drops from the ceiling. Lukewarm water rains down over his head and he arches his neck, running his hands through his hair. I take the opportunity to study his body some more. The scar on his neck is by far the most noticeable on his body, but looking closely in the light, I see several dotting his torso. My thumb grazes one on his side.

“What happened here?”

He steps out of the water and looks down. “I don’t remember, I’ve had it so long.” He turns and shows me a circular scar on his other side. “But this one is from the Xlyopian Invasion, one of them ran me through with a spiked staff.”

“Zeahiri was invaded?” I didn’t see anything about that in the history books I read, although I didn’t have time to read that many. My knowledge of their history and culture is still lacking.

He smirks. “They tried.” I wait for him to explain while he rinses the shampoo from his hair. “It was short lived, and they failed, rather spectacularly if I might add. This,” he points at his side, “only happened because I was shielding a group of children.”

“Has anyone else tried?”

“Yes. Our entire existence has been filled with others coming to invade.”

“Why? I mean no offense, but your planet isn’t in a desirable system.”

“It’s not, but we are rich in minerals due to the volcanic past of our planet. There are many reasons to try to wrest it from our control.”

“Even though technology doesn’t work.” Which, now that I think about it, leads to many more questions. “Wait. How did you become advanced enough to have ships like this? And your hospitals in space?”

“Trade. Not everyone who comes for our minerals wants to take the planet, some just wanted to trade. One of our most long-lasting trade relationships is with Chortlotal 3, they brought us all the tech we have now. Taught us how to use it, how to mold it to suit our needs.”

“How long ago was that?”

“Long before I was born.” He turns the water off and grabs a towel.

“Which was a long time ago.” I shriek when he shakes his hair off, splattering my recently dried body with specks of water.

He laughs, fangs poking out the tiniest bit from beneath his lips, and my heart does a summersault in my chest. It’s beyond attraction. Deeper than affection. Warmth spreads through my body, and I rise onto my toes, pressing a kiss to his lips when he bends to meet me. If there was a way to bottle this feeling and keep it locked inside me, I would.

CHAPTER 23

RAIZ

* * *

“What are we doing here?” Neev looks around the empty training center with curiosity. She walks over to the wall of training weapons.

“You’re going to choose a weapon, and I’m going to give you a crash course on using it properly.”

“Why?” She looks over her shoulder at me. “Do you think I’m still in danger?”

“Yes. You’ll be in danger until my mission is completed. Especially when we go underground to the temple. I need to know you’ll be able to protect yourself in case I can’t get to you.”

“Are you worried about the males who attacked me following us?”

“Not really. I’m mostly concerned about the creatures we’ll encounter on our journey.”

Her eyebrows rise. “What kinds of creatures?”

Horrifying ones. Not that I particularly want to share the specifics of what lurks beneath the surface of our planet. “I’d rather focus on teaching you how to protect

yourself for now, rather than run through a list of our deadliest creatures.”

She eyes me suspiciously but turns back to the weapons as I come stand beside her. I watch as she runs her fingers along the blades of a few sharp knives.

“I know how to work these.” She glances up at me. “Stick them with the pointy end.”

I huff a laugh. “It’s a bit more complicated than that but yes. I’d rather you take something that doesn’t require you being so close.” I pull a blaster off the wall. “Have you used one of these before?”

“No, but I’m familiar enough with them.” She follows me as I lead her to the side of the center that holds the shooting range.

I tap a few buttons on the monitor waiting for the target to appear and then take my stance, aim, and fire several successive rounds. “Do you think you could do that?”

“I’ll try.”

She takes the blaster and imitates my stance nearly perfectly. I catalog everything in my mind that she needs to fix, so the next time she fires off a few rounds I can correct her. Her eyes narrow as she focuses on the target, a black outline of a dehazgam.

“What is that target supposed to be?” she asks before firing.

“Dehazgam. It’s a vile creature capable of tearing a Zeahirian in half with one bite.”

She slowly lowers the gun and blinks. “And that’s something that will be down in the tunnels and caves?”

“Yes. They aren’t even the worst we may run into down there.” I nod toward the

target. “Let me see what you’ve got.”

She turns and holds up the blaster with one arm. Just before she can fire, I step behind her. She shivers as my fingers run down the length of her left arm and lift it.

“You need to use this arm to support and hold the blaster steady. I know I used one arm, but I’m used to firing them.”

“And you’re a little bit stronger than me.” She adds lightheartedly.

“Just a bit?”

“Mmhmm.” She lifts her arms back into the position I placed them in and squeezes off a shot. It hits the paper, but it’s outside the actual shape of the target. “Damn,” she mutters. She tries again and gets within the shape of the target but not in a fatal area.

“Here.” I stand behind her, widening my stance until I’m a bit closer to her height and wrap my arms on either side of hers. “Feel the weight in your hands, let the blaster become a part of you, an extension of your hands.”

Do I need to be draped over her to teach her how to do this?

No.

Am I going to take every single chance I can to touch her?

I absolutely am.

Her scent around me intensifies, so I know she loves this just as much as I do. I help her aim, trying to ignore the spark of arousal between us and then squeeze my finger over hers on the trigger. Together we hit the center of the target, a direct hit to the kill

zone.

“Do that a few more times without me.”

I walk around her, taking in her shots from every angle and correcting what needs it. She gets better with each round of shooting until I’m confident she knows enough to protect herself. I know these creatures hunt in packs, so it’s not like she’ll only be fighting off one. None of us will be able to completely dedicate ourselves to keeping her safe. This part of it comes down squarely on her shoulders.

After she’s exhausted herself with the blaster, she hands it over. “Can we try something else now?” she asks.

“Of course. Your choice.” I set the blaster back in its drawer and wait.

Eventually she settles on two twin blades, each about the length of her arm from wrist to shoulder. They’re covered in a gel that dulls the sharp edges for practice but peels off quickly and easily for emergencies. I love the idea of watching her walk around with these blades on her back.

“You want to spar with those?” I ask, grabbing a sleek single blade sword.

“Will the blaster work on your planet? Shouldn’t I have a backup weapon I can use?”

“Of course, though the blasters do work on the surface.”

“Why don’t you use them, then?”

“Blades are more fun.”

Her brows rise once again, but she doesn’t say anything. I watch as she pulls her hair

back, twisting it until it sits atop her head in a messy knot. She rarely wears it up like that, and I can't help but take in the elegant line of her neck, the way I can see her pulse flutter beneath her silken skin.

My fangs ache, mate bond fluid dripping from their tips. I swallow and push the desire to mark her, to claim her, deep down inside. We'll have this conversation when the time comes, but it isn't now. She has enough worries on her plate, I don't need to add anything to them.

Her violet eyes flash as she steps onto the mat with me. "Torre taught me how to fight with a blade. I might surprise you."

Jealousy rears up inside me like an unruly beast. Her former lover comes from a matriarchal society of warriors. I'm sure she's incredibly fast and strong, all of her kind are, but she'd be no match for me.

"Show me what you've got, then," I challenge her.

Her form is better than I was expecting. She doesn't manage to strike me, but I don't have to go easier on her than I would anyone else starting out with training. That alone makes my chest swell with pride. My mate is strong and resilient. She's a fierce and intelligent fighter, a combination that would make her deadly if she possessed my strength.

I sweep her feet out from under her but catch her before she can hit the ground. Her eyes narrow in annoyance. It's so cute I have to battle the urge to press a kiss to her lips.

"I'm proud of you, Neev. You surprise me in the most wonderful ways."

"I didn't even hit you."

“Not many can. It’s not a reflection of your power or skill.”

She mumbles a disagreement as she walks over to get a drink of water. “What’s next?” she asks after taking a gulp.

“We’re done here for the day. You can go soak in the tub, it’ll help with any sore muscles.”

“What about you? What are you going to do?”

“I need to take a few meetings.” I put the blades away. “I’ll find you for dinner.”

* * *

Meeting after meeting dragged on after leaving Neev in the training center this morning. Being on board the ship has meant I’m back on regular Commander duty. It’s beneficial to be aware of everything going on throughout the system but late today an order from the Sovereign came through informing us of the next Bak’hura happening at the start of the next lunar cycle. We’re all to attend, including Neev, who the Sovereign is now aware of.

I didn’t get the impression that he knows who she is or why I brought her here. But the last place I want to take her is to the capitol. I certainly don’t want her witnessing the barbaric blood rite and rituals that surround it.

My hope is that we’ll find something in the temple to at least convince him to pause the rite, if not end them all together. Or find enough evidence to pull some of the power away from the Sovereign until the rebellion is more organized. We’ll have less than a week once we’re back on the surface to get to the temple and back.

Those worries and plans evaporate as soon as I walk into my quarters and find Neev

sitting on the couch with a tablet in her hand and books beside her. She looks up, and as soon as our eyes meet, my chest begins to thrum. A smile crosses her face as she sets aside the tablet and pushes to her feet.

“Someone’s happy to see me.” She crosses the distance between us and wraps her arms around me. The tension in her body melts away as the thrum soothes her. “I don’t know what it is about this, but it just eases any stress or worry.”

“That’s the point of the thrumming. To provide comfort.”

“Do you control it?”

“No. It’s as natural as breathing. My body senses yours and shows its—” I almost say love but fear it’s too soon. “Peace at being in your presence.”

She reaches up and cups my jaw, pulling my face down to hers. “You bring me peace, too.”

Her soft lips press against mine, and my thrumming intensifies. The soft curves of her body press against the hard planes of my own as my fingers glide through her silky hair, angling her head to deepen the kiss. I’ve never known another female to have this profound of an impact on me. One glance, one touch, one kiss, and I want to drag her off into the bedroom and ravish her.

I want to imprint my soul onto hers until we’re no longer separate entities.

I reach down and lift her by the back of her thighs until her legs lock around my waist. I should stop and talk to her about the change in plans, fill her in on my meetings, but the scent of her arousal hits me and logic flies out the window.

I press her against the wall and tug her shirt out of her pants. She breaks the kiss long

enough to pull it over her head, tossing it to the side. My fingers run along the length of her spine as I savor the feel of her impossibly soft skin. She's wearing another of those undergarments that hold her breasts close to her body. I let my fangs elongate and bite down into the fabric tearing it from her with my teeth. She releases a startled gasp as her breasts bounce free.

"I don't have many of those," she says breathlessly between kisses.

"Good. They're a nuisance."

She smiles against my lips. "I can't walk around without one."

"Why not?"

"Do you want everyone to know that I'm turned on when I look at you, to see my nipples straining against the fabric of my shirt?"

I pause, never having thought of that before. "No."

She laughs as I carry her into the bedroom and toss her onto the bed. She quickly removes the rest of her clothes as I watch. I could have taken her in the shower this morning, but I worried she may have been sore from the night before.

"Are you sore?" I ask as my cock hardens, pushing against the fabric of my uniform pants.

"A little, but maybe you can kiss it better?" She leans back on her elbow and spreads her legs invitingly. I watch with rapt attention as she slides her other hand over her soft belly and the small mound at the top of her sex. Her fingers slip along the seam and part her folds revealing the lush, pink flesh that makes my mouth water.

I lower myself onto the mattress and crawl between her thighs. I wedge myself with her legs over my shoulders and lower my mouth to her core. I keep my eyes on hers as my lips wrap around her clit, sucking the small bud between them as I slip two fingers inside her. She's soaked and delicious. Who needs a meal when I can feast on my mate's cunt?

Her fingers toy with her pink, hardened nipples while she rocks her hips against my face. I want to feel her explode around my fingers, so I hook my fingers forward, searching for the spot that made her erupt with pleasure last night. Her moans spur me into a near frenzy, and I have to grind my hips into the mattress to satisfy my cock's need for friction.

Her heels dig into my back, rubbing along my spines and sending shockwaves of pleasure through me. I turn my head and bite down on her inner thigh. The pleasure of her feet on that spot has my cock leaking seed. If she doesn't stop, I'm going to cum in my pants like a youth.

"Neev." My voice is nearly unrecognizable, so rough and needy. "If you don't stop running your feet over that part of my back I'm going to release before I'm even inside you."

Her pupils are blown so wide there's only a violet ring around them when she looks down at me. "Really?" Her toes run along the fin. "Like this?" She does it again, increasing pressure. "This feels good?"

"Yes," I answer with a shaky breath.

"Maybe I want to make you lose control." She reaches down and pulls my shirt all the way off. "Sit up." She nudges my shoulders back. "Let me take care of you this time."

The words are on my tongue to argue as she undoes my pants and works them down my hips. She pushes me onto my back and tugs them all the way off. I'm ready for her to climb on top of me but she sits beside me and looks up as she wraps her hand around my cock.

"Fuck," I drop my head back as she runs her fist up and down my length, taking time to circle a finger over my knob with each stroke. That pleasure is nothing compared with the jolt of electricity that shoots through me when she wraps her warm mouth around me.

I look down, startled to see her take my length all the way down her throat. Her nose grazes my knob as it begins to vibrate. My toes curl as my fingers grip the sheets. This is something that Zeahirian females never do. It's considered taboo but fuck does it feel amazing.

I'll give the female the entire galaxy, the universe, if she never stops.

She releases my length with a loud pop, saliva connecting my cock to her lips in a sexy mess. I drag her on top of me and pull her face to mine. This kiss is feral, all vicious desire and need as she drags her wet heat along my shaft.

She sits up using my chest for balance while I grip my cock and run its tip along her seam. She moans, her eyes fluttering shut, as I use it to tease her clit. I've never seen a more beautiful sight than her lost to her pleasure on top of me.

"Look at me," I command as I notch my crown just inside her opening.

Everything in the universe aligns when she opens those gorgeous violet eyes and sinks down slowly, taking every inch of my length until I've bottomed out. She cries out as I begin to thrum, the first jolt of my body's intense reaction to her sending pleasure shooting through her body. Her cunt tightens around me as she begins to

grind her hips in a tempo that satiates her need.

She can use me however she needs. All I care about is her pleasure, making sure she is satisfied is my only goal. She is my purpose.

Mine.

My female.

My mate.

Her cry of pleasure as she milks my cock fills my chest with so much emotion I think I might explode. Wave after wave of her orgasm rips through her body. The part of me waiting for completion of the mate bond aches with emptiness.

The sharp scratch of her nails on my chest brings me right back into the moment as she rides me. She grips me for support as her speed increases. The single place where we're joined isn't enough, I need to feel her against me.

I sit up, holding her tight to me as I thrum for her. Her hands move up my chest and over my shoulders until her fingers thread themselves through my hair. She rests her forehead against mine while she continues to ride me.

"Raiz," she whispers my name against my lips. "Stars."

I know. Her two panted words carry a deeper meaning infinitely greater than their definitions.

Her walls tighten. She tosses her head back as she pulses around me. Her wet heat feels too good for me to hold my climax back. My seed fills her in wicked bursts as she clings to me, still trembling. I wrap my arms around her as we both come back

down from the high and she melts against me.

CHAPTER 24

NEEV

* * *

R aiz lays me down before walking into the bathroom. I can't even think about moving right now, so I just lie here and listen to the sound of water running. I watch with curiosity as he brings a wet cloth out and pulls my legs apart.

The warmth soothes my skin, seeping into the sore muscles and relaxing them. I can't help wondering if this is a common thing that males do on Zeahiri. My experience with partners has not included any type of doting care following the act of sex. Then again, I've not had many partners.

Maybe Torre was the problem.

Or maybe she just wasn't the right person for me.

"Thank you." I use mind speak because the quiet of the room as he cleans me up and takes care of me seems too sacred to breach.

He smiles at me. "You're welcome."

I've really come to enjoy the Zeahirian lackadaisical view of nudity. Watching this male move around without a single part of his god-like body covered is beginning to be my favorite pastime. Every bit of his body is perfectly muscled and honed into his

dangerous physique.

Which is why I frown when he walks over and grabs a pair of his favorite lounge pants to pull on. I suppose I can still ogle him shirtless with mused hair. He looks over when I scoot to the edge of the bed and stand to grab myself some clothes.

“Hungry?” he asks.

“Yes.” My stomach rumbles on cue. “Starving apparently.”

“What an odd trait.” He tilts his head. “Does your stomach do that every time you’re hungry?”

“Only when it gets to a certain point, like if I ignore other, more subtle, hunger cues.” I pull on pants and one of his shirts.

“So if you get to this point, I should take it as a failing? That I haven’t ensured you’ve fed recently enough?” He frowns, troubled by this information.

“No.” I hold a hand up. “My hunger and eating aren’t your problem. I’m an adult and am capable of making myself food when I’m hungry.”

“Then why would you let yourself get to the point of your body loudly demanding sustenance?”

“It wasn’t that loud.”

“I beg to differ.” He strides out of the bedroom and over to the kitchen. “What do you want to eat?”

The difficult side of me wants to tell him nothing just to prove a point. But I am

hungry, so I give in and list off a few things that sound good. He gets us both drinks while we wait for the food, and I take the opportunity to sit back down with the books I was going through earlier.

“What do you have here?” he asks, putting a glass of water down in front of me.

“Research.” I crack open a medical textbook that I borrowed from Hyva on humans. “I wanted to see if there was anything about the headaches and whisper episodes I have. Why I hear them and couldn’t ever get away on my own until you came along.”

“You can leave the room on your own now?”

“Yes. I did while I was unconscious after the attack.” I flip through pages of irrelevant information. “Maybe you forged a pathway for me?”

“Could be.” He sits down across from me. “Did you look into whether or not any humans were recorded having psionic gifts?”

“If there were, they didn’t write about it in this book. Humans are just human. Nothing spectacular.”

“What if you’re not just human?” His voice is soft, and his face gives nothing away.

“From what I know, I’m just a regular human. Did Hyva find something?”

“No. According to everything he’s found, there’s nothing to say you aren’t. Your DNA is fully human.”

“That settles it then. Can’t fake DNA.”

“What’s that book?” He points to the one beside me, an encyclopedia of Zeahirian

animals.

I hand it over. “After target practice today I wanted to be aware of the possible creatures we could encounter.” I give him a sharp glare. “It’s a good thing, too. Some of those are downright terrifying.”

“We probably won’t come across anything too dangerous.”

“Regardless, it’s better I know so I can prepare and not be caught off guard.”

“You’ll be safe.” He sets aside the book. “I won’t let anything hurt you.”

“Yet you were teaching me how to defend myself earlier.”

“Can’t be too careful.”

“Exactly,” I say exasperated. “If you had to guess, what’s going to be the most dangerous part of what we’re doing?”

“Entering the temple.” He answers with no hesitation. “There will be protections in place. We won’t be able to prepare for them ahead of time.”

“Great. Scary creatures in the dark and booby traps. Sounds like a fantastic time.”

“Cuna and Hyva are almost finished creating lenses for you to place over your eyes. They should allow you to see in the dark nearly as well as we can. I want you to try them out tomorrow.”

The synthesizer beeps, alerting us to our food being ready. He sets my plate down in front of me and begins eating his own meal. I keep doing my research while he pulls out a tablet and begins to do some of his own work.

A while after I finish eating, I set everything aside. A small ache begins to pulse behind my eyes, and I know soon it'll morph into a full-on migraine. I pick up my dishes and carry them to the sink, just those movements alone accelerate the pain. My glass clatters from my hand into the sink, shattering. I start picking up shards and end up slicing my palm open.

I feel Raiz's presence at my back within seconds. "Stop. I'll clean it up." He grabs my hand and swipes his thumb over the blood seeping from the wound.

He pulls me through the bedroom into the bathroom and pulls out a medical kit from under the sink. The throbbing in my head intensifies with each beat of my heart. Beads of sweat gather along my hairline as I try desperately to fight back the episode.

"Doing alright?" He glances up at me while dosing my hand in antiseptic.

"Yes." The sting on my palm gives me something to focus on beyond pain in my head.

"What's going on?"

"Headache," I say through gritted teeth as he wraps a bandage over my palm.

"I'll get Hyva." His eyes grow distant, an indication of him reaching out mentally. I've noticed if he's further away it seems to take more effort and focus for him. "He's coming and said to lay down while we wait."

He leads me to the bed and helps me down.

"Will you dim the lights, please?" I ask.

"Of course."

The lights go off entirely. I can't see, but I know he can, so I let myself relax into the soft bedding that still has his comforting seawater scent. Maybe if I imagine the beach near his home, I can block some of the pain. A few of the Order medics tried visualization techniques with me, but it never worked.

It's worth a shot now that I have somewhere that feels like home. A place I could wake up and be happy seeing every day. Or at least a person who feels like that.

The door to our quarters hisses open, and Hyva appears next to me seconds later.

"I'm going to put this cooling pack over your head, okay?" He sets his bag on the mattress beside my hip.

I nod, knowing that trying to speak will only hurt more at this point. My vision is already tunneling, the blackness of my migraine coming to swallow the little light filtering into the room from the window looking out into space. He wraps a cold, smooth mask over my eyes and forehead and around the back of my head. It instantly soothes me in a way nothing else ever has.

"I'm also going to give you an injection of the medication you used to take on Oculus Nine. This might be a little stronger since it is a liquid. Are you okay with that?"

I give him another slight nod. The scent of antiseptic hits my nostrils, churning my stomach as he cleans my skin. I feel a pinch and then the burn of the medication enters my bloodstream. Almost immediately everything begins to fade, my consciousness included.

CHAPTER 25

RAIZ

* * *

“Y ou can turn the lights back up a bit,” Hyva says as he caps the needle he just used and puts it in a sterile discard bag. “She’s asleep.”

We both look down at her as the lights turn back to dim. “She was reading when the headache started.”

Her lips press into a line; tension bleeds from the shape of her mouth and the stiff way she lays on the bed. Her chest moves up and down rhythmically, though, in slow, measured breaths that seem calm if not relaxed. I wish there was an easy answer to how to solve her headaches. And the mental episodes.

The futility I feel is maddening.

“How long did it take to go from the beginning of her headache to this?” He pulls out his tablet to input my answers.

“Minutes from when she stood up and mentioned her head beginning to hurt.”

Hyva makes a humming sound as he taps on the screen. “What was she reading about?”

“She’d spent most of the day researching both human physiology and things to know to help ready herself for the mission to the temple.”

“Did she seem more stressed than usual about anything?”

More stressed than usual. That’s an interesting question. In all fairness, I’ve only known her for a short period of time, despite knowing she’s my mate, I couldn’t say whether she was more or less stressed than usual.

“I’m not sure. I don’t think I can answer that.” A small whimper comes from her. “Should I go inside her head and check on her?”

“No. Give her some time. The medication she takes is strong.” He lifts her wrist and places two fingers on the inside of it. “Her pulse is steady. She’s not in distress.”

I don’t like it. Knowing she could be slipping into that white void inside herself without me. Whoever that male is that somehow slips inside with her and seemingly knows more than she does worries me.

He could hurt her.

Then I’d have to add another to my list of enemies.

Not that he’s not already there just for having the audacity to violate her space the way he does. If I ever come face to face with the male, he’s as good as dead. Hyva’s hand on my shoulder pulls me from my rapidly darkening thoughts.

“We should let her rest.”

I don’t want to leave her side, but I follow him out into the living area. He walks over to the bar cart in the corner and pours us both a glass of ale. The bitter brew sits on

my tongue as my thoughts stay focused on Neev. If my dark mood bothers Hyva, he doesn't give any indication.

"Did she find anything while she was looking through this?" He holds up the book on human physiology.

"No." I take another sip while he thumbs through the pages. "But I did float the idea of her being more than human."

He turns to me. "How did that go?"

"She's convinced she's strictly human."

"I'd be shocked if she wasn't. From the science of it, she is only human. There are no genetic abnormalities." He goes back to looking through the book.

"Could there be two identical species? Maybe living in another galaxy or something."

"The universe is vast, so anything is possible." He stops skimming the book and looks back at me. "But it's not probable."

"I've never heard of a human with purple eyes."

"Because you've met so many?" He sets aside the book and stretches out on the couch, one long arm slung over the back and his ale resting on his knees. "I know you want answers. I get it. I do, too, but there's a high likelihood that there are things about their species they keep to themselves. Look at us, for example, and the secrets we hold so tight to our chests."

He's right, but I hate it. Not knowing. Feeling helpless to help her. It guts me.

How bad will it be if she willingly joins the bond with me? Will I be able to function with the uncertainty if we don't figure out how to stop her attacks? At least she seems to be responding well to the treatments we're giving her.

I steer our conversation away from Neev and toward preparations for the upcoming mission. Hyva pulls out his tablet and goes through the list of what he'll have in the medical pack he'll carry. I reached out to my contact about securing five kyril for the journey now that the time we have is shortened.

I keep working long after Hyva leaves for the evening. Even though he checked on Neev one last time and assured me she was okay, I move myself into the bedroom to be close to her. Hyva pulled the cold pack off her, so I can watch her facial expressions as she sleeps. If she shows any sign of distress, I'm going in.

Now that she's given me her consent, I'll be using my abilities with her extensively. I love when she speaks to me in her mind. The way her nose crinkles when she fights her smile as she does so.

I'm gone for her.

Wholly and happily.

If I wasn't honor bound to my house, I'd simply leave Zeahiri behind and spend my life solving the mysteries behind my mate's background.

Stripping off all my clothes, I slip into bed beside her and wrap my arm around her soft body. I pull her until she's flush against me and spend the next few hours silently counting her heartbeats. Sleep is not on my mind tonight; I have to stay focused on her and ensure she's okay. My mood isn't stable enough for sleep, regardless.

If I were to close my eyes and rest, I know I'd end up covered in my brother's blood

watching as the life drained from his eyes. It's the last thing I need right now. Reliving the most horrific moment of my life, despite it giving me the fire to keep fighting for a future where we aren't killing our own family, would only cause me to spiral. I can't risk it. Not with so much on the line.

Not when I have her.

So I lay here, keeping watch over her and hoping the heat of my body and presence of her mate at her back eases her pain. She might not be cognizant of what we are to each other yet, but her body most certainly is. It's attuned to me in a way I'm not even sure she realizes herself yet.

* * *

Hours pass before she rolls over in my arms. Her hauntingly beautiful violet eyes meet mine, and she smiles. She slides her arms around my back and presses her face to my chest. Love fills my chest so quickly I feel like I could explode.

I didn't ever think I'd find my mate. For the longest time I assumed I'd be sent into an arranged partnership with a daughter from another one of the noble houses. There are those who are lucky enough to find their mates, but with each passing year, it becomes harder and harder. I have a theory that the Bak'hura could be playing a part in that. Eliminating half your population can't be good for reproduction.

The reproduction issues we've been facing for generations have to be connected somehow. We can reproduce outside of mate bonds, but it's never as successful. The rates of live births drop from fifty percent for mated pairs to eight percent for arranged. And that's with all the medical interventions we have at our disposal.

Neev stretches against me, quickly pulling my attention back to her. I run my hand up and down her back as our bodies press together. Even though I'd love to roll her over

and slide inside her tight, heavenly body, I tell myself to relax. She doesn't need anything from me except comfort and safety right now.

"How is your head?" I ask quietly.

"Better. That cold wrap felt amazing."

"Good. Did you have any dreams?"

"No, thankfully. Just dreamless, deep sleep."

I release a heavy breath, relieved to know she didn't have any troubles. My hands stroke up and down the length of her back, slipping under her shirt to the warm, soft skin beneath. Despite my desire to spend the day deep inside her, I don't do anything to take the morning into sexual territory.

We have to go back down to the surface today, but before then, she needs to try the lenses Hyva and Cuna made for her.

"Do you think you'll be okay to move around today?" I ask gently. I don't want to push her if she needs rest, no matter how important it is to get going.

"Yes. I'll be fine. I feel completely back to normal. I'm sure the headache was a response to all the reading I did."

I press a kiss to her forehead, inhaling the scent of her hair. My scent on her. A deep satisfaction rolls through me realizing that even when she's clean, she still smells of me.

"Okay. I need to go down to the training center for a session with Mydax if you want to get cleaned up."

“Okay. I’ll go find Hyva and ask him about a fitting for the lenses.” She sits up, her long dark hair spilling over her shoulder and down the arm she braces herself on. “What time are we going back down to the surface?”

I fill her in on the plans as I stand and dress, loving the feel of her eyes on me as I do so. When I turn and find her heated gaze still on me, I smile slowly, prowling to where she still sits in the center of the bed. I tuck a lock of hair behind her ear and press a chaste kiss to her lips.

“If you keep looking at me like that, we won’t be leaving this room today.”

“That doesn’t sound so bad,” she says, her voice thick with promise.

I step backwards, so I don’t dive back into bed with her. “Don’t tempt me, female. I’ll let Hyva know to expect you.”

CHAPTER 26

NEEV

* * *

C una reaches the med bay just before me. They give me a nod in greeting and halt just outside the doors, gesturing for me to enter first. I haven't had very many interactions with the chief engineer, but from what I understand, they're amongst Raiz's most trusted officers. If Raiz trusts them, I have no reason not to as well.

Hyva glances up from his desk as we walk in, his smile widening even as his eyes rake over me in a clinical sweep. "How are you feeling?"

I hand him the cold wrap. "Better. This really helped."

"Good. I'll have several sent to your quarters."

"Thank you."

"Anything else of note to tell me?" One of his brows lifts slightly.

"No. Just the headache." I appreciate that he and Raiz are keeping my episodes to themselves. From what I understand, not even Hyva's closest assistant knows about it. I'd like to keep it that way, if at all possible.

"Great." His gaze moves from me to Cuna. "Did you make the adjustments we talked

about?”

“No.” They toss a small box to Hyva in a move belying their annoyance at being questioned.

“No need to get sassy.” Hyva catches the box and pats the end of the bed next to him. “Hop up, Neev.”

I do as he says and watch him as he opens one side of the box and pulls a small lens out of the saline solution. He sets it on his fingertip and turns to me.

“Have you ever seen these before?” he asks.

I shake my head. “If anyone on Oculus Nine needed corrective lenses, they were just given glasses, like I was for eye strain. Or they had corrective surgery.”

“Unfortunately, what these can do for you I’m not sure surgery could. Not only will they give you perfect night vision like ours, they will also act as your glasses did.”

Cuna watches quietly, their eyes falling on my neck briefly.

“Do they just go right on my eye?” I ask. They’re shaped as though they would fit over them.

“Yes. Do you want me to apply them, or would you rather do it?”

“I will.”

He sets the lens on my fingertip, and I walk over to the mirror. In order to get them onto my eye, I have to pull my eyelids out the way. As soon as I get it properly placed, I feel it suction to my eye with the slightest pop. The other eye takes a few

more tries than the first, but eventually I feel the same little pop as it settles into place. I blink several times, my eyes watering at the feel of a foreign object covering them.

“You can’t even tell they’re in.” I look closely in the mirror blinking rapidly to clear the tears.

“Hop back up on the bed. We’re going to cut the lights and see how well you can see.”

I do as I’m told while Cuna pulls out their own tablet with a schematic of the ship on it. They navigate through the screens quickly until they get to a list of rooms and then wait for Hyva to give them a nod.

One second the lights of med bay are bright and the next everything goes completely black. Even the medical machines that consistently hum and whirl have gone dark. But I can somehow see everything crystal clear.

“Wow.” I look around and slide off the table. “I can see just as clearly as I could in the light.” I turn back to both of them. “Is this really how well you see?”

“Yes.”

“Do you need any adjustments?” Cuna asks. “I can still calibrate some of the settings if need be.”

“No.” I turn and smile at them. “Thank you. This is the most incredible thing I’ve ever experienced.”

“I’ll be sure to relay that message to the commander.” Hyva’s voice is laced with humor and mischief. “If you need any major adjustments, we’ll have to wait until

after the mission, but I'll be able to help if there's anything physically you need done."

The lights flicker back to life and my vision changes back to normal with no problem.

"Are we done?" Cuna asks.

"Yes."

"Thank you," I tell them. "I appreciate your help, Cuna."

"No thanks necessary." Cuna inclines their head and then turns and walks off.

"They're a little strange, huh?" I say as the door closes behind them.

"All geniuses are in my experience." Hyva lifts my left eyelid and then the right as he double checks the fit. "But they mean well."

"Yeah, I've worked with others like them on Oculus Nine."

"I'm really surprised the corrective surgery wasn't successful. I know the Order has the ability to handle even complex issues. Why make you rely on glasses and imperfect vision if it wasn't necessary Or at the very least explain why it wasn't working?"

"I've been questioning a lot of things about the Order lately."

"Like?"

"Their rules. The strict way I was raised. Them not sharing anything with me about my past. All they ever shared was that I'm human and my father left me with them.

Any questions I asked as a child ended up with me being reprimanded, so I learned not to ask.”

Hyva frowns as I begin to open up.

“I’m surprised they allowed me access to human media at this point. Though doing so would be in direct opposition to their philosophy. Knowledge is power, you know?”

He nods, everyone in the galaxy knows that’s their core belief. It’s what makes the Order what it is. Why they absorb everything they touch.

“Zeahiri has always been untrusting of the Order,” Hyva says. “Because knowledge is power, but what does that say about a group that hoards all the knowledge it comes into contact with?”

“Right.” I nod slowly. “I get it.”

I sigh heavily. It’s uncomfortable to look back at the group of individuals who raised you and see their shortcomings when you always held them above reproach before. I never thought I’d be grateful for being kidnapped, but here I am, glad to have this experience. Knowing my worldview has expanded and I’m finding answers to questions I didn’t even know I had gives me a sense of peace I’ve never had.

* * *

“What is that?” My eyes must be comically wide as I take in the huge creatures before me. They stand taller than Raiz with a huge line of spikes leading from between their ears to the base of their long neck. Powerful muscles ripple along their flanks under the saddles they all have strapped around them. Their coats are made of sleek and shiny fur, in a myriad of black, grays, and soft white.

“These are what we’ll be riding to the temple. They’re called kyril, and despite their appearance, they’re kind and calm creatures.”

“I thought we were walking?” I stay a few steps further behind than Raiz.

He strokes his hand through the black fur of the one beside him. “Not with our timeline being pushed up. We’ll make it there and back twice as fast.”

“I don’t know how to ride.”

A wicked smirk lifts his lips, and he leans down close to me. “I’d say you have excellent riding skills,” he whispers.

I smack his chest with the back of my hand as my cheeks flame. “You know what I meant.”

“I know.” He pulls me closer and lifts my hand to the beast’s soft fur. “You’ll ride with me. I’ll keep you safe.”

“Are you two going to be like this the entire time?” Hyva asks as he tosses his bag onto the back of his own kyril. “Because I’m going to need regular vomit breaks.”

“Jealous Hyva?” Vynia smirks over at him. “I’m sure your kyril will give you some extra affection if you’re feeling left out.”

“Or you could,” he taunts back. It sounds like a joke, but the way that he yanks the straps around his bag to tighten it tells a different story.

I’ve never really paid much attention to what goes on between the two of them, even though they’re the closest to me, aside from Raiz. They’ve each become equally good friends to me, but neither of them have even hinted at having romantic feelings of any

sort, for anyone. Most matches for the Zeahiri seem to come from arranged partnerships rather than developing naturally. Aside from the mate bonds I've heard mentioned in passing.

I'm going to use this journey as time to dig a little deeper into these two who have steadily become my friends. As easy as it is to spend all my free time with Raiz, I shouldn't depend on him for everything. Even if I were to somehow find a way to stay with him, I'd also need my own life. I can't let him become my everything.

Las comes stalking down from the other side of the tunnel. He's dressed in the same heavy clothing as we are, with thick fur-lined pants tucked into boots. The cloak he has wrapped around him is hooded with a mask over his nose and mouth, so all that can be seen of his face are his red eyes. Two daggers are strapped to either of his thighs, which doesn't seem excessive when Raiz has weapons attached to every possible body part.

I myself have two blasters, one on each hip and a small blade tucked into my boot. I was also told to wear extra layers as there are places where the land above the tunnels and caves have collapsed, leaving it open to the frigid temperatures of the dark side of the planet. Even though I have lost nearly all mobility, I'm not upset. They're taking the cold seriously, so I trust I should as well.

Vynia mounts her kyril with ease as she speaks quietly to Las. Hyva and Las mount both of their kyrils and begin to guide them in the direction we'll be traveling. The one I'll be riding with Raiz turns his head and snorts at me impatiently. Steam puffs out from its nostrils while it stares me down with obsidian eyes.

"Ready?" Raiz asks quietly. "I promise we'll be gentle."

The kyril paws at the ground, very much giving the vibe that it disagrees.

Raiz bends down and interlocks his hands. “Grab the saddle, and I’ll give you a boost.”

“Okay,” I say with hesitation.

Unsurprisingly Raiz lifts me effortlessly so getting into the saddle is easier than I thought it would be. I pull my cloak to the side, so he doesn’t get tangled when he gets up behind me. He gets up with ease, settling behind me like a natural.

“I take it you’ve ridden one of these before?”

He snakes his arm around my waist and pulls me flush against his chest, holding the reins low in front of my belly. “I grew up riding. It’s almost as natural to me as riding Kodia.”

“Who does he belong to? And does he have a name?”

“He belongs to one of the members of House Aste. His name is Nebula.”

“Are you not worried about the spikes in front of us?”

“No, not particularly. They have those for protection, but when they’re relaxed, the blades retract.” He switches the reins to one hand and runs his fingers over one of the spikes. “Just like our talons, they’re only out when they need to fight or escape.”

Everything on this planet is made to survive violence. “I’m not sure how much I like being the most vulnerable being on this planet.”

“There’s something to be said for the softness you possess. You don’t view things through the lens of violence and brutality like we do. It’s refreshing and something we could use more of.”

He speaks of the violence of his people often, but all he's shown me is kindness and an openness to change. I don't think it's as bad as he believes it to be here, despite the attempt on my life. There are pockets of kindness everywhere. Even the males aboard his ship were always deferential to me, never showing anything less than the utmost respect for the strange female wandering the halls.

Then again, I'm only seeing a very small amount of the planet and even less of the people who call it home.

He leads Nebula deeper into the tunnel as we fall into silence. I can't help looking around the space in awe as I take in every detail that I would have missed without the special lenses created for me. The same stone that Raiz's home is carved from seems to be the same lining the tunnel walls.

Occasionally I'll notice some water seeping down the walls, the trickling ends up being the only thing we hear aside from the sound of the kyrils' hooves on the stone. Vynia and Hyva ride side by side in front of us. Both of them stay alert, looking at everything we pass.

At one point the tunnel opens into a large cave. Stalactites and stalagmites grow from above and below. The line of kyril walk through them, careful not to touch any of the formations. We're nearing the other end of the cavern when I look down and notice we're crossing over bones. In fact, it's not just a few bones but rather a deep layer of them, cleared of any tissue or blood.

My stomach churns at the sight.

"What kind of bones are those?" I ask in a whispered tone.

"Hopefully not Zeahiri." Raiz's answer leaves much to be desired.

“Next time lie to me.”

“I thought you didn’t want to be lied to.”

“I’ll make an exception this once.”

Because if those are Zeahiri bones, we have much bigger problems on our hands than simply navigating to the temple.

“Noted.” He runs his hand along my thigh. “How do you feel? Do you need a break?”

“In the cave of bones? No, thanks.”

His chest shakes with laughter at my back. “We’ll keep going until we find a stream for the kyril to drink and then we’ll eat.”

“I’ve noticed the water running down the walls in places. Should we be worried about flooding?”

“No. It’s just groundwater seeping through. As we move further from the terminix, it’ll start to freeze. Some of the caves will be completely covered in ice.”

“Does this cave and tunnel system exist under the entirety of the continent?”

“Yes.”

I shift my weight from one side of my ass to the other. Had he asked if I needed a break in any other location, I would have said yes. It’s only been a few hours, and I’m already stiff and uncomfortable. I can’t imagine how I’ll feel after days of this.

We enter into a narrow passage, the kyril moving single file and all the Zeahiri have

to lean forward to avoid scraping their heads along the ceiling. Nebula snorts and whinnies as he follows the rest further into the darkness. It's so pitch black that even with my enhancements I can barely see.

The hairs on the back of my neck stand as I feel as though we're being watched. I feel Raiz tense behind me at the same time.

"Do you feel that?" I ask.

"I do."

"Do you know what it could be?"

"Lies or real answer?"

My stomach drops because, with that answer, it can't be anything good.

"Real answer, please."

"We're being hunted."

"By what?"

"I'm not sure. Take the reins." His hands cover mine, slipping the leather into my sweaty palms. "I'm going to dismount, keep going."

"No. I don't know how to do this. You can't go alone." I grip his hands, terrified to let him go.

"I'll be right back." He presses a kiss just below my ear. "Fear not, female. I'm the scariest predator down here."

Before I can protest again, he leaps from Nebula's back and silently blends into the darkness.

"You better be a good boy for me," I lean forward and whisper into Nebula's ear. "I don't know what I'm doing or how to defend us."

He jerks his head up and down in what could be considered a nod. I'm going with that instead of assuming he's telling me I'm pissing him off. Either way, he's the one in charge, and he probably knows it.

CHAPTER 27

RAIZ

* * *

The cold from the stone wall at my back seeps through the layers of clothing covering me as I wait for whatever creature that's stalking us to pass by. I have a feeling it's just a cave ursax. If that's the case, I'll be able to eliminate the threat quickly and quietly.

Soon after the hoofbeats of the kyrils fade, I pick up the clicking of claws on stone. One animal. Big. Slowly and silently, I unsheathe my sword. Any sound of a struggle will only attract interest from other predators.

I can smell it now. The foul, rank breath of a creature that doesn't discriminate in what it chooses to consume. Ursax were the reason building underground cities proved to be such a challenge.

The glowing eyes of the beast are all I can see at first. It stops, its large maw dripping saliva as its nostrils flare. Now that it has caught my scent, there's no use waiting against the wall.

I step out in front of it, slashing my sword with brutal force. The metallic scent of blood fills the narrow space, and the walls shake with its roar of pain. The creature's eyes lock on me as it pounces on me.

So much for not drawing attention. I move forward, avoiding its jump and aiming for its life organ, but it swipes out a paw, its claws catching my arm. I feel the blood welling from the wound. The beast inside me rises to the surface ready to meet the challenge.

I drop my sword as my talons and fangs extend. We're already making noise, might as well have fun with the fight. I launch onto the back of the creature and slam my talons into its flanks. It rears back onto its hind legs in an attempt to dislodge me, but I've locked my legs around it and my talons have hooked into its ribs.

It throws itself against the wall, smashing me between its body and the stone. Bits of rock fall around us as it swings its body in the opposite direction. My head narrowly misses a piece of rock protruding from the wall. I dig my talons deeper, satisfaction at the feel of muscle and tendons being flayed apart by my strength rolls through me like a wave of primal destruction.

As the red haze of fury settles around me, I unleash my full strength and tear its ribs from its body. Blood sprays around me as the ursax falls to the ground, its body a mess of bone and shredded flesh. My fangs ache to sink into flesh, but this being was brought down too quickly and easily.

The wound in my arm burns as the toxin from the ursax's claws seeps into my flesh. I bend and pick up a sword, wiping it clean on a patch of fur not yet coated in blood. Hopefully the carcass will distract any predators' attention who heard the fight.

"Are you okay?" Hyva speaks into my mind.

"Yes, I had to kill an ursax. It got a little messier than intended."

"Are you injured?"

“Just a scratch.” I don’t need him hovering around me when I just have to let the toxin run its course.

“From what?”

I sigh heavily. “Its claw.”

“Did it inject the toxin?”

“I don’t know. I don’t think so.”

“Liar.”

I chuckle at the annoyance dripping from his tone. Nothing gets under his skin faster than someone he cares about not letting him help them. Which I understand to a point. I mean, it drives me mad when I can’t help Neev.

“I’ll let you look at it if you don’t hover around me like a nursemaid.”

“You’ll let me treat it and say thank you, you mean. Should we stop and wait for you?”

“No. Keep going. I know where Las is having us stop for the night, if I don’t catch up before then, I’ll just meet you there. Is Neev okay?”

“She is. I think she’s sore, though. She keeps shifting her weight back and forth.”

“Ride alongside her.”

“Already am.”

“Thank you.”

The passage opens back up, and a few beams of dusky light filter into the cavernous space from holes in the rock above. I wrap my cloak tighter around myself, warding off the deeper chill from above. We’re already out of the terminix by the way the sky looks. That’s good.

Taking the kyril was the best move, even if it means a bit more work. They require more water, so we had to slightly alter the route to stay near the underground rivers, but that also means we’ll have access to several hot springs to bathe in, including at the camp tonight. Even though it’s not a direct route, it’s still quicker than taking the direct route on foot.

I move into a quick jog. Physical activity will help the toxin burn through my system quicker. It’ll also ward off the damn chill settling into my bones.

* * *

By the time I get to camp, Las has a fire going beneath a natural vent in the ceiling of the cave. The sound of the icy underground river fills the space as it flows past the rocky shore. All of the kyril are tied up with easy access to the river when they need a drink. Luckily, they can go for days without food, so we didn’t have to pack them anything. They’ll take turns lying down and resting until we saddle them back up in the morning.

Hyva glances up when he hears my footsteps approaching. He points to the spot beside him and opens his medical bag.

“You smell awful,” he says as I sit down beside him.

“Killing an ursax with your bare hands will do that.”

His lip curls in distaste. “Let me see your arm.”

I unclip my cloak and pull off my shirt. Three deep cuts cross my bicep, oozing green puss from the toxin. I glance around as Hyva begins to clean the lacerations.

“Where are Neev and Vynia?”

“In the hot springs. Neev could barely walk when she got off Nebula.” He dumps antiseptic over the wound. “I was just looking for the muscle relaxing balm to give her when you showed up. Hopefully between relaxing in the hot water and the balm her muscles won’t hold on to any stiffness.”

My arm burns as he dumps another round of antiseptics onto the cuts. I wince when he presses the sides of one of the wounds together, pushing the puss out. He takes a swab and removes the toxin. The process is repeated two more times until my arm tingles painfully from the final cream he rubs over the wounds.

“I’m not going to close them up just in case more of the puss needs to weep out.” He scoots away from me and gathers the trash, putting it into a refuse bag and rolling it up tightly. “You can get it wet, the cream I added at the end acts as a sealant.”

“Thank you.” I extend my hands toward the fire. “Was your ride here uneventful?”

“Yes. We didn’t encounter or even see signs of anything on the way here. At least not since the cave with all the bones.” He shivers in disgust.

Now that Neev isn’t here, I need to ask him about that. “Were those Zeahirian bones?”

“Yes. Some of them. I know I saw several skulls that could only be Zeahirian because of the retractable fangs.”

“Do you think it was an ursax den?”

“If it was, there had to be more than one of them living there.”

I came to the same conclusion, unfortunately. I’m just hoping that I didn’t kill a member of the pack. They won’t take kindly to it, and I definitely don’t want a pack of ursax hunting us.

I reach out mind to mind to Vynia. “Are you two okay?”

“We’re fine. Just enjoying the hot springs after a long day’s ride.”

“Stay with Neev while I get my part of camp set up. Then I want privacy with her.”

“Will do, Commander.”

I ignore her sass as I lay out my sleeping roll and grab a clean change of clothing. I need to hold my mate. To make sure she’s safe and in one piece. Grabbing a change of clothes, I head off in the direction of the springs which are tucked back in a small grotto hidden from the riverbank.

The sound of female laughter hits my ears as a welcome sound. I’ve never been happier to have Vynia play such a vital role in my crew and personal life. It would be so much more difficult for Neev if she didn’t have the female camaraderie, especially if she decides to stay permanently.

At the thought of her being mine, truly mine, heat explodes in my chest. It’s a feeling she always gives me. Everything about her makes me joyful. As we get closer and closer to answers about the Bak’hura and creep closer to a full out rebellion, I worry about how she’ll feel being front and center next to me. She enjoys my company, the novelty of a new world and our sexual compatibility, but is it too much to ask of her

to be my true, full partner in a war? Especially a war she has no skin in the game for?

I don't know.

But the thought of letting her walk away rips my insides out.

As I come around the corner, I catch a glimpse of her in the water. Steam rises around her shoulders as she speaks to Vynia with a smile on her beautiful face. If I wanted to I could eavesdrop on them, but they look happy. So I hang back, just watching as they continue to chat quietly. Neev runs her fingertips over the top of the spring and tiny, bioluminescent organisms light up, creating streaks of the greenish blue in the dark pool.

"I'm here," I say into Vynia's mind. "I'll stand back to give you privacy to dress."

"Thank you."

Despite our society's liberal view of nudity, Vynia has always been more discreet than most. I've never asked her about it, but I assume it has to do with not wanting people to see her leg. But she has shown Neev, which makes me happy. She deserves to have a friend she can confide all things in. I'm her commanding officer and brother's best friend, even if I'm also her close friend, it's not the same.

CHAPTER 28

NEEV

* * *

Just as Vynia excuses herself from the springs, I see Raiz approach. My eyes skim him from head to toe, making sure he's all in one piece following his encounter with the ursax. Whatever the hell that is. Probably something terrifying that would give me nightmares for months.

He gives me his signature smirk as he pulls his shirt over his head and drops it on the ground beside the springs. His boots and pants go next until he's standing in the cold air above me, totally nude and fucking irresistible.

Stars, I've never been this attracted to anyone before. I want to roll my eyes at myself for that thought. Every minute drives my need for more of him higher.

His smile widens, revealing all of his white teeth, not just the tips of his fangs. "I heard that."

He steps down into the water, prowling toward me with devious intent. My nipples pebble beneath the surface of the water. The space between my thighs begins to throb. All from his proximity to me.

He slowly lowers his body into the water to his shoulders. Every move he makes toward me is precise, slow, and predatory. The part of my brain that recognizes he's

an apex predator lights up as he moves through the spring toward me silently.

“How are your thighs?” he finally asks once he reaches me.

“Better now that I’ve been soaking in here for a while.”

His hands land on my knees, pushing them apart as he settles his body between them. The ache between my thighs intensifies. His thumbs press into the sore muscle and begin moving in firm circles.

“Is this okay?”

“Stars, yes.” My head falls back in pleasure until I remember he’s injured. “What happened to your arm?”

“The ursax got me with his claw. I’m fine, the toxin is out, and Hyva sealed the wound.”

I lift my hand from the water and run my fingers alongside the wound. It doesn’t look good, but I trust Hyva did a good job. I lean forward and press my lips to the skin beside the wound.

“What are you doing?” He looks bemused, a small smile on his lips.

“Kissing it better.” My voice has taken on a husky tone I don’t recognize. Truthfully, I don’t recognize much of myself lately. The drive to always be near him physically is so strong I feel it in the marrow of my bones.

“Is that a strange human thing?”

“Yes.”

“Did you learn that from your books?” He leans down until his lips are only a whisper from mine.

“Mmhmm.” I cup his cheek.

“I like it,” he whispers against the shell of my ear. “Should I kiss your thighs better?”

A noise that sounds strangely similar to a whimper comes from my throat as I nod. I start to lift myself out of the water, so he can reach, but he stops me. His hands cover mine and place them over his neck as he submerges to just under his lips.

“Stay right here. I can breathe just fine under the surface.”

He sinks beneath the surface while his hands resume the deep massage they had been doing. His lips press to the inside of one of my knees while his fingers move further and further up my thighs. I gasp as his thumb strokes along the crease of the junction between my thigh and pussy.

“I love having you spread open for me like this.” He presses a kiss to my other thigh.

“Raiz.” Even in my mind his name comes out with a whimper as he teases my folds with gentle touches.

“I love how you say my name, all needy and desperate.”

“I am needy and desperate for you.” My hips rock toward his face as he continues to tease me with the sweetest kisses moving slowly higher on my thighs just as his hands did.

He slips a finger inside me, then another. Scissoring them as his mouth closes around my clit. He flicks it with his tongue as his fingers work my channel. My back arches,

lifting my breasts out of the water. I cup both of them, teasing and pinching my nipples as Raiz continues to torture with me his brand of worship between my thighs.

Both of his fingers glide against my walls, finding that one spot along the front that sends pleasure erupting in searing heat through my veins. My fingers sink into his hair and hold him to me as he licks and sucks my pussy, prolonging my orgasm until I forget to breathe. He doesn't stop until my body goes slack with the final few tremors of my orgasm.

He emerges from the water with a satisfied grin and twinkling eyes. His mouth claims mine in a deep kiss. Even though he was underwater, I can still taste myself on his lips. He sweeps his tongue along mine in strokes of ownership as he cups my neck and angles my head back. His fangs scrape along my lower lip, applying pressure but not breaking the skin.

I want him to, though. I want him to sink his fangs into me and leave his mark. I want everyone to know who I belong to and who belongs to me.

Stars, where the hell did that thought come from?

I don't have time to question myself because he releases my mouth and flips me around, bending me over the edge of the springs with my ass in the air. I feel him drag the head of his cock through my folds, stopping to tease my already sensitive clit before sliding back to my entrance.

He slides all the way inside me and moans when he bottoms out. "Fuck, Neev." His fingers flex on my hips, digging into the flesh as he pauses. "Are you okay?"

"I'll be better when you fuck me."

He pulls back and thrusts in with a low growl. There's no thrumming tonight, just

fucking. The sound of his groin smacking against the wet flesh of my ass as he unleashes himself drives me wild with lust. He fucks me with an animalistic ferocity. Pleasure builds when he reaches around and pinches my nipple.

Steam rises from my hot skin in the cold air. Every one of my senses feels heightened as he continues to rut into me, his length rubbing against the spot that sent me spiraling into pleasure earlier. I reach back and cover his hand with my own, interlocking our fingers over my hip.

He angles his pelvis, so the knob at the base of his cock hits my back hole with each pound of his hips. It feels so good, so deliciously forbidden. Like he can hear my thoughts, he pulls his free hand from my nipple and begins to circle it around the rim.

“Someday I’m going to take you here.” His voice fills my mind with a growl.

“I’m going to fill you with so much of my seed it’ll be running out of you for weeks.” His thrusts become more powerful. “You are mine, Neev.”

His words push me over the edge. I cry out as my walls tremble around him. My vision blurs as I feel him empty inside me. Hearing him in my mind, my ears, feeling him everywhere is so much, too much. I rock back against him as the most powerful orgasm I’ve ever had tears through me.

He pulls out of me with a low groan when our orgasms finally subside. I feel him palm my ass, spreading my cheeks so he can get a good look at the mess we made.

“I could go again just seeing my seed seep from your pussy like this.” His finger runs along my folds and pushes his cum back inside me. “Fuck,” he groans, his dick twitching against me.

He collapses over my back, and I feel the rapid beat of his heart against my skin. It

matches the rhythm of my own as I work to catch my breath. His arms lock around my waist, and he switches us so he's sitting on the rocky ledge and pulls me into his lap.

I curl against him, making sure to stay as submerged in the hot water as possible. His chest expands and contracts deeply as his heart rate slows beneath my ear. He lifts my chin with two fingers under it until our eyes meet.

"Was that okay?" Apprehension fills his stunning green eyes, making them appear darker. "I kind of went harder than I meant to."

"Yes." I press a kiss to his lips. "That was incredible. I loved every second of it. I'm not as fragile as I look."

"I'm stronger than I look," he says with a smirk.

"You won't break me." At least not physically.

He cups my cheek. "Let's hope that goes for both of us."

* * *

"Are you ready for this?" Vynia asks quietly as we approach the temple on foot.

The past two days of travel were arduous. I'm not sure my legs will ever go back to normal after the hours and hours of sitting on Nebula's back. Even the warm comfort of having Raiz at my back couldn't ease the discomfort.

"I'm just happy to be walking on my own two feet for a bit."

She huffs a laugh behind the scarf wrapped around her nose and mouth. "Right?"

The temple itself is incredible. Extending from the floor of a large cave, the building rises into the darkness well above the surface and with spires piercing the sky. Two eternal flames burn from large stone bowls on either side of the massive door.

The structure is the complete antithesis of its surroundings. Huge piles of boulders dot the open space, more than likely leftover from the construction of the temple. How they managed to build something so intricate in such a remote spot, with no technology is astounding. I wish I could spend weeks studying it.

Las informed us he wouldn't be entering. We left him behind with the kyrils. Raiz and Hyva are going first into the temple, checking to make sure it's safe. They each light a torch from the bowls of fire and then disappear behind the doors that close behind them.

As the minutes pass my anxiety grows. Vynia and I fall into silence as we wait for them to come back out for us. Snowflakes swirl down around us from above, adding an ethereal ambiance to the already haunting scene before us.

"Forget waiting," I say finally. "Let's just go."

"We have orders." Vynia frowns, clearly irritated with said orders.

"You have orders." I point at my chest. "I don't."

She glances at me out of the corner of her eyes. "Technically, my orders are to keep you safe."

I nod, catching on immediately. "Exactly. So if I decide to go in, you have no choice but to come with me."

"To do anything else would be dereliction of duties."

There's no hesitation on my part as I walk up the smooth stone steps. Our boots don't make a sound as the snow begins to fall heavier. Vynia grabs one of the torches and lights it while I pull open the door and let us both inside.

If I thought the outside of the building was beautiful, the inside is a masterpiece. The arched ceilings and flying buttresses are carved from a white stone, not the black that seems most prevalent on the continent. Each wall is divided into panels with a different relief carved into the center.

Vynia holds up the torch as we walk through; I don't see words, but I suspect there are hieroglyphs of some sort because I keep seeing repeating symbols. There's no sign of Raiz or Hyva, so we keep slowly working our way through the long, rectangular room.

"Do you know what any of these depict?" I ask Vynia.

"No. I don't have a clue."

"Is this a church? Was it originally built for worship?"

"Yes. I believe this was once a temple to the old gods. But religion fell out of favor long ago."

"The Bak'hura isn't a religious rite?"

"No. It's more of an offering to the Sovereign."

"You kill each other for him?" I stop and look at her. "Doesn't that seem backwards? If he was a good leader, he'd want Zeahiri to thrive. You can't thrive when you erase half the population."

“I know. That’s why we’re here, trying to find anything to help us. No one wants to see the tradition continue aside from the very few in power who benefit from it.”

“How—”

“Were my orders to wait unclear?” Raiz appears from the darkness behind us with an irritated growl that he directs at Vynia.

“I came in first. She was just coming along to keep me safe,” I say without looking back at him, so I can keep studying each new relief, trying to find a pattern to the symbols.

“That doesn’t change the fact that she disobeyed a direct order.”

I stop and meet his glare with one of my own. “She disobeyed one order to follow another.”

“Not to interrupt, but what are you looking at?” Hyva asks, coming beside me and holding his own torch up to the relief in front of us.

“I’m trying to figure out the symbology.” I point at a few of the glyphs. “Do you happen to know what any of this means?”

Raiz joins me on my other side. “No.”

“I don’t either.” Hyva moves down. “I didn’t even know these were here.”

“Should we go find the book?”

“Yes.” Raiz puts a hand on the small of my back and guides me toward a darkened corner. “There’s a staircase up. The library should be on the top floor.”

Light from the three torches bounces off the white stone with occasional gold veins running through it. I want to stop and examine it, but I have a hard enough time keeping up with my companions' long strides. The stairs curve around the side of the temple. We come to a landing but don't stop. There are at least two more floors until we get to the top of the temple.

I gasp when we reach the upper landing. It's freezing, but the top of the temple is high above ground level, showcasing an endless expanse of shadowy land. Huge panes of glass enclose the roof, creating the feeling of being outdoors without the frigid discomfort. Not that it is by any means warm. The sky above is filled with thousands of twinkling stars, more than I've ever seen before. It's a sight so beautiful it hurts.

"This way." Raiz's warm hand on my back guides me to the left and down a long corridor. "The library should be at the end and on the left."

The scent of smoke seems to become stronger as we get closer to the end of the hall.

"Do you smell that?" I ask.

"Yes." Raiz stops our progress and looks around. "Hyva stay with Neev." He and Vynia stalk down the hall with weapons drawn. They stop on either side of the door and share a look before Vynia kicks it open and Raiz enters.

"Should we go?" I start walking, but Hyva's arm wraps around my waist and pulls me back.

"Nice try, but no. We'll wait for them."

"It's clear." I assume the message was sent to both of us because Hyva drops his hand and starts walking alongside me.

“Would have been fine,” I singsong quietly.

My good mood evaporates in an instant as I take in the sight before me. Everything in the room has been torched. Piles of ash coat the floor and smoke damage stains the walls. A stone table is the only thing left standing in the room.

I cross the room, ash floating up as I walk through it. “How did this happen? How could a fire be contained to only one room?”

There’s no sign of damage in the hall but the door, made of wood, didn’t burn. It doesn’t even have smoke damage. The shelves that once held the volumes of books are gone, a few large, splintered pieces of wood are all that’s left.

As someone who’s spent her life surrounded by books, the thought of lighting all that knowledge, all that work on fire is unthinkable. It’s horrendous. How many of these books can’t be replicated? How much history has been erased?

“Who would have done this?” I turn back to look at Raiz and find him having a private conversation with Vynia.

“There’s only one person who would want this library destroyed,” Vynia says quietly as she scans the damage.

CHAPTER 29

RAIZ

* * *

“It had to be the Sovereign.” Not one fucking book was spared. Everything burnt to ash. I run a hand through my hair as I fight the urge to punch the wall.

All this work.

Everything I went through, dragged my crew through.

Stars, I kidnapped Neev for nothing.

Guilt swamps me. Obviously good has come from it, I’ve found my mate, but at what cost? What if she leaves me now?

No. I can’t spiral with that dark line of thinking right now. I have a mission. A purpose. I can’t lose sight of the end goal just because of this setback.

Hyva’s got a bag out, collecting samples of ash.

“What are you planning on doing with that?” I ask.

“Maybe Cuna and I can figure out how old the ashes are. Maybe even what started the fire. It’ll give us a starting point to investigate.”

“Good thinking.” I follow Neev down one of the aisles, watching as she runs her fingertips through the ash.

“Is it possible you have a mole on board your ship?” she asks quietly.

“Before I walked in here, I would have said an emphatic no. Now, I’d be dumb to not consider the possibility.”

Looking around at the remains of the fire it looks to be recent, weeks, maybe months at most. The only thing that saved the temple from burning down is that it’s made of stone. I can’t think of anyone beyond the Sovereign who would want this. Sure, there are factions of us who are unhappy with his rule, and we all have differing opinions of how our society should change, but none of us want this.

“Raiz?” Neev’s hand wraps around my wrist, drawing my attention to her. “Are you okay?”

She shouldn’t be the one asking me that. It should be the other way around. I dragged her into this mess, and for what? To have her attacked? To not find the entire reason I needed her in the first place?

I pull my arm away from her, ignoring the pained look in her eyes. “I’m fine. There’s no reason to stay here. Let’s go.”

Without waiting for anyone else, I stalk out the door and back down the corridor. I put up my mental shields, something I rarely do, to keep Hyva and Vynia’s questions out. Even though I’m not speaking or watching for their safe exit, I still listen closely for all three sets of footsteps. Just because I can’t handle their looks of pity or confusion doesn’t mean I don’t care about their well-being. I’d die a thousand deaths before allowing any of them to be injured on my watch.

Especially Neev.

Except I couldn't even do that, could I? She was viciously attacked in my own home while I was nowhere to be found. Once again, I've failed.

I won't be able to stop the Bak'hura. Children will die because of my failure. Parents will have to watch; I'll have to watch. My stomach roils with nausea.

Hyva, Vynia, and Neev murmur to each other behind me, but I'm too lost in my own head to make out any of their hushed words. I wouldn't blame them if they were discussing my inability to carry out the mission. Perhaps I should resign my post. Just go back to being Lord of House Aste and try my damndest to keep my people safe.

Las is lounging at the rendezvous point with the kyrils when we arrive. He jumps up, surprise etched on his face.

"I wasn't expecting you back so soon. I hope you found what you need."

The fewer people who know what's going on, the better. "We did," I confirm. In many ways we did find what we needed. The lack of it is still finding something.

"Excellent." He mounts his kyril. "Shall we get on with it, then?"

"Yes."

I grab Nebula's reins and lead him over to Neev. She tries to make eye contact as she places her foot in my interlocked palms, but I keep my eyes trained on the ground. Even though I can't handle looking in her eyes, I still pull her back against me after I mount Nebula. The feel of her body pressed to mine is grounding in a way I didn't realize I needed.

Las leads the way with us behind and then Vynia and Hyva bring up the rear as they ride side by side. I hear their mumbled conversation in bits and pieces but don't engage. Neev turns her head, leaning her weight against me and pressing her ear to my heart. I drop the reins from one hand and wrap it around her middle, holding her close.

No matter how upset I am with myself, having her near is always calming. She grabs the edge of my cloak and wraps it around her shoulders as she's done a few times on this mission. I'm perfectly comfortable, temperature-wise; the tunnels and caves are dark and cold but not as cold as being on the surface would be. Her human body isn't used to the constant chill though, so anytime she's needed to borrow my body heat, I'm happy to oblige.

"Are you going to talk to me?" she asks after getting comfortable.

"About what?"

"What are you thinking?"

"I'm thinking we need to get back home quickly, so I can prep for the Bak'hura and meeting with the Sovereign." And try to figure out a way to keep her from having to attend either of those events.

"Are you going to ask him about the library?"

"No. I don't want him to know that I went to the temple."

"That makes sense." She falls quiet for a while, her breathing deepening until I wonder if she's fallen asleep. "You're going to have to give me lessons on etiquette for meeting him."

“Fuck etiquette.” He would be privileged just having the honor to put his eyes on her.

“Raiz.” Her voice is soft but slightly exasperated. “I need to know what’s proper and improper, so I don’t offend him. It’s what is best for you. Especially since he didn’t know you were going to take me from the Order.”

“I know. I just hate the idea of you having to be paraded around in front of him. He’s old and evil. No good can come of it.”

“No good can come of making him angry, either. What if he uses you as an example?”

“I’d like to see him try to challenge me.”

“Challenge you?”

“To hand to hand combat. It’s a tradition among the Lords to challenge each other physically when one of them feels slighted by another. A way to keep the houses from forming factions and infighting.”

“So you just take your frustrations out on each other physically instead of sitting down and negotiating like proper adults?”

“Yes. Though there is a lot of sitting and negotiating that happens, as well.”

“Maybe my presence will negate the violence.”

“Doubtful.”

It’s possible that her being there could actually increase tension, especially if any of the Lords take an avid interest in her. There are several who have been looking

outside of Zeahiri to find a female to mate as they haven't found their own yet.

Neev is attractive beyond being my mate. From the moment I laid eyes on her, I wanted to know her. She's smart, assertive, confident, and beautiful. The human female form is so different from the Zeahiri females, with their soft bodies and supple curves. I could easily envision other eligible males making a move for her.

I can't tell her that she's my mate yet, which leaves openings for other males to swoop in. Telling her and having her accept the bond would be ideal, but I'm not changing my mind now. She deserves a choice, even though I don't have one. I'll never look at a female and want or desire them if they aren't Neev. That's just how the bond works.

She's in my arms for now, though, and I'm going to enjoy every second of it.

* * *

After helping Neev get settled in for the night, I walk over to Vynia as she finishes her dinner. She starts to stand, but I wave her off, sitting down next to her instead.

"We likely have someone on the crew reporting back to the Sovereign."

"I've already started putting a list of suspects together," she says as she folds the wrapper from her dinner and puts it away in an airtight bag.

I nod. "Same. What are your thoughts?"

"I don't think it's anyone from the lower ranks. They wouldn't have knowledge of the actual missions or objectives."

I thought the same.

“Which leaves everyone on the bridge. Cuna. The security team.”

“Cuna’s out. He hates the Sovereign more than anyone after what happened to his family.”

“Agreed.” She kicks a rock as she shifts her leg, and the kyrils all turn at the noise. “I hope it isn’t anyone from the bridge, but Mydax is still so young. I hate saying it, but he has an idealistic bent to his worldview.”

“That’s exactly why I don’t think it’s him. I trust him. He wants a better world, not more of the same.”

She hums as if she doesn’t agree. “When we get back, you’ll have to ask Altis to look into the security team. He knows them the best.”

“I agree.”

“What are we going to do in the meantime?” she asks.

“I’ll have to attend the upcoming Bak’hura and act as though nothing is amiss.”

“Are you going to bring Neev?”

“I don’t want to, but I don’t see that I have any other choice.” I run a hand through my hair, tugging on the strands until it hurts. “I hate that I brought her into this and for no reason now.”

“If you hadn’t, you would never have found your mate, though. That has to count for something.”

“It would if she knew.”

“So tell her.”

“No.”

“Why not?” she asks with exasperation. “She clearly cares about you.”

“Does she actually care, or is it just the bond? Or, conversely, what if I tell her and she questions whether her feelings are true? Humans don’t have mate bonds. Fuck, she could even think I tricked her into it somehow or that I’m lying.”

“You’re an idiot.”

“No. I’m thinking about her. I don’t want her to feel like she doesn’t have a choice in our relationship. I won’t be an obligation to her.”

“So you’re just never going to tell her?”

“I will, eventually. If she decides to stay with me.”

“But what do you want?”

I pin her with a look. “It’s obvious what I want.”

“Then fight for it.”

“No. It has to be her choice. Her decision. I’ve had choice taken from me far too many times. I will not do it to someone I love.”

Her brows lift. “Love?”

“Yes.”

“Wow.” She looks shocked.

It isn't necessary for two individuals in a mate bond to love each other, it's a different kind of connection. One that usually comes with falling in love but not always. It can also be something as simple as the universe deciding your genetics are compatible.

“What?”

“You're just a bigger idiot than I thought if you love her, but you're not going to tell her.”

“Xarloc was the last person to call me an idiot.”

“And?”

“And you know what happened to him.”

“Are you threatening me, Commander?” A wide grin crosses her face. “Because I could go for a fight.”

“I'm not going to fight a cheater.”

She chuckles. “It wasn't cheating. My leg just came detached at the perfect moment to use as a club. Don't be a baby.”

The fact of the matter is that Vynia is the only one I'd let talk to me like this. She's like a sister to me and never hesitates to give me true, honest advice. Altis is a great second. I know he will always have my back and rarely challenge me. They're opposites, just like Xarloc and I were. Except where I clashed with my twin, Vynia and Altis complement each other.

I tell her that I'll take the first watch, so she wanders over to her sleeping roll which is laid out next to a sleeping Hyva. She throws him an irritated glance when he begins to snore right as she closes her eyes. But as the fire fades to embers, I see the two of them roll toward each other until he's pressed against her back.

I've noticed them being cozy one minute and at each other's throats the next. I thought maybe they were just irritated from being near each other more than usual, but there's something different going on. Whatever it is, it's none of my business. They're adults, and I trust them not to be unprofessional on the ship.

CHAPTER 30

NEEV

* * *

The stench of decay fills my nostrils as we pass over the carcass of the ursax that Raiz killed a few days ago. The kyrils snort and shake their heads as we drive them down the tunnel toward the cave of bones. I can't tell if I'm sensing something watching us or if it's just my imagination, but all the hairs on the back of my neck seem to rise the closer we get.

Raiz tightens his arms around my body, tension radiating off him in waves.

"Something doesn't feel right," I whisper.

"I know." He nods at Vynia when she looks back at us. "Do you have your blasters ready?"

"Yes."

"Good. Try to stay on Nebula if anything happens. He's the safest place to be if we're attacked."

We continue through the darkness in silence. The feeling doesn't dissipate, it actually gets worse. I try to tell myself it's just because I know the creepy cave of bones is coming up, but I can't shake the anxiety. If I could melt back into Raiz, I would.

We emerge into the cave of the bones, the kyrils standing side by side as they scan the darkness. Nebula steps in place while nervously snorting. Las leads his kyril and the one carrying our supplies out first, the path through the bones has changed since we were here days ago. Vynia goes second, followed by Hyva, and then finally us taking up the rear.

We're halfway through when the growling begins. I can't tell if it's one ursax or many because of the way the sound reverberates through the space. All four of the Zeahirians jump off their mounts and unsheathe their weapons in the blink of eye. Their speed is a good thing because eight ursax run from opposite sides of the room, converging on where we are with no cover.

The first two reach Las before he can swing his weapon. The smaller ursax jumps on his back and bites his neck while the larger one bites into his leg. He doesn't even get the chance to scream before his body is torn in two. Each creature takes its piece and runs off to where they came from.

The horror of the moment doesn't fully sink in as I watch my friends fighting off the others. I pull my blaster as three close in on Vynia. Nebula stays calm beneath me as I lift the gun in two hands like Raiz showed me. It takes precious seconds to find my target, but when I do, I pull the trigger. The ursax falls to the ground with a lucky shot to the side of its head. Vynia kicks one of the attacking creatures and slices the head off the other.

Now that she's down to just one, I turn my attention to Hyva. He's managed to take down one and is pulling his knife out of its eye. I yell for him to watch out as two more race out of the shadows going right for him. I shoot with my gun but miss the first time. It howls out when my next shot gets it directly in the leg.

I'm just about to check on Raiz, when I'm knocked completely out of the saddle. My breath whooshes out of me on impact with the ground, and when I look up, I notice

an ursax on Nebula's back. The kyril rears back on its hind legs, violently shaking the creature off.

Raiz yells my name just as a large shadow crosses over me. Hot, foul, saliva drips onto my face from the jaws of the largest ursax I've seen as it steps over me. Just as I turn my head, I see Raiz run and slide between us. He covers me with a roar of anger I've never heard him make. His fangs are down, and his talons rip into the belly of the ursax that was about to attack me.

I can barely breathe beneath Raiz's weight, but at least I'm alive. He tears the ursax into shreds, flesh and fur flies when it makes a feeble attempt to flee. Raiz won't allow it though, as he wraps his hand around one of its legs and tears it apart. Blood and gore arc through the air, painting the bed of bones into a macabre masterpiece.

Once he's ripped that ursax to pieces and watched it take its last breath, he runs to the closest one and tears it apart. It's as though he's fueled by some sort of primal rage now. It's gone beyond protecting himself and turned into a mission he must complete.

My arm hangs at an unnatural angle, but I'm too horrified by the scene in front of me to feel any pain. Vynia is on her back, kicking at the jaw of the ursax who keeps attacking her. I look down at the ground for my blaster but can't find it. I hear a sickening crunch and look over just in time for Vynia to rip her leg from the mouth of the ursax. It spits out her prosthetic leg and shakes its head. She uses its momentary confusion to her advantage and swings the leg at its head. When it falls to its side from the impact, she pulls her knife and jabs it down into its chest, twisting the blade until blood trickles from the ursax's mouth and the light of life dims from its eyes.

The sound of a neck cracking is the last thing I hear aside from heaving breathing and irritated snorts from the kyril who managed to live through the attack. Hyva runs to Vynia, helping her stand up on her one leg. Raiz drops the body of the last ursax and hurries back to me. He can't speak around his elongated fangs as well, so he falls to

his knees beside me. His talons retract quicker than his fangs, so he runs his hands up and down my legs, checking for injuries. I'm only just realizing that I'm covered in blood.

"It's okay." I grab his hands as I start checking him over. "It's not my blood." It's likely from the ursax he slaughtered while protecting me.

His white hair is dark and matted with blood. Violence swims in his eyes, like he'd bring the creatures back to life just to kill all over again. Rationally, I know this type of violence should be horrifying to witness and experience. But there's nothing rational about the way my body is responding to him like this. I watch in fascination as his fangs slowly recede until he can speak as usual.

"I didn't realize they got that long." I wipe blood from under his eye. My cheeks heat as soon as the words are out of my mouth. What a weird thing to say after what we just experienced.

"Are you okay?" He scans me with his eyes and hands.

The hint of a smile that was on his face falls away when I wince as his hands brush my shoulder.

"I think it's just dislocated from the fall." As the adrenaline fades, the pain is starting to set in while my arm hangs limply at my side.

"Hyva," he calls out urgently. "Neev is injured."

Hyva comes quickly, helping Vynia along on her one leg. She waves him off and drops to the ground, blood coating her skin as well. Hyva drops to his knees looking me over to figure out what's wrong.

“My shoulder is dislocated.”

“What does that mean?” Raiz looks from me to Hyva.

“The joint slipped out of place,” Hyva says as he frowns. “I’ve never treated anything like this before. Our joints are different from humans and don’t move the same way.”

“I think you just yank it back into place.”

“That’ll hurt without any anesthetic.”

“Better than risking nerve damage or not being able to use my arm. Just do it. I’ll be fine.”

“Okay.” He feels around my shoulder for a minute and then sets one palm in place and grabs my bicep with the other. “I saw you nail one of the ursax with a blaster.”

I hiss as sharp pain explodes in my shoulder as it pops back into place, but it quickly fades to a manageable ache. I circle my arm forwards a few times and then backwards a few more until the pain fades to a dull ache.

“I did get one of the bastards.”

His lips tilt upwards. “How’s your arm feeling?”

“Almost normal. You did a good job fixing me up.”

“Thanks, I’d rather never do that again, so if you could refrain from doing that in the future it’d be appreciated.” He turns and heads over to Vynia. “I have a spare leg in my medical pack for you.”

“You brought a spare?”

“Yes. You have an irritating habit of using your prosthesis as a weapon or tool. I’ll always have a spare handy.”

“At least I wasn’t the one who removed it this time. That damn ursax bit it off.”

“After you kicked it in the teeth.”

They bicker a bit more while Raiz rounds up the three kyril we were riding. The other two ran off. I’m just about to stand up when I’m lifted off my feet and pulled into Raiz’s embrace. He spins me until I’m facing him and can wrap my arms around his waist.

“It’s okay.” I rub my palms up and down his back while he continues to radiate tension. “I’m okay. Hyva and Vynia are okay.”

He nods but doesn’t say anything. He just pulls me even closer until it’s work to breathe. “I thought I might lose you.”

“I’m tougher than I look.” I lean back so I can look up into his eyes. “We’re not too far from home, are we?”

“No, we’re not. Just a few more hours’ ride.”

“Good. A shower has never sounded better.”

* * *

It’s late by the time we get back to Raiz’s estate. My entire body is so sore it’s difficult to climb the stairs. I entice myself by thinking of standing under the hot

spray of his shower for at least thirty minutes while the nastiness of the day washes away into the drain.

I'm not the only one who is exhausted, both Hyva and Vynia decide to take a guest suite for the night. I'm glad it won't just be Raiz and myself tonight. It's the first night I've spent back in the house since I was attacked. It feels strange to walk through the halls and not see Uzold passing by or bringing me something to read.

Raiz leads me down the hall, stopping between his room and mine.

"Where do you feel more comfortable sleeping?" he asks.

I think about it for a minute. Thoughts of being chased and attacked in his bedroom filter back, and my heart speeds up. "I think I'd rather sleep in my room, but I want you with me. If you prefer yours over mine, I'll manage." I look up at him. "I just want to be with you."

He gives me a long, intense look. One that's full of so many emotions I don't know how to sort through it all. Then he pushes open my door. "I'm happy to sleep in here with you."

My shoulders loosen with relief.

I immediately begin to strip out of my bloody, filthy clothes as I head right for the bathroom. I don't turn to see if he is following me, though I really hope he is. I want to take care of him the way he's always taking care of me. I want to clean the remnants of today from his body and give him the comfort that he so deeply deserves.

The door closes behind me, and I hold my breath as I turn the water to as hot as it'll go. My breath whooshes from my lungs as I feel him grab the bottom of my bra and lift it over my head. The feeling of safety I get from his proximity brings the prick of

tears to my eyes.

“I don’t know how you can wear those wretched contraptions all day long.” He tosses the bra to the corner of the room.

“I don’t really have a choice,” I say with a smile while I push my pants and panties down my hips and step out of them.

The water is just shy of scalding when I step into the spray. The hot springs were great, but there’s nothing like a hot shower to make me feel truly clean. Raiz steps into the glass walled shower behind me, immediately taking up a majority of the space with his size. I turn around to face him while I tip my head back and wet my hair.

He stares down into my eyes and gathers my hair in his hands. “Let me?”

I nod, and he presses a quick kiss to my lips before getting the shampoo. He lathers it between his palms and begins to work it through my hair from the roots to tips. My eyes drift closed at the feel of his fingertips on my scalp. It feels so good that goosebumps race across my naked flesh regardless of the hot water streaming down over my body. As his chest brushes mine, my nipples tighten into hard, pink points.

If he notices, he doesn’t say anything. All his attention is on working conditioner through my tresses. I feel the need to do something for him, so I grab his soap and get a good lather going. I run the sudsy wash rag over his body, wiping any lingering smudges of blood from his skin.

Neither of us speak as we take our time helping the other clean up. The thrumming begins in his chest as he watches suds run down my body. It isn’t until now that I realize he didn’t thrum at all while we were on the way to the temple.

“Can you control that?” I ask.

“What?”

“The thrumming?”

“No. But it can be suppressed by a shot.”

“Did you suppress it while we went to the temple?”

“Yes.” He lets me switch our position until his back is under the spray. The last thing left is to clean his hair.

“Why?” I pull down on his hands. “Kneel so I can wash your hair like you did mine.”

He does as I ask, his eyes zeroing in on my breasts now that they’re at eye level for him. “I didn’t want it to draw attention.”

My fingers glide through his hair, working the shampoo through as his eyes fall shut. He wraps his hands around my waist as I watch the water run black from the blood in his hair. His palms move down to my hips and his thumbs circle slowly toward the apex of my thighs.

“I love your body, Neev. You’re so soft and pliant beneath my hands.” His finger traces along my slit. “And this heavenly place,” he parts my folds, “is my favorite in the galaxy.”

I reach behind him and turn the water off. He doesn’t wait for a towel before standing and lifting me into his arms. His cock presses against my clit with each step he takes, making my pussy throb with need.

Instead of tossing me on the bed like I anticipate, he sets me on my feet beside it and bends me over. When I look over my shoulder, I see him drop to his knees behind me. He pushes my legs apart until my sex is fully on display for him.

Heat from his mouth covers my clit as his tongue lashes against it in hungry, hurried strokes. My fingers dig into the bedding for purchase as my hips rock back toward his mouth. He squeezes the backs of my thighs just beneath my ass, hard enough to lace the pleasure from his mouth with the slightest bit of pain from his hands. He cups my cheeks, spreading them further apart and drags his tongue from my tight bundle of nerves to my pussy. He thrusts his tongue in and out of me in rapid succession. One of his fingers circles the rim of my virgin hole, teasing me with something I didn't even know I'd want.

"Fuck," I whisper breathlessly when his mouth continues its upward ascent and he circles my puckered hole with the tip of his tongue. "Raiz," I moan his name as he slips two fingers inside me, immediately finding my g-spot and sending pleasure flooding my cunt.

He moans against me as his lips work their way back to clit. Searing, white heat rolls through me as I'm rocked by a powerful orgasm. He keeps working me through each trembling wave.

I crawl up the bed as he stands to his full height. His cock juts out proudly, a pearlescent drop of cum beaded on his tip. Before I can change directions and take him into my mouth to bring him the same pleasure he brought me, he's on top of me. He settles between my parted legs and enters me in one powerful thrust. My fingernails dig into his back as he pulls out and glides back in. My body rocks into the mattress with each thrust, the entire bed moving with the force of our fucking.

He wraps his hand around the back of my thigh and lifts my leg into the air, resting it against his chest. His eyes travel to where we're joined.

“You take me so well, female,” he growls. “The way your cunt stretches over and welcomes my cock makes me want to forget everything outside this room.” He reaches down and circles my clit with his fingers. “Fucking. Perfect.”

Our skin slaps together forming a primal chorus with his panted curses and my whimpered breaths. I lift my other leg until it rests against his chest. The new angle tightens my channel, and my walls begin to tremble and milk him again. He growls as his cock surges inside me; hot seed fills me as he pulses over and over with his prolonged release.

He lowers my legs gently to either side of him, but he stays full seated within me. He plants his hand low on my stomach, right over the softest, roundest part of my body. I’m usually uncomfortable being touched there, but he strokes the pooch gently, reverently. Like he’s transfixed by my body.

I feel bereft as he pulls out of me with a groan. His eyes move to the spot between my legs. “Mine,” he gathers the cum spilling from me and pushes it back inside.

He pulls down the covers and lays beside me, putting them back over us. I turn my head and press a soft kiss to his lips. Cocooned in his arms I manage to fall into a deep, dreamless sleep.

CHAPTER 31

RAIZ

* * *

I 'm awoken by Hyva gently tapping on our mental connection. Neev is still wrapped around me in the same position we fell asleep in last night. Neither of us moved once we fell asleep, which is a first for me. I kiss her forehead softly and extricate myself from her arms.

I wasn't thinking last night and didn't bring any clothes into her room. After making sure my cock is tucked away, I stride out into the hall where Hyva is waiting for me with one foot propped on the wall.

He smirks at my lack of clothes and follows me into my bedroom. "The Bak'hura is at nightfall on the Sovereign's ship."

I pause halfway through pulling my pants on. "His ship?" Honestly, I'd rather be on his ship than at the palace where my Bak'hura took place. Memories from that terrible day are harder to ignore when I'm standing watching history repeat itself.

"Yeah. Apparently, he's ill. His medical staff don't want him on the surface."

"He announced that publicly?" My brows rise.

"No. I heard the reason from one of my contacts on his team."

“What are the chances he’ll just die and this fucking rite can go with him?” I mutter as I pull a shirt on.

“Considering who will replace him, not good.”

I grunt in agreement. Honestly, the Sovereign dying wouldn’t help the cause at all. Part of the strength of my plan relies on his weakened state. The next male in line is as cruel as he is cunning. He’d be much harder to defeat.

“I’ll make breakfast. Go wake up Vynia.”

“She’s already left to start getting ready.”

“Right.” That makes sense. Even though she’s a highly decorated pilot in the fleet, at this rite, she can’t wear her official uniform like the rest of us. She has to dress like a lady of nobility, which she obviously hates. They won’t even allow her the dignity of wearing her prosthetic leg.

“Does Neev have a dress for the occasion?”

“Yes. She was given a wardrobe full of clothing for all possible occasions.”

“Have you changed your mind about the mate bond? It could keep her safe.”

“No. I haven’t changed my mind. It still needs to be her choice; I will not make her feel pressured in any way.”

“Even at the cost of her safety and your happiness?”

“I don’t think it will come to a question of her safety. I have a plan to explain her presence.” We start walking toward the kitchen.

“And that plan is?”

“I’m going to tell them that I bought her freedom and have offered her a role on the ship as an interpreter for those who don’t have universal translator chips.”

“What if they know she’s from Oculus Nine?”

“Then I’ll find another explanation. I don’t plan on spending more than a few minutes up there tonight.”

“What are you two plotting?” Neev asks from the doorway of the kitchen.

I hold my hand out to her, my chest expanding when she crosses to me and slips hers inside mine. We fill her in on the plan and what to expect while I make breakfast. She eats and listens, thoughtfully taking in everything we tell her.

“Are you worried about whoever on the crew spilling secrets about who I really am?”

“No. The only people who know about you that will be there are the three of us in this room and Altis and Vynia.”

Hyva excuses himself when we finish to go home and check on his parents.

“Can we go see Kodia and his mate? I haven’t seen them since they saved me.”

“Of course.” I pick up our plates and carry them to the sink. “We can even take them some treats if you want.”

“Oh, that’d be good. What do they like?”

I bite the inside of my cheek because I have a feeling she’s not going to like it.

Opening a freezer drawer, I pull out two frozen sea birds and hand one to her.

“These are their favorites.”

“Oh.” Her face takes on a green pallor. “They look like they could be alive.”

“Yes, that’s the idea.”

“Right.” She nods, holding the bird out from her body. “Shall we?”

“After you.”

We get down to the water’s edge, and I tap the water’s surface several times in a specific pattern that Kodia will recognize. I stand back up and walk over to Neev, not knowing how long it will take for them to get here. If they’re far out, it could be a few minutes.

“How will I know if his mate is my soul tie?” Neev asks.

I tap a finger over her heart. “It’s just knowing in here. You’ll feel her, and it’s such a different sensation from anything else. Think of how it feels to mind speak with me. It’s kind of like that but on a level without words.”

She nods at the explanation and looks out to the water. “Do you feel that?”

As soon as the question is out of her mouth, I feel them approaching. The water at the mouth of the cave ripples, and before I know it, both Kodia and his mate are flying out of the water and landing nearly on top of us. Kodia’s mate rubs against Neev so fiercely she knocks her over and begins licking her face.

Neev’s laughter fills the cave as they bond. Kodia takes the bird from me and

swallows it in one gulp before turning his attention back to the females. Neev wiggles out from under her and offers the bird, which disappears down her throat in the same manner as Kodia's did.

"It definitely feels like a soul tie to me. I guess I get to name her now."

"You do."

"Lucy." Neev scratches behind the female's ear. "She feels like a Lucy."

"Kodia and Lucy. I like it."

"I wish we could go for a swim with them," she says.

"Soon. She'll always be here for you."

Just like I will be.

* * *

I stare at my reflection as I put the pins I've earned through perfect military service on my uniform. Awards for bravery, for brutality, for serving my planet in the most violent way possible. Patches from the major battles I participated in are sewn onto the sleeves of the stiff black jacket.

I loathe what I see in the mirror.

Quickly taming my unruly hair into submission, I tear my gaze from my reflection and walk out into my bedroom. My cloak is laid out on the bed, along with my boots and swords. The fact there are smudges on the latter is a stark reminder of Uzold's loss.

Eventually I'll have to hire a replacement, if such a thing even exists. How do you replace the male who practically raised you and stepped up when your parents died before you reached adulthood? I don't have the answer. In truth I haven't had time to grieve his death properly. I haven't even had time to breathe, let alone plot revenge for his death.

Everything is happening so quickly I can't keep up. If I could take those I care about and disappear, I would. Find some peaceful planet, ideally uninhabited, and spend my days fucking my mate and laughing with friends. At this point in my life, that's all that I want. I'm so close to giving up my birthright of House Aste and my position in the military, I can almost taste the freedom.

I finish lacing my boots and slide my swords into the cross sheath on my back. Their ornate handles are carved from the same stone of my family's mines. The veins of silver crystal that run the black obsidian walls of my family estate are three times as hard as any substance in the system and the most valuable product Zeahiri trades with other planets.

Laughter drifts into the hallway as I walk toward Neev's room. Vynia came to get ready here with her, so she could help her dress and explain aspects of the night that I haven't had a chance to yet. The sound of their happiness, even in this tense of a moment, brings a lightness to my soul I didn't realize I needed.

I lift my hand and knock on the door, waiting to open it until they call out I can. The two of them are standing side by side when I enter, and the sight leaves me breathless. Vynia is arguably one of the most beautiful Zeahirian females on the planet, but my eyes are glued to Neev.

She's wearing a deep purple dress that dips low in the front, nearly to her belly button. The wide expanse of exposed skin on her chest shows her tattoo and the curves of lush breasts. The swaths of fabric tie around her neck, leaving the soft skin

of her shoulders bare. The rest of the dress skims her body, a large slit runs up the front, and as she walks to me, I see the length of the legs I've felt wrapped around me.

My fangs ache to descend and sink into the skin, leaving my mark so everyone knows she's mine. The desire to claim her, to mate her, to spend weeks fucking her until I've left my mark on every part of her body roars in my blood until I can think of nothing else. I don't snap out of my trance until her hands slide up my chest.

Vynia disappeared while I was stuck in my possessive haze. I've never been as close to blurting out the truth: that she's my mate.

Mine.

My. Fucking. Mate.

As her hands wind around my neck and she pulls my head down to her for a kiss, my hands slide up her sides. It's only then that I realize the sides of her breasts are even more exposed than the center of her chest. I slide my thumbs along the supple curve and under the thin fabric until I feel her nipples pebble beneath my attention.

"Oh." She practically purrs against me. "Don't start something you can't finish."

"I'll finish any male who looks at you tonight."

She tosses her head back and laughs. "I'm sure they won't give me a passing glance. Did you see Vynia?"

"I've seen her every day of her life. She's beautiful, but you?" I say with a shake of my head. "Your beauty is otherworldly. Every male in your vicinity will wonder if your skin is as soft as it looks. If your breasts will feel as heavenly in their palms as

they look.”

She lifts onto her toes, but I still have to bend to put us eye level. “Good thing you’re the only one who will ever know the answer,” she whispers against my lips.

My chest thrums, deep and low and possessive as I crash our mouths together. I gather the soft roots of her hair in my fist and pull, angling her head so I can kiss her so deeply I consume her. Her nails sink into the hair at the nape of my neck and scratch against my scalp, like she’s trying to leave her own mark on me.

She doesn’t need to worry about that. As far as I’m concerned, no other female even exists. She’s the only one I want. Even if she looked at me and told me she wanted to go back to Oculus Nine, I’d go with her. I’d orbit her life from afar. I’ll never touch, never notice, another woman for as long as I live.

Vynia clears her throat from behind us. “I don’t mean to interrupt, but Altis is here with a transport. We should leave if we’re going to make it in time for the rite.”

With a will stronger than any I’ve ever known, I drop my hands from her hair and take a step back. “Where’s your cloak?”

Vynia hands her one the same color as her dress and is lined with fur. I watch as Neev drapes it around her shoulders and pulls her hair loose. She struggles with the clip at the top.

“You’re not to take this off tonight.” I clip the two sides of the cloak together for her.

“Why not? What if I get hot?” She raises a slim brow.

“You won’t, the Sovereign keeps his ship icy cold. But that’s not why you need to keep this on. It’s so I don’t go on murdering spree against any male stupid enough to

look too closely at what's mine."

Her lips lift slowly into a smile. "And what if any females look too closely at what's mine?"

"You don't need to worry about that. As far as I'm concerned, no other female exists."

"Good."

My cock thickens at the look of possession in her eyes. For the millionth time the temptation of telling her about our mate bond bubbles up so close to the surface. I feel Vynia's eyes on me expectantly, and it pulls me back from the edge, much to her irritation. My friends have come to care as deeply for Neev as they do me. I see it when they watch us together, when they interact with her. Truthfully, Vynia might like her more than me at this point.

"Ready?" Hyva asks from the doorway.

When I turn I'm ready to beat him if he looks at Neev wrong, but I find his eyes locked on Vynia. In fact, it feels as though he can't take his eyes off her. I watch as they do a sweep from her face, down her body, to the crutches aiding her and back up to her eyes.

"You can quit staring," Vynia says with a hint of venom.

"My apologies." He smirks, a foreign glint in his eye. "I forgot that you can look like a proper female from time to time."

"Watch yourself, doctor. I'd hate for one of my crutches to slip and bruise that pretty face of yours."

“You think I’m pretty?” His smile widens wickedly.

“Not particularly. I prefer a more rugged look on my males, but you don’t seem to lack in female company. They must see something in you.”

I look at Neev, who watches the bantering in fascination. I’m used to their back and forth vitriol. It’s been going on since we were kids, though today seems a bit more pointed than usual, even as it continues as they walk into the hall.

“Do you think Hyva knows her crutches hide two blades? He might not want to antagonize her like that.”

“He knows. He made those especially for her. They’re full of little surprises she could use to defend herself.”

She smiles. “Do you think they know they’re in love with each other?”

“What?” I couldn’t be more surprised if she ran me through with my own sword.

“The flirting?”

We walk down the hall, far enough behind the two bickering back and forth in front of us that they won’t overhear.

“That’s not flirting,” I say. “They’ve been like this since we were kids.”

“And?” She laughs. “It’s funny that I can see it, but you can’t.”

I truly don’t think there’s anything there, but I’m going to keep an eye on it. I’m not sure what Altis would think of his sister and one of his best friends becoming involved. Especially when that friend happens to have a long history with females.

Altis sits in the pilot's seat of the transport as we board. "Took you long enough." He begins flipping switches as the doors whoosh closed behind me.

Vynia takes the seat next to him, probably ready to take over the task of flying, but he shakes his head, telling her to just relax. We all know how she feels about watching the Bak'hura and how she always has to subjugate herself while we're allowed to walk in wearing all of our military decorations.

I take a seat next to Neev while Hyva drops down across from us. The slit in Neev's dress parts high up on her thigh, and I notice a strap wrapped around it. She notices my gaze and parts the slit further, showing a small blade strapped high on her leg.

"Vynia gave it to me just in case."

I meet the gaze of my pilot over Neev's head and incline my head in thanks. I've been too distracted thinking about other males just looking and lusting over her to think about her physical safety beyond that threat. Not that she'll ever be without one of us by her side tonight.

Hyva settles back into the seat. He looks relaxed, but I know he's anything but. Having been born without a twin, he was spared from the brutality of the blood rite, but he's been forced to watch it unfold. Having chosen medicine and dedicating his life to healing, this is torturous for him to watch.

Only barbarians treat the Bak'hura as a spectator sport. Unfortunately, that's who we'll be surrounded by this evening. Not only that, I'll have to help Neev navigate the layers of society and meet other Lords tonight on top of witnessing the brutality of the rite.

She must be feeling the pressure because she slides our palms together and interlocks our fingers in the way she likes to do. It's a human form of connection and affection

she told me. It does bring a certain level of warmth to my body as she smiles up at me. I lift her hand and kiss the smooth skin of her knuckles.

“Oh, you’re grotesquely cute.” Hyva rolls his eyes dramatically. “Stop that before I get sick.”

I do it again, giving him a lighthearted smirk. This is what we need to ease tension hanging around our shoulders like a noose. At least we’re together for this.

CHAPTER 32

RAIZ

* * *

As Altis slows the transport, I look out into the docking bay, taking in which Lord's ships are here already. Most of them used their private vessels. I'm the only one who is an active member of the military at the moment. I'm also the youngest by a good twenty-five rotations.

Both factors lead to me being a deeply unpopular Lord among my peers. My hatred for all our rites and rituals doesn't help either. I've never been accepting of the status quo, a trait that's served me well in my military career at the very least.

"Are you okay?" Neev asks me, slipping her hand in mine and squeezing.

"I'm fine." I keep her hand in mine. "You have to stay close, preferably to me but, if not, Hyva or Altis."

"What about Vynia?"

"Altis is her chaperone."

Neev's gaze swings toward Vynia, who just rolls her eyes. "I know. Archaic rules."

"Do not speak to another male unless one of the three of us is with you. In fact, try to

avoid eye contact with anyone to begin with.”

The doors slide open, and the ramp extends.

“Do you understand?” I know I’m being over the top, but it is really important that she not bring attention to herself.

“Yes.” She drops my hand. “I’ll stay glued to your sides and only interact when you introduce me to someone.”

My muscles relax slightly. Altis and Vynia are the first to exit the transport. Followed by Neev who is sandwiched between Hyva and myself. We come upon the first checkpoint and wait for the guard to check his tablet for our name. Once we’re given clearance, we flow into the line leading to the pit.

Hushed voices carry down the red-lit corridor. I can smell all the emotions swirling in the air. Fear, excitement, but most of all bloodlust. Zeahirian’s love watching a good, vicious fight to the death, and that’s what is on the menu today.

The stench of blood, sweat, and piss assault my nose as we enter into the arena known as the pit. A large sand floor sits in the center of the room with rows of seating on all sides. Each successive row rises, so no one has an obstructed view of the horror we’re about to witness.

“Lord Aste,” a deep voice from the row behind me calls.

Fuck.

I turn to see Lord Salx standing alongside his daughter. This is the worst-case scenario. Had I known they would be seated behind us, I would have given Neev a heads up.

“Lord Salx.” I incline my head. “Lady Salx.”

“Don’t be ridiculous, it’s all but official that you’ll be wed by this time next rotation. Call her Bex.”

“It’s not what it sounds like,” I implore into Neev’s mind.

She doesn’t respond, just stands still as a statue staring forward while I glance at her out of the corner of my eye.

“You didn’t tell her?” Hyva questions. “I can’t believe you.”

“I was never planning on marrying Bex Salx. It didn’t even occur to me to mention it.”

Hyva slips his hand around Neev’s back and leans down to whisper in her ear. Before I know it, he’s traded places with her. She’s now between him and Vynia. Entirely too far away for my liking.

“I can’t wait for my visit to your estate on the coast. When is your next leave?” Bex asks. She does a double take when Neev drops her hood and pulls all her beautiful dark hair free. “Oh my, who is this?”

“The newest member of my crew. She’s a linguist and gifted translator.”

Waves of icy anger ripple off Neev. The corners of her eyes have tightened, and her lips press to a straight line. Her fury does nothing to dull her beauty, in fact, she’s more beautiful than ever while she stands there frozen in a jealous rage.

“Oh.” Bex deflates a little. “I thought perhaps she was an engagement gift for me. I love collecting exotic servants.”

Hyva hides a laugh by pretending to cough.

“There are no servants in House Aste,” I say sternly.

She has the good sense to pale at the anger in my voice. Luckily, before any of us have to endure any more of her idiocy, the Sovereign’s spokesman walks out into the pit and the arena falls silent.

He introduces the twins who will be dueling. As he reminds them of the rules, I hear the wail of who I assume to be their mother. This happens more often than not. The two males look even younger than the last who fought.

Both of them have red-rimmed eyes as they step out into the center of the pit. The lights around us dim, highlighting the fight that’s about to occur. They circle each other, each one scanning the other for weaknesses.

The crowd tenses, hungry for the violence that fuels our society. Males in the front row grow tired of the boys not throwing punches, so they begin to beat their chests in time. Chanting a fight song passed down through millennia and calling for violence.

My stomach churns. They did the same thing when I fought my brother. I had him pinned but didn’t want to finish him. It took him saying the world would never become better than this if he had his way. That he’d fight to keep the barbaric rite exactly how it is. I used to think he was being honest, but sometimes I wonder if maybe he just didn’t want to win. That he knew I couldn’t kill him unless he pushed me.

So he did.

Because if it wasn’t one of us who would be killed, it would be both of us.

Shocked whispers erupt in the stands as both boys drop to their knees facing each other. Terror bleeds from their eyes as their still undeveloped chests heave. They won't hurt each other, so they'll die together.

The Sovereign's slayer walks out into the pit, his scythe resting over his shoulder. The mother's wailing echoes off the walls as he lifts his weapon and beheads the boy closest to him in one powerful swipe. He walks to the next and does the same thing.

I glance at Altis and Hyva, who nod in agreement. In seconds violence will erupt all around us. The bloodlust of those who gathered to watch the Bak'hura has not been sated. All that swirling violence and brutality has no outlet. It's why we come armed, on the off chance that the twins will refuse to fight and instead choose death.

The wailing mother runs into the pit and drops into the blood-soaked sand. She grabs both heads of her children and falls into a weeping heap. The father is nowhere to be seen; he likely ran off in shame as soon as the first child was slain.

Neev watches it all unfold in stunned, frozen, silence. A fight breaks out on the other side of the arena, and Hyva immediately bends and throws the nearly comatose Neev over his shoulder. Altis rushes down the aisle, making a path for Vynia on her crutches.

I block a punch meant for Hyva as someone else reaches for Neev. Vynia pulls out a knife and throws it at the male reaching for Neev. It hits its intended target right in the eye. This is why she has the position in my trusted circle.

"Don't you dare set her down," I tell Hyva. We're out of the arena but won't be safe until we're out on our transport on the way back to the ship.

"I've got her," he reassures me even as she struggles to be set down.

“Let him get you to safety,” I tell her.

“Get the fuck out of my head,” she snarls at me, lifting her body enough to glare at me.

“ You’re so fucked,” Hyva chuckles in my mind.

I don’t reply to him. Once we’re on board and speeding off through space, I’ll explain everything.

The four of us run as fast as we can, which with Vynia on crutches isn’t as fast as we could be.

Altis runs to release the ramp, and as soon as it’s down, Vynia rushes up to take the captain's seat. She can fly us out of here quicker than her brother. Hyva follows, then Altis and I. Hyva sets Neev down, and she takes a seat quietly shrinking into the far corner. He gives her a long, examining look before pulling out Vynia’s prosthetic leg and sitting down next to her to attach it while she fires up the engine.

I crouch down in front of Neev, my hand resting on her exposed thigh. She stares over my shoulder, refusing to meet my eyes, but she does pull her leg away from my touch. I can’t tell if she’s in shock from witnessing the execution of the two young males or if she’s just so angry at me.

It’s probably both.

“I need you to look at me, so I can make sure you’re okay,” I plead quietly. “Please.”

She blinks a few times and then slowly turns her gaze to mine. What I see there is nothing. Her eyes are dead. She’s pulled her emotions so far inside herself I’m not sure they’ll ever resurface, at least not in my vicinity. I’d take hatred and anger over

this nothingness.

“I’m not, and was never, planning on entering any kind of arrangement with any female on Zeahiri.”

“Lady Salx seemed to be under a different impression.”

“She’s delusional, and her father was referencing an arrangement he made with my father before I was even born. As my father is dead, and I hold the title of Lord Aste, I make my own choices.”

She looks away from me, and it cuts my chest open. If I didn’t know it before, I certainly would now. Neev Kaesong is my mate. My love. My future.

“Please don’t shut me out,” I cup her face and turn her head until our eyes lock. The lone tear that rolls down her cheek guts me. “I’m sorry for not warning you.”

“Okay.” She looks away from me, still withdrawn.

“We’re not done talking about what you just witnessed. Are you alright?”

Her eyes flash as she looks at me. At least there’s still life in them. “Are you serious? Am I alright? With watching two brothers be executed in front of their mother? Being nearly swallowed into a mob of violent, bloodthirsty brutes? No. No, I’m not alright.”

“This is what we’re trying to change.”

“How? Now that the books have been burned? Where can we go? How can we change the traditions of brutality that are so ingrained in your society?”

“I’m not sure yet but?—”

“Commander?” Mydax’s voice crackles through the speakers. “We have a problem.”

Fuck.

“What kind of problem?” I immediately stand and walk behind Vynia’s chair, so I’m closer to the controls.

“The Order is here, and they want Neev.”

Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 2:42 pm

My heart drops as I hear the news over the comms system. They came for me. I'm not surprised, but I am sad. This forces me into making a decision at the worst possible time. I believe Raiz that he had no plans to be with that female.

I still trust him.

It just hurt. It hurt so much more than I was expecting. It felt like getting stabbed and then having the knife twisted.

Despite feeling like I've known him my entire life, we only just met. Today just served as a wakeup call to not give myself away so easily. Maybe it's a sign that I should think a little more carefully about what I'm doing instead of jumping straight into things.

Hyva sits down next to me, his shoulder brushing mine and giving me just a little bit of grounding support. He doesn't ask me any questions, he just stays with me while Raiz picks up a headset and speaks quietly into it. I'm sure he's giving instructions to Mydax.

"Did you guys think they'd come for me?" I ask Hyva.

"They'd be stupid not to come for you. Honestly, it took them longer than I thought it would."

"You guys did kidnap me from my bed."

"That we did. Well, I didn't encourage the idea. It goes against my oath as a doctor."

We fall into a comfortable silence. I wonder who came to retrieve me. Am I going to go back with them? I could just walk away. After the horrifying experience of the Bak'hura, I don't think anyone would blame me.

"How long until we reach the ship?" I ask.

"Forty-seven minutes," Altis answers.

"Forty-seven minutes to decide your future," Hyva says quietly. "Tick tock."

"Stars, Hyva." I ram my shoulder into his. "But you're not wrong."

I want to stay. I look over at Raiz and wonder if I could actually leave him. Just the thought guts me.

But then maybe that's why I should leave. I can't go from the structure of the Order to jumping into the arms of the first male that shows interest, right? Even if it feels better than anything I've experienced.

Not that I want to return to my life on Oculus Nine. I know that for a fact. Having seen a tiny slice of the galaxy outside the glass walls I was raised within, I know I want more. I want to explore, meet people, see new things. I won't do that locked away in my library office on the Eye.

Raiz sets the headset down and clenches his jaw. I watch as he paces back and forth several times, both hands raking through his hair as he closes his eyes. He finally stops and crosses to me, kneeling in front of me and placing his hands over my thighs.

"Leave," he orders Hyva, who gets up and walks to speak with the twins, giving Raiz and I some semblance of privacy. "The choice is yours. They're going to want to take you back, but you don't have to go. You can stay with us. We can take you

somewhere else, anywhere you want to go. I have enough credits to get you set up anywhere in the galaxy. I'll give you anything you want or need."

"Why?"

"Because I want you to be happy."

"What do you want me to do? If I gave you the decision?"

"If it was up to me? You'd never leave my side. We'd spend the rest of our lives together."

"What if I don't want to be Lady Aste?"

"Then I'd walk away and leave it to my cousin."

Stars, I wasn't expecting that answer. "Why?"

"Because you're mine."

He stands and leaves me to spiral. Which I do.

As Vynia pulls into the loading bay of Raiz's ship, I don't see one of the Order's cruisers. Instead, I see a large freighter. It carries deep marks in the hull from what I can only assume are battles with pirates. Our galaxy is generally peaceful as far as interplanetary space goes.

Mydax is standing in front of a small group of the Order's security team. Two Zeahiri security officers flank him. No one has weapons out, but the atmosphere seems tense.

A flash of gold streaks around the Zeahirian crew, and my breath is knocked free of my lungs when I feel Torre wrap herself around me. My arms embrace her back just

as hard. It feels so good to have my best friend back in my arms. My eyes turn glassy as I look up and meet Raiz's gaze over her shoulder.

"Torre, this is?—"

She drags me away from Raiz and pulls me behind her back protectively. "Stay away from her." She lifts a blaster, clicking off the safety.

The space echoes with the shuffle of weapons being drawn, and when I look around, I see everyone has their weapon trained on someone else. All except for Raiz who just stares at me.

I put my hand over Torre's arm and push it down. "Stop. They haven't hurt me. It's okay."

She narrows her eyes. "They kidnapped you."

"Only because they needed my help."

"Your help for what? Reading a book?"

Her dismissive tone stings, and I take a step away from her. One of the reasons she and I would never work romantically is her tendency to not take my work seriously. She never saw a use in learning so many languages when universal translators exist.

"Watch how you speak to her, female," Raiz growls, stepping toward me.

Torre lifts her blaster again. "Get the fuck away from her. Now."

"How about we all calm down?" A male voice says, stepping out from behind the freighter.

I do a double take at the human male. Maybe it's because I've only seen one other in real life, but he looks so much like the male I saw back on the pleasure planet in the bar. He walks over toward us with both hands up. As he comes closer I see that the holster he wears on his hip is empty. Finally, someone with some damn sense.

He comes to a stop in front of us, and he's taller than I expected a human male to be. Not as tall as Raiz, obviously, but only an inch or two shorter than Hyva. His hair is a sandy brown color with streaks of gray. Deep lines crinkle from the corners of his dark blue eyes. He looks friendly. Almost familiar in the oddest way.

"Everyone put your weapons away. There's just been a misunderstanding, Neev is fine and has been well taken care of onboard my ship." Raiz holds his hand out for me, and I take it with no hesitation.

We link our fingers, and I dart a look at Torre, who looks like I just punched her. "Apparently she's been so well taken care of that she's forgotten who she is," Torre snarls the words. "What are you thinking Neev? This isn't like you."

"I just trust him. I trust them all. They've helped me learn things." Raiz squeezes my fingers.

"Like how to suck a cock apparently," Torre says under breath.

"Torre." One of her commanding officers steps forward and pulls her back. "Speak like that again, and you'll lose your rank faster than you can blink."

She doesn't care; I can see the glint of recklessness in her eyes as she steps toward us again. But instead of speaking to me, she turns to the human male. "Are you just going to let this go on without telling her? After everything you've done to keep her safe?"

Everyone's head swivels to the male who glowers at Torre.

“Who are you?” Raiz asks.

“Captain Timothy Sanders,” he answers Raiz before turning to me. “But you can call me Dad.”