



OUTCASTS OF CORIN SERIES

# THE ALIEN'S SURRENDER

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

ELLA MAVEN

# THE ALIEN'S SURRENDER

---

OUTCASTS OF CORIN

ELLA MAVEN

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

Copyright © 2022 by Ella Maven

All rights reserved, including the right to reproduce, distribute, or transmit in any form or by any means.

Copyedited by Del's Diabolical Editing  
Cover design by Natasha Snow Designs

First Edition: April 2022

# CONTENTS

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Also by Ella Maven](#)

# ONE

*VINZ*

Chewing on a stalk of sweet grass, I lounged in the crook of a tree high above the ground watching the four-legged creatures below sniff around. They got a whiff of me but couldn't figure out where I was. Maybe because they didn't have eyes—just round skulls with large oval ears, nostrils the size of my fist, and a lip-less mouth full of crooked teeth. Hunch backed and hairy, they stalked among the vegetation on silent bony paws. Every once in a while, one would stop and sit up on its haunches with its nose in the air.

I crossed my arms over my chest. My hunch that we had way bigger problems on this planet than those ugly Wutark flecks was right. In fact, I was starting to think the Wutarks were a diversion. I couldn't understand why they were so adamant about their borders. What did it matter if we shared the plentiful game and resources of Corin? But now, as I watched the handlers of the nose hounds approach, it all began to make sense. The Wutarks were merely an obstacle meant to stop us from searching this planet further.

Because here, far past the Wutark border that I promised never to cross, was an enemy who looked ready for war.

I'd never seen them before, and I had no idea what they called themselves. One stopped at the base of my tree, and I craned my neck to get a better look. Standing as tall as me on two stocky legs,

he fiddled with the collar on his nose hound with two lower arms, while his upper arms were rounded with muscles at the shoulder and ended in wide bony plates tipped with talons. He wore a type of chain armor over a thick leathery skin a deep red color. His skull was shaped like an upside-down triangle, with the two wide points tapering into horns wider than his broad shoulders. His entire face was flat as a board except for bulging oval eyes. Coiled at their waists were long translucent whips that glowed a putrid green.

I wasn't winning any beauty contests, but these flat-nosed flecks were hideous. Their language sounded like antella meat roasting on a fire—sizzling and hissing as they called to each other.

I'd lied to Kutzal, my drexel, when I told him here was a border breach. There was no such thing. But a buzz at the back of my neck wouldn't let up and I couldn't sit in camp another day. I didn't always listen to my intuition, but it was rarely wrong. My search led me here, and while I was in the mood to making something bleed—and shed a little of my own blood—I had to stay alive long enough to report to Kutzal.

We'd have to find their camp and get a sense of how large this settlement was. Were we talking a few fringe warriors? A familial camp? Or an entire flecking army?

"Corin really went to fleck since we left," I murmured to myself.

The nose hound below reacted to my voice, its head lifting into the air while its snout bobbed to scent the breeze.

I sneered at it and stayed still, my least favorite position. I liked to be *doing*. Lukent was the observing type, but he was probably busy pining for his little human now. I rolled my eyes remembering how infatuated he was with her. But surely she was in our capital Granit now, and the head drexel of the Drixonians was likely parading a bunch of proper warriors in front of her as possible mates. My lip curled as I imagined Lukent's pain. Maybe after this was over, I'd go steal her for him. Would I get in trouble? Absolutely. Did I care? No, because my goal in life was to make things interesting. Boredom was my least favorite activity, which was why sitting in this flecking tree was making my scales itch.

Our creed, *She Is All*, was the only reason I gave a fleck about the human females who had been abducted and brought to our

galaxy. And the only reason I cared about the creed was because it meant so much to my fellow warriors who were like brothers, like Lukent and Kutzal. When I searched deep in my sola for an actual fleck about the females, I couldn't find one. None of them really interested me, although I did love teasing Lukent about his obvious care for Tasha.

If our creed was *Trees Are All*, then I would have put my life on the line for some flecking trees if that was what my brothers wanted. Other than that, my duty gave me a purpose, and I'd fulfill that purpose while I was still alive. In fact, the duty for my brothers was truly the only thing keeping me from jumping off a cliff into the freshas.

A threat to our human females was a threat to my brothers, and that was why I would always be willing to put myself on the front line.

Eventually the flat-faced guards and their nose hounds retreated, but I didn't dare move until the sun was setting and I hadn't seen movement for what felt like half a day.

I dropped down to the ground, landing in a nearly soundless crouch before rising to my feet. The dense foliage prevented me from seeing where the strangers had gone. More than anything, I wanted to chase them down, but I could hear Kutzal's voice in my head, telling me to head home.

Sighing and pushing aside the itch to fight, I turned on my heel to return to camp. I'd taken one step when my eye caught on movement. Stopping, I stared at a long lock of hair that was snagged on a tree branch and now swaying in the slight breeze. It wasn't like my straight, black hair, and the strangers I'd seen were hairless.

I reached out and touched the soft strands. Curly and the color of gold, the locks slipped through my fingers like a warm breath. I sucked in a breath as my chest hollowed out and my cora pounded loudly in my ears.

This hair wasn't of this planet.

Freeing the hair from the branch, I clutched the strands in my palm. Somewhere out there was the owner of this hair. I wasn't sure about many things in my life. But I was sure of two things—I wouldn't live long, and before I died, I had to find who this hair belonged to.



Taking the gold hair, I wove it into a braid at the nape of my neck so it would be hidden under my mass of dark hair. Then, ignoring Kutzal's voice in my head, I set off in the direction the flat-faced strangers had gone. There was no explanation for this hair to be there. They had to have something to do with it. Were they protecting their females? Something else?

I walked until the sun set and my eyes adjusted to the darkness. It was then I saw the flickering of lights ahead, casting shadows off a large crude structure. Careful of the nose hounds, I scaled a tree to get a better look.

Standing tall, surrounded by a deep ditch, was a gated fortress. Flat-faced guards walked a pathway at the top of a wall, and a few nose hounds lounged near the gate chewing loudly on meaty carcasses.

I didn't linger long there and began to make my way around the perimeter of the fortress on foot. The walls were as high as the three-story buildings in Granit and made of a thick dense stone. Around the back was a larger tower with a few barred windows. There, I climbed another tree, placing me nearly eye-level with the lowest window.

I waited, never taking my eyes off the window as it was my only look into the fortress. A few times, I caught a flat-faced guard looking out, but I was hidden, camouflaged by the blue foliage around me. Legs cramping in my crouched position, head aching from concentrating, I was contemplating taking a nap and waiting until morning when a new face entered the window. Pale skin, small nose, and big round eyes all framed in a mass of golden curls.

A human female.

My world spun. Bark splintered under my claws as I dug them into the tree in an effort to keep myself still. Within this fortress, these flat-faced flecks had a human female, the owner of the golden curls woven into my own hair. She blinked slowly, tilting her face toward the light of the moon. I stared at the soft curve of her jaw and the line of her pale neck, only marred by a metal collar that reddened her skin.

A loud voice barked, and the face paled before disappearing in the blink of an eye. I remained poised in the same spot, gaze on the

window, never leaving my post. But the human never returned.

Barred inside this crude structure, guarded by the flat-faced warriors and their nose hounds, the female was a collared prisoner.

I ignored Kutzal's voice in my head telling me to return home. What was the fun in that? This was what we did, after all, put our lives on the line for females. And, frankly, I was really curious about this fortress. I told myself that was what this was about, not my interest in the human with the golden hair. She was like all the other females, an untouchable flower behind a glass vase that I never got to touch but had to protect with bloodshed.

I spent the rest of the night studying the entire perimeter of the structure for a way inside, but the entire place was an impenetrable stone wall. The only way in was the front gate. And the only way to get into the front gate... was to be taken in. I hid my axe weapon in a spot outside the walls, so no flecking way would I let it be taken. Cracking my neck and rolling my shoulders, I made my way toward the front gates.

---

### *Amber*

The Joktal dropped an additional bowl of gruel on my tray with a clatter. When he spoke, his rancid breath ignited my gag reflex. "New captive in last cell on the left."

I glanced at the furred loris ladling the gruel into bowls. When we made eye contact, she made a discreet flicking motion beneath her chin that I'd learned meant to be wary. I gritted my teeth. The last time they'd told me they had a new captive, I'd nearly gotten my hand bitten off.

I, along with about a dozen loris, were all captives too. But we'd been deemed harmless and easy labor, so we were put to work rather than left to rot in a cell. Gripping the tray, I followed a Joktal guard named Heego down a narrow hallway until we reached the tower stairs. There, I snatched a precious moment to shuffle to the

barred window and peered outside. Inhaling deeply, I listened to the breeze rustle the trees just outside the fortress walls. I exhaled and rounded my lips, blowing out a puff of air.

Somewhere, I imagined my friend Tasha catching my scent and running to rescue me. An absolute pipe dream, I knew, but it didn't stop me from trying every chance I could get. I fingered a spot on the back of my head where new hair had started growing. Somewhere out there, a clump of my hair fluttered off a tree branch. Just another clue I'd tried to leave behind for someone. Anyone.

I wasn't sure how long I'd been here. I tried to make marks on the wall, but Heego had scratched over them just to be a dick. I estimated about a week, even though it felt like a year. I still wore the clothes I'd arrived in—the leather pants Neve had sewed with her own hands, and the shirt left over from my former captors. It was thanks to them that I had a translator implant behind my ear. The Joktals had seen it upon my arrival and quickly updated their language onto it. I resented that I understood their commands.

“Move!” Heego barked at me.

I hated all the Joktal, but Heego had a special place of resentment in my heart. Taking one last look outside, I scurried down the stairs with two of the loris, Yua and Yoa, on my heels. The loris were all around three to five feet and covered in a soft blue and cream striped fur. With eyes like flies, they cleaned them with a cluster of antennae on their foreheads. They walked silently on soft paw pads and only spoke in gestures along with some occasional mews of distress or titters of laughter.

I hadn't been able to learn their full language yet, just a few gestures here and there, so I didn't know their story or how they came to be here. However, they were kind to me, and treated me well, making sure I ate and even let me cuddle with them in our large empty sleeping chamber, as their furry bodies were better than any blanket.

At the bottom of the stairs, Heego unlocked the door leading to the cells and shoved me through. I nearly dropped the tray and would have turned to glare at him, but last time I did that, I'd earned a split lip so instead I clenched my jaw and righted the tray without spilling a drop. A furred paw landed on the small of my back, and I

turned to find Yua scrunching her nose like a rabbit and puffing out air from her nostrils. The action was their form of comfort, and while it'd been alarming at first, I now found it appealing. I smiled at her, and she wiggled her pointed ears on the top of her head.

“Quick.” Heego leaned against the wall and crossed his thick arms over his chest.

Right. I started down the hallway with barred cells on either side. A small door at the bottom of each one opened, and that was where I placed the gruel while collecting the bowls from the previous day.

Some of the captives scuttled forward immediately to take their daily ration, while others remained huddled in the corner of their cell, the previous day's food uneaten. Yuo and Yua walked with me, helping to gather yesterday's bowls. The captives were a mix of species I'd never seen before, not that I had much experience in this galaxy. I'd lived years in an underground lab being poked and prodded as an experiment before escaping with a few fellow human females to this planet.

Just the thought of my friends had me nearly doubling over, as the grief over losing them was an acute, physical pain. I hadn't even felt that way when I'd been taken from Earth, but the bond I'd formed with loyal Tasha, fierce Trix, the bratty Lu and Maisie, and the quiet, stoic Neve was unlike anything I'd ever had before in my life. I'd been content to live out the rest of my days with them on this planet. We'd really had what felt like the beginning of a comfortable life just within our grasp. The settlement we'd found had been quiet with enough game to sustain us, and it'd been safe—or so we thought. Until we'd been attacked in the middle of the night by some warthog alien assholes and separated. I was the only one taken here, at least as far as I knew. Within this fortress, I'd been confined only to this tower, working to clean, cook for the Joktal, and take care of their prisoners.

I reached the last prisoner—at least, the last prisoner as of yesterday, but there was still one last cell at the end of the hallway. I glanced back at Heego, and he pointed to it. “Keep going.”

I blew out a breath and glanced at Yua and Yuo. They both rubbed the antenna over their large eyes and stared back silently. “Okay,” I murmured. “Let's do this.”

I took careful steps, the loris right behind me, to the last cell. Keeping my distance from the bars, I stopped and peered inside. Farthest away from the flickering torches on the wall, this was the darkest cell, and for a moment, I thought it was empty. But then a very slight movement caught my eye in the back corner of the cell. A large body lay on its side, back to us, ribs rising and falling with deep breaths.

I took a bowl off the tray and settled it on the ground as silently as I could. The edge caught on the corner of the bar with a clang, and I froze in a crouch at the sharp sound.

The body twitched and then stilled. Letting out a relieved breath, I slowly removed my hand from the edge of the bowl. As I made to rise, the body suddenly lurched to its feet and whirled around in a massive cloud of dark hair and mottled skin. I let out a shriek, falling back on my ass as the body surged forward. The tray slammed to the ground and the bowls hit the stone with a bang. Two five-fingered hands tipped with sharp black claws gripped the bars and then a blue face appeared between, punctuated by glowing violet eyes.

He'd been beat to shit, which was no surprise. One eye was nearly swollen shut, black blood dripped from his temple, and his lips were split in about three places.

I stared up at the alien as the loris scuffled behind me with alarmed squealing. He ignored them, only watching me, and I swallowed as his massive black pupils seemed to dilate to nearly obliterate the purple. His skin was covered in mottled blue and black scales, kind of like a snakeskin, and he had a large silver piercing through the septum of his nose. He was the most human-like alien I'd seen on this planet, but he still was very much *not* human.

The longer his gaze lingered, the more I found it hard to breathe. My skin broke out in goosebumps, and my entire scalp tingled.

He rasped out one word in a low, growly timbre. "*Glichko.*"

I swallowed as my stomach knotted. I didn't know what he meant, but there was something there... something sentient and aware in his eyes that didn't exist in any other of the captives here, not even in the loris.

Suddenly a hand gripped my neck and hauled me to my feet. Heego's breath flooded my nostrils just as he flung out his whip and

cracked it. Charged with a current, the coil sizzled in the air.

“You’re lucky she didn’t drop your bowl or you wouldn’t get another one, Drixonian,” he snapped.

The blue alien drew back his full lips, causing a few drops of blood to leak out of a cut, and snapped his fanged teeth at Heego.

Heego sneered. “You like this one?” He shook me so hard my teeth rattled, and to my shame, a whimper escaped.

The blue alien—a Drixonian—leered and lashed out a long tongue studded with three ball piercings down the middle. He spat out a few words in my direction which sounded insulting, threatening, and disgusted. A shiver ran down my spine at his tone.

“Ah, so only for your own females, then, huh? Too bad they’re all dead.” Heego let out his throaty chuckle, which was nothing short of terrifying.

The Drixonian’s eyes flashed a bright neon purple before he slammed a fist into the bars so hard, I swore they’d bend. I jerked at the sound, half expecting him to come crashing through like the Kool-Aid man, but the metal bars held.

Heego dropped me, and I hit the ground on my knees, hard. His foot slammed into my thigh, and I bit down on my tongue so hard, I drew blood. “Clean this up,” he ordered before sauntering away.

The loris dropped down beside me, and we scrambled to grab the bowls, some of which had rolled away. When all the bowls were on the tray, I rose to my feet, favoring my left thigh where Heego had kicked. Feeling eyes on me, I risked one last glance into the Drixonian’s cage.

He was standing at the back on two feet wearing only a pair of ratty pants with his hands fisted at his sides. His muscled chest heaved, and his thick neck bulged with veins. And again, those nearly black eyes were on me, no longer filled with disgust or anger. If anything, he looked...anguished.

Yua placed her paw on my arm, and I shook my head and broke our stare. Walking back down the hallway on unsteady legs, it took everything in me not to run back to that cell and try to puzzle out this mysterious Drixonian.

## TWO

*VINZ*

I'd found her. I could barely believe my luck. I'd expected to have to endure a lot more beatings from the Joktal before I found a way to get free and search this tower for her, but she was here.

I'd been so shocked to see her that I'd scared the fleck out of her, but that was good. I couldn't let Heego know I favored her, because then he'd certainly use her against me. And really, she should be scared of me. I wasn't gentle Lukent or authoritative Kutzal or even-keeled Axton. My moods were unpredictable, my tongue sharp, and I didn't know how to be anything other than aggressive.

I watched her walk away until she was out of sight. Only then did I realize I had my face pressed against the bars of my cell painfully trying to get one last glimpse of her. I growled to myself and retreated to the back of my cell with the bowl of gruel. It tasted like nothing but was surprisingly filling. I had no idea what it was made of, but I was sure I'd eaten worse.

I'd been a baby when my father deserted the Drixonian army, sealing my fate with a lifetime of suffering. Back when we'd lived on Corin in a thriving society, punishment for desertion lasted a generation. I was considered a son of naught. Nothing. No one. The bloodline had to end with me. My mother couldn't take the shame and ended her own life, leaving a squawking chit Vinz alone.

So yeah, I'd eaten absolutely shet in my life, and it'd only gotten worse when our females died, society crumbled, and we began working for the Uldani. As a son of naught, I didn't get a cushy assignment as a bodyguard for the children of the Uldani elite. Only my Kutzal, Lukent, Axton, and a few other sons of naught knew what I'd been put through, and I preferred to keep it that way. It was in the past, and it was my business.

Now we were back on Corin after defeating the Uldani and trying to rebuild our society. But the only females were the abducted human females we'd saved. They all lived at Granit with proper Drixonian mates—proper warriors who'd trained and were raised to be the future of society.

Not like me.

The human's face came to mind—big eyes and pale skin and that curly hair. I hadn't seen many females with that color of hair, but then they tended to keep me away from the humans.

Heego had kicked her, and she's barely flinched, which led me to believe it wasn't the first time he'd struck her. But why was she here? And was she the only female? Tasha had said there had been a total of six of them, but so far I had only seen the one with golden hair.

The pain of the beatings subsided as my brain mulled over my situation. The good news? This was sure as fleck not boring. Well, being locked up sucked, but the Joktal gave me enough attention—sure it was painful, but whatever—and got me out of the cell enough that I had a chance to look around. We were in the tallest tower of the fortress, and when they questioned me, I was taken to a room they called the locker. It wasn't exciting—just a chair and some chains. Their questions were telling, though.

*Why are you in our borders? Who knows you're here? How many warriors strong is your army?*

They also wanted specific locations of the Drixonian camps. Like fleck I was going to tell them anything. And the more I avoided their questions and laughed at their frustration, the more fun the beatings got. I had to admit their bony plated hands were some massive weapons. I would have to talk to our weapon-makers about recreating something like that.



I didn't let myself think I'd die here. I knew I'd die eventually, and likely soon, but it wasn't going to be here. Not me, not Vinz Naught. I had to die in some grand way where I sacrificed myself for my brothers. Not a female. A female was only a means to the end to fulfilling my duty to my brothers who saved my life more than once. Lukent and Kutzal deserved long lives and the best chances at happiness, so I'd do everything I could do ensure that happened. The first step was finding out what the fleck these Joktals wanted. And the next step was rescuing the human with gold hair.

I finished my gruel and settled into the dark corner of my cell for some sleep. Once I got some rest and healed a little, I'd work on doing some digging. It wasn't fair that the Joktal thought they could get all the information out of me. I had to strategize, because there had to be a way I could use my beatings to my advantage. It sure beat the monotony of pain, anyway.

I crossed my arms over my chest and closed my eyes. Hopefully, when I woke up again, I'd get to see the golden-haired human. It wasn't that I was interested in her, of course. She was just something to look at to pass the time, was all. Sure. That was it.

---

## *Amber*

Every movement felt like I was dragging my limbs through quicksand. I'd already fought sleep for longer than usual, but I was terrified to let myself close my eyes and rest. My body wasn't the same as all those years ago when I'd been stolen from Earth, transported on an alien ship, and then taken underground a city by sneering gray aliens and poked and prodded like a lab rat.

Not *like* a lab rat. I *was* a lab rat. So were the five other women who I'd managed to escape with, although we were all experimented on in different ways, leading to what we called our alters. Tasha could smell almost anything for miles. And me? I could stay awake for days, sometimes over a week. But when I finally slept, I was dead

to the world for a day or two. It was when I was most vulnerable, and the thought of relinquishing that control here in this dungeon terrified me more than anything.

I'd spent much of my time here trying to scout out places I could hide to sleep where the Joktal wouldn't find me, but then I'd seen their dogs—big eyeless beasts with massive nostrils and sharp jaws who would sniff me out. My stomach rolled imagining what they'd do to my limp body. Would the mortal think I was dead? I could just imagine them burying me alive and I'd wake up six feet under. Or worse, would they let their hounds eat me?

The loris knew something was wrong. They walked close, like they didn't want to let me out of their sight. I wished I could communicate with them, ask for their help, but I didn't want to endanger them either or make them do anything to incur the Joktal's wrath. This was something I had to deal with on my own.

My hands shook as I lowered a bowl of gruel in front of the Drixonian's cell. He lay at the back of his cell, body battered from his frequent trips to the Joktal questioning room. I wasn't sure what they wanted out of him, but he always emerged bloody and barely conscious.

Still, when he heard the bowl clatter, his head shot up. One eye was swollen, but the violet pupil of the other shone in the near dark. He dragged himself closer to the bars, gaze never leaving me, and the loris tittered behind me in a slight panic.

Crouched in front of the cage, I remained where I was. It'd been two days since he arrived, and he hadn't reacted toward me the way he had that first day. His eye roamed my body from head to toe before focusing on my outstretched hand. I glanced at it, surprised to see the visible tremors of fatigue. Sucking in a breath, I pulled my hand back and tucked it into my lap.

A puff of breath steamed from his flared nostrils in the cold cell. He reached for the bowl of gruel and tugged it toward him before pushing his empty bowl at me. Why did it make me so happy to see he was eating? Most of these prisoners didn't pay attention to me. I was like a machine who brought their food, but this Drixonian focused more on me than his food. He scanned my body in an assessing way all while completely ignoring the loris behind me.

His reaction made me wonder—had he seen humans before?

But there was still something feral about him. Even caged and beaten, his movements were fluid and predatory, from the way his eyes followed me like a hunter. Was he eying me up for food? For a fuck? I shivered, and he caught the movement. His good eye narrowed, and the way he seemed so attuned to me raised goosebumps on my arms.

I couldn't decide if he was an evil, violent alien, or a good one. Likely, he was somewhere in between. But I hadn't been treated well by anyone on this planet except for the loris and my human friends. So I was probably just desperate for a hero when there was none to be found.

I shook my head and gathered the empty bowls on the tray. When I reached for his bowl, my hand closed on nothing. I blinked and tried again, finally managing to focus through my exhausted state to use proper hand-eye coordination.

This was bad—one of the last things to go before I passed out. "Just a little longer, Amber," I whispered to myself. If I could just get to our sleep room and hide away in a pile of loris bodies. Maybe, just maybe I could get away with sleeping for a few days.

I rose to my feet, wobbling a bit as my balance suffered, and a low growl stilled my movements. I peered through the Drixonian's cell bars to see he'd stood and remained poised with his hands fisted at his sides, muscles bunched and coiled. Alarmed at the gleam in his eye, I stumbled back a step. The loris furry arms circled around me, and only then did his eyes shift to them before returning to me.

Was some sort of hunting instinct activated when he saw my weakness? Another shiver ran down my spine, and he growled again before taking a step forward. I didn't stay to see what he'd do. Turning on my heel, supported by the loris behind me, I took off down the hallway toward where Heego stood at the entrance to the cells. He did not care enough to watch me carefully and didn't notice that I walked as if I had just come off a tequila bender.

When I reached him, he jerked out one of his hands, forcing me to stop. The loris squeaked. "Go ahead," he told them. They looked at me with alarm, and I swallowed as Heego's shrewd gaze landed on me. "You forgot the tray. Go get it."

“What?” My brain processed at about fifteen percent capacity right now.

Heego’s eyes narrowed. “Go get the tray, you dumb bitch.” He backhanded me so hard across the face that I tasted blood in my tongue. I tongued the cut on the inside of my cheek just as a raging bellow sounded from one of the cells. I was too dazed to know which one. And it didn’t really matter.

Head ringing, feet unsteady, I turned without a word and walked back down the row of cells. The tray was where I left it in front of the Drixonian’s cage. At least, I was pretty sure that was what the blurry object was. Between my need to sleep and that blow to the head, everything was fuzzy. My vision had tunneled to about a pinprick.

A door opened somewhere, and I heard a Joktal voice telling Heego he was needed elsewhere.

“Hurry up, human,” Heego hollered at me. “Wait here at the door. I’ll be back.”

The door closed, and silence reigned in the hallway. I glanced behind me, but there was no Heego-sized bulk at the door.

“He left me,” I mumbled, shocked as hell. But he’d be back. He promised he would be, and Heego always kept his promises.

When I turned back around, the hallway spun like a funhouse. I stumbled and reached blindly for something to break my fall, but my fingers scrabbled uselessly on the stone wall. I fell to one knee as pain shot through my hand. I blinked at it, seeing red on my fingernail.

“I broke a nail,” I giggled deliriously. “Well, fuck.”

Unable to get to my feet, I crawled the rest of the way on all fours until my hand bumped against the tray. I tried to pick it up, but my fingers only closed on the bare floor. Sleep was no longer in the near future. Sleep was now. My fingers stopped opening and closing. The edges of my vision darkened, and the last thing I saw before I lost consciousness was one violet eye peering through the bars of the cell.

## THREE

*VINZ*

She wasn't moving.

I hit my knees in front of my bars and forced myself to stay still and listen. She breathed. I could hear the soft puffs of air as she inhaled deeply, while her back rose and fell. Her eyes moved rapidly behind her pale eyelids.

But she wasn't moving. Flat on her stomach, face turned toward me, she seemed to be passed out. Her curly hair lay spread out around her like a golden pool. She was so small, so vulnerable. That flecking Heego. He'd hit her so hard that even I felt the ringing in my own head.

I reached out between the bars of my cell as far as I could and tapped one claw on her arm. Again, nothing. Dead to the world.

"Fleck," I murmured. Heego had said he'd be back, and if he found her laying like this on the ground... I didn't want to think about what he'd do. And if he hurt her in front of me, I couldn't be sure I would be able to hold back. I had barely maintained my composure when he struck her. If he did worse to her limp body? I'd never recover. They'd know she meant something to me, and this entire mission to rescue her would be over.

I stretched further, trying to get a grasp on her, but she was just out of reach. All I could do was barely tap her with one claw.

Growling in frustration, I snagged the tray and pushed toward me. I had to get to her, and despite the aches in my body and my wonky vision, I placed the tray between the cell bars and twisted, hoping I could bend the bars enough to drag her into the cell with me.

The tray squeaked and then snapped in half under the pressure, causing me to slam my head into the bars. I ignored the new injury—it would blend in with all the rest—and was about ready to break out of the cell with my bare hands when the door opened.

My cora pounded, and white noise roared in my ears. Heego would arrive any moment and see her...

But instead all I heard was the tittering of the two furred loris—a gentle species who'd lived on Corin as long as we had. They spotted Amber and let out a series of alarmed whisper shrieks before rushing over to her. But they were small, scared, and kept glancing at the door in anticipation of Heego barging inside.

They looked at the broken tray, and then at me, utter terror in their eyes. I could see what it looked like, that I'd broken the tray over her head. But I didn't have time to soothe their feelings.

A small section of the wall across from my cell was damaged, the stone crumbling, created a small hole. Big enough for... a human body.

I pointed at it, and the two loris only saw my clawed hands and went into a frenzy. I growled over them. "Hide her there!"

They blinked their big eyes at me as they huddled over the human's body. I tried again, first pointing to the female and then to the hole. "Hide her body there. Now! Before Heego returns."

The one loris seemed to get what I was saying, and although she still looked like she was about to piss herself, she made some hand gestures to the other loris. Grunting and straining, they dragged the limp body of the human to the alcove and had just shoved her inside when the door to the cell block slammed open.

By the footfalls coming down the hall, I knew this was Heego. The loris stood right in front of where they'd stowed the female's body, acting as suspicious as possible.

Heego came into view, his gaze first on the tray and then settling on the loris with a ferocious intensity. "Where's the human?"

The loris tittered and shook. One moved her fingers rapidly.

Heego picked up the tray pieces and threw them against the wall. "I don't know what that means!"

At the clatter of the tray hitting the stone wall, the loris both began to shake so violently, I thought their bones would break. But I only had eyes for the human female, who remained barely out of view in the small dark alcove.

Heego stepped forward toward the loris, and his gaze began to shift around, checking the floors, the wall and the ceiling.

One strand of the female's hair was visible on the dark stone floor, just beyond the feet of the loris. If Heego saw that...

I sighed and rolled my shoulders. Time for the Vinz show. While the loris did their part, they could only do so much. And I didn't want to see them get beaten either.

I pounded on the bars of my cage and hissed. "Lose something?"

Heego's head whipped to me, and he turned fully, putting his back to the loris and to where the female hid. "What did you say?"

"What will your commander say when you tell him you lost a human?"

"Shut your mouth." He pointed a wide boned hand at me, and I held back a shudder as I remembered vividly how badly it hurt to be smacked in the face with one of those.

The door opened at the end of the cell, and two more Joktal entered. "Fleck," I murmured under my breath as they jogged down the hall to where we were all clustered.

"Why aren't the loris locked in for the night?" one said.

Heego's eyes narrowed. "I'm busy listening to this one mouth off." He jerked his thumb at me.

I realized then that he was using me as much as I was using him. I needed to draw his anger to protect the human, and he needed an excuse to draw attention away from the fact that he lost her. It would mean a whole lot of pain for me, but I'd heal. I always did. And pain wasn't so bad. I'd been through worse, and I preferred pain.

Cracking my neck, I shook out my shoulders. "If I'm still standing, you didn't do your job right earlier, did you?"

"You want us to take you to the locker again?" Heego sneered.

I shrugged. "Sure. I'm kind of bored anyway."

“Just tell us who knows about Joktalis, and we’ll let you go.” He grinned widely, but it was all a lie. They named their city after themselves, which was really telling about how much they thought of their prowess.

Of course, I kept silent on that answer. They’d kill me as soon as they got something useful out of me. For now, it didn’t cost much to feed me, and they had a good time trying to break me.

I leaned against the bars and snarled through them. “How about *no*.”

One of the loris tried to take a sidestep and fell to one knee right near the female’s hideout. Heego whirled around, and at that moment, the thought of him dragging her out by her hair and stomping her fired my blood like an ember on dried kindling. I wasn’t thinking of duty in that moment, or my brothers. I was only thinking about protecting that human with the golden hair who looked me in the eye.

I slammed my fists on the bars to catch Heego’s attention. I growled and raged like the monster they thought I was. The monster I could be. The monster that would likely also be inside of me.

I didn’t let up, not as they drew out the electric rods and poked them through the bars to shock me. Not as the two Joktal guards led the frightened loris to safety. I only let up when Heego, tired and breathing heavy, fell back against the wall and retreated to the doors at the end of the hallway.

Only then, bleeding, one arm dangling uselessly at my side, and body covered in red burned sores, did I slump on the ground.

I toppled over onto my side as the pain coursed through my body and the aftereffects of the shocks tasted like metal in the back of my throat. I watched the sleeping human. The side of her face was swollen from Heego’s blow, but she slept with deep, even breaths and her face remained relaxed. I ached to trace the arch of hair over her eyes, and brush the edge of her jaw. Touch the tip of her nose. Feel her soft skin on my hard scales.

Content that I’d completed my duty and protected the human female, I let myself fall into a fitful sleep so my body could heal... and this could start all over again tomorrow.



---

## *Amber*

I opened my eyes, and dread curdled in my stomach. Darkness surrounded me, and I was so cramped I couldn't stretch out my legs. My heart sped up as I battled the panic cursing through my blood.

I'd passed out, and my worst fears had come true. I'd been buried alive. I tried to slow my breathing, concerned about wasting oxygen, as I took stock of my surroundings. I scrabbled at the dark wall in front of me, expecting my fingers to sink into newly dug dirt, but instead my fingernails scraped on stone.

Had they buried me in some sort of tomb? "Oh God," I whispered tearfully. "No."

Then my eyes adjusted, and I realized there was a slight bit of light leaking into my tomb from behind my head. I tried to roll over, but my entire body cramped up. Muscles locking, I breathed through the pain until I could manage a slight shimmy in the crowded space.

Wait, I was buried. At least not underground. Behind me was... nothing. My body was in some sort of hole with an entrance. I waved my hand into the darkness and the flickering light of a torch caught on my palm. I blinked as I gazed out into the cell hallway and caught sight of two violet eyes watching me intently.

I let out a squeak and hit my head on the ceiling. "Ouch!" I rubbed my forehead with a whine of pain and then slowly dragged myself toward the entrance of the small hole, which was barely big enough for my body. How the hell had I gotten in here? The last thing I remembered was passing out in front of... those violet eyes.

I peeked into the hallway to check if Heego was on guard, but the area was empty and quiet.

I crawled out, wincing as my muscles protested being used after so long. And still, the Drixonian watched me with his face pressed up against the bars of the cage. He'd been beaten again, badly. Sores oozed from his side, and I knew from experience that those were from the electric poles that the Joktal used.

But he didn't seem to be paying any attention to his wounds. His eyes were clear and steady. Stumbling to my feet, I braced myself against the wall as pins and needles shot down my legs. I dug my fingers into my calves and thighs to warm up the muscles and gently pounded them with the flat of my first. "Come on," I whispered. "Work with me body."

My hair was a wild mass all around my head. I blew it out of my mouth and once again peeked at the Drixonian. He was watching my movements carefully as if he would be tested on them. Was he eyeing up my legs for the best cuts of meat? Or something else?

The door at the end of the hallway opened, and I startled. How would I explain my absence to Heego? How long had I been gone?

Yua and Yuo burst through with the daily rations for the prisoners. When they saw me, they let out two surprised squeaks before rushing to my side. The bowls on the tray that Yuo held rattled in her excitement. Yua began rapidly moving her fingers. While I could understand some of what they said, this long explanation was beyond my comprehension.

I waved my hands in the air, glancing at the door once again to see if Heego had arrived yet. "Where did I fall asleep?" I cradled my hands beside my cocked head.

Yua pointed at the ground in front of the Drixonian's cell.

"Then how did I get in there?" I pointed to the hole.

Yua patted her own chest and then Yuo's arm before swiping her hand across her head like it was hard work to drag my body. Seeing as they were tiny, it surely was. "Thank you," I hugged Yua to my chest. "You saved my life."

Yua pulled out of my hug and frowned before pointing at the Drixonian.

"What about him?"

*His idea*, she signed with a snap beside her temple.

"His... idea?" I repeated.

She nodded. Then she made the sign for Joktal and from her gestures, I understood that Heego had nearly found me. But the Drixonian... Yua bared her teeth and curled her paws into claws. Then she made pained noises, which I knew was the electric pole.

“Did he...?” I couldn’t be understanding her right. “Why did he rage and then get punished?”

*To distract*, she signed and then cradled her arms to her chest like she was rocking a baby. *Save you*.

I turned and blinked at the Drixonian, who now sat with his back against the wall near the front of his cell, purple eyes on me. “He saved me?” I whispered.

Suddenly the door to the cell block slammed open and Heego marched inside. When his eyes landed on me, they widened almost comically before his hand settled on the whip at his side. I swallowed, my thoughts shifting quickly away from the Drixonian and now to self-preservation.

“Where have you been?” Heego roared as he marched toward me.

“I’m sorry,” I murmured. “I was getting extra sleep.”

“Extra sleep?” Heego uncurled his whip, and terrified tremors rattled my spine.

“Please,” I mumbled. “I—”

The Drixonian’s growl rumbled from the cage, and whatever he said stopped Heego in his tracks. His massive boned head swung to the blue alien and he glared with a vicious snarl. “Why do you care?”

The Drixonian rumbled something back and Heego let out a bellow before turning on me. “You’re lucky, human. I don’t know where you’ve been, but I need you in working form, which is the only reason I’m not whipping you bloody, do you understand?”

I stared at him, shocked as hell that I wasn’t being punished. What had the Drixonian said to Heego? I could only nod numbly. The Joktal slipped his whip back onto his belt and turned with a sneer. “Feed them quick,” he shouted over his shoulder.

I hurried to help Yua and Yuo feed the prisoners. When we reached the Drixonians cell, I gave him the fullest gruel bowl—which I’d saved—and ducked my head. “Thank you,” I whispered. I knew he couldn’t understand me, but I needed to say the words out loud.

He took the gruel bowl with a dirty, blood encrusted hand and let out a short grunt in acknowledgement. Like he *knew* what I said. When he did so, his hair moved, and I caught a glimpse of a translator implant behind his left ear. So *that* was how he could

understand the Joktal. With another shake of his head, his hair once again covered nearly his entire face, and then he retreated to the back of his cell to eat.

For a moment, I wondered if he could understand me, but that had to be wishful thinking. My implant wasn't updated for his language—it was just a bunch of guttural tones to me. But sometimes the way he looked at me... I could almost believe he knew what I was saying.

---

I understood soon what Heego meant when he said I had to be in working form. Something was happening. The tower was abuzz. From outside the lone window, I could hear constant activity in other areas of the Joktalis—hammering sounds, shouted orders, and the erection of massive flags with a foreboding horned triangle symbol.

The loris and I cleaned the tower from top to bottom—dusting, mopping, and scraping mold from the stone walls. In the kitchen, Heego ordered us to prepare more food than normal, not gruel for the prisoners, but platters of roasted meat, baked tubers, and other root-like vegetables, all dripping in this calorie-laden spicy sauce that was barely edible.

As I stirred the sauce, the smell of which burned my eyes, I turned to Yuo who chopped meat nearby. A question had been burning in my mind all day. “What did the Drixonian say to Heego?”

*Not to hit you, she signed. Because you are valuable.*

Valuable. I guessed I was. I could carry more weight than the loris, who were built delicately with tiny bones and small muscles.

But none of that helped the Drixonian. So why was I valuable to him?

## FOUR

*Amber*

The one good thing about my alter was that when I did sleep—and somehow my cramped hole in the wall provided me a safe place to get plenty of rest—my senses were amplified. I couldn't smell as well as Tasha, but I could pick up on scents much easier. The sense that improved the most was auditory. I couldn't necessarily hear from far away, but what I could hear was amplified, which meant I could distinguish words through walls and whispers.

I'd spent the better part of the day trying to listen to everything and anything I could to determine what was going on at the fortress, but the loris and I were kept away from any of the meeting rooms, and Heego was uncharacteristically silent as he glared at me every chance he could get. I didn't doubt he'd take out his anger on me when he could, but he had a commander to answer to who would want to know why a beating had left me unable to work well. And since they were planning for some big event, my labor was needed.

Why these big brutes hadn't learned to clean and cook for themselves was beyond me. I also hadn't seen any Joktal females, which made me wonder how they were treated. I assumed not well, but what did I know? Maybe the Joktal served them like queens. I snorted to myself. Highly doubtful.

I swiped the broom across the top step of the staircase while Heego waited at the top landing talking with another guard. They weren't saying anything important, just bitching about the length of their meal breaks. The broom was made of no more than a stick with some dried ferns on the end and it shed with every sweep which only created more debris. Sometimes I felt like Sisyphus using it. With every sweep, I wasn't getting anywhere. Annoyed, I swept harder but froze when a crack sounded. The broom stick had cracked in half, and I watched as the end clattered down the stairs.

"Oh shit!" I immediately chased after it, running my hand along the wall of the round staircase so I didn't slip on the thin-soled shoes I wore.

This stupid fucking staircase lasted forever, and I heard Heego bellow at me to hurry up just as I reached a landing. The broken broom stick end hit the wall and rattled to a final standstill on the ground. I took a moment to catch my breath and crouched on the ground with my chin tucked into my knees. "Stupid broom," I muttered. I wished one of my alters was that I could run faster. Better stamina. Something like that.

As I stood, voices filtered through the walls, and I went still. Drifting closer to the stone, I pressed the side of my face to a small crack in the wall where some Joktal were talking on the other side.

"...on for tomorrow. It's important we make an example. How are the preparations?" This voice sounded electronic, as if talking through a speaker.

"They are almost finished," said Gruper, a voice I recognized as a high-ranking Joktal. "The execution will be carried out in the center of the courtyard."

I placed my hand over my mouth to hide my gasp. *Execution? Of who?*

"I'm disappointed you weren't able to obtain any information." The speaker voice said.

"I'm sorry," Gruper sounded like he spoke through clenched teeth. "I'm not sure he has all his faculties to be honest."

"Well, we need his people to believe he sold them out, and that his torture and execution is a direct message to them. It must all be recorded and then sent immediately to Granit."

“Yes, sir.”

The speaker voice of the commander grunted. “I heard you haven’t gotten a scream out of him yet. I’m eager for tomorrow. I’m sure cutting off each limb one by one will make the Drixonian scream, right?”

My knees buckled, and I hit the ground. The broomstick pinged off the wall and Heego bellowed from above. “Human! Where are you?”

My stomach rolled as bile rose in my throat. I held back the gag, forcing myself to hold onto the contents of my stomach. They were going to publicly torture and execute the Drixonian tomorrow, that wild blue alien who had suffered a beating to protect me.

He terrified me. Just the thought of facing him without the safety of his cell bars sent a cold shiver down my spine. But I hadn’t experienced much good in this galaxy. I certainly never imagined some caged beastly alien to give a single fuck about me. But he’d done it. The loris were very clear on that. And no one deserved to be killed Braveheart-style.

“Human!” Heego shouted again just as his lumbering footsteps began to echo off the winding walls of the staircase.

“I’m coming!” My voice trembled, and I cursed under my breath as I grabbed the two pieces of the broom and sprinted up the stairs.

I met him halfway, panting and shaking, while he glared at me. “What took you so long?”

“Sorry.” I ducked my head to avoid his eyes. “The broom broke, and I had to chase it.”

He snatched the two halves of the broom from me and with his other lower hand grabbed a hunk of my hair and shoved me up the stairs. “Move.”

I bit back a cry as my scalp tugged painfully in his grip. Passing by the one window of the tower, I stole a peek to see the sun was setting. Soon it’d be dark. Which meant... tomorrow was that much closer. The day the Drixonian died. Even now, far away from the cell block, I could feel his violet eyes on me.

Heego’s stomps spurred me to keep going, and when we reached the top of the stairs, he shoved me toward the kitchens. This was the time for our last meal of the day, but the thought of

eating made me nauseous as the Joktal's words of violence repeated themselves over and over in my mind.

The kitchen wasn't much. We cooked soups and stews in a kettle over an open flame and baked bread and sometimes sweet treats in the oven. Dishes were all done by hand, of course, and wasting food was nearly as big of a sin as murder. Tonight's meal was leftovers from the Joktal's dinner—a roasted meat stew with some herbs and boiled vegetables.

Yua and Yuo sat on the floor in the kitchen with the other loris—altogether there were about twelve of them—eating quickly. I sat down between the loris twins while Heego and another guard stood at the entrance to the kitchen talking—this time bitching about how cold it was in the tower. That was a Joktal pastime, I learned. They seemed to bond through their complaints like two gossipy office coworkers.

I ate only because if I didn't, Heego would notice and pay attention to me. Right now, I wanted as little attention as possible. I barely ate as I contemplated what to do next. I could pretend I didn't hear anything and remain under the radar until I found a way to escape. Tomorrow, I could wear ear plugs so I didn't hear the sounds of a crowd cheering while a living being was tortured and killed for no reason.

I could do all that... but I also couldn't.

Even if the Drixonian hadn't saved me, I wasn't sure I'd ever be able to live with myself if I didn't do what I could do prevent his violent death. I couldn't believe I was in this situation—but then I'd had that thought many times since I was taken from Earth. On my home planet, I'd been a quiet apprentice intern. Structure and organization made sense to me and made me happy. My life now was devoid of either of those things, which kept me in a constant state of nearly debilitating anxiety. Sometimes I wondered how I hadn't completely shattered under the weight of my messed up life, but Trix always said the human need to survive was one of the most powerful things in the universe.

I didn't taste the food, but I ate until the crude spoon clattered back into my empty bowl. Yua and Yuo, more accustomed to my moods, watched me closely, as did the rest of the loris. They were



terrible actors, and showed their emotions vividly in their color-changing eyes, so I smiled and put on an act myself. Soon, I was no longer the center of their attention as they managed to save cookie-like desserts. I didn't eat mine, but discreetly dropped it into my pockets.

Afterward, I sent the loris with Heego to the sleeping chamber and told them I'd clean up. It wasn't my turn to do the dishes, but they all looked so tired that none of them complained. The twins half-heartedly asked to stay and help, but I waved them on. I didn't need to sleep for a while, after all, and this was my way of repaying them for the kindness they'd shown me since I'd been brought to the tower.

I also didn't want them in any way involved in what I was about to do next. I'd face the consequences on my own. As much as I wanted to see my friends again, as much as I wished to hug Tasha one more time and hear Lu's laughter, my integrity mattered to me. The most human part of me wouldn't remain an innocent bystander.

As I scrubbed the bowls, doubt flitted through my mind. Was I making the wrong decision? Was setting the Drixonian loose result in a worse fate than living as a slave with the Joktal?

Even as I doubted myself, I knew my decision was already made. I'd free him from his cell and point him in the best direction I could think of to get out of here alive. The rest was on his own. I hadn't only spent my time here cooking and cleaning. I'd studied the tower the best I could and listened to every conversation to learn if there was a way out of here. A few options had materialized, but I wasn't confident in them yet, which was why I hadn't escaped myself. I could tell myself I was using the Drixonian as a guinea pig. That was the excuse I'd have given Trix if she were here. I could see her now, eyes narrowed telling me I was too soft. I was too soft. Still, after all these years, but I had clung to that softness with white knuckles. It was what still made me *me*. I wasn't sure Trix ever had softness. While I was born a marshmallow and had to toughen up over the years, Trix was born sturdy platinum, and I couldn't see her ever melting.

Before Heego returned to retrieve me for the night's sleep, I gathered a few supplies and wrapped them in a sack—some dried

meats and cheeses as well as a satchel of nuts that tasted a lot like cashews. I took a small amount from different supplies so the missing food wasn't noticed—or at least, not noticed quickly. The Joktal kept careful stock of their supplies with frequent weigh-ins. I'd deal with the discrepancy in the future. Maybe I could blame rodents.

I looked around for a weapon for the Drixonian to use if needed, but all the knives were dull, so I didn't bother. I had just stored the satchel in a small corner of the kitchen when Heego's footsteps echoed from outside.

I took a deep breath and said a silent prayer to myself. It wasn't like I had never thought about how I'd escape—I actually had a pretty good plan, but I had been too scared to carry it out, plus some parts of my plan were still... fuzzy. Yeah, pretty damn fuzzy. And fuzzy in a way that would get me killed.

My last part of the plan was to fold a vivi leaf and shove it into the waistband of my pants. Thick, smooth, and bland, the leaves were used to bulk up the gruel for the captives.

Wiping my damp hands on the bottom of my shirt, I turned just as Heego's bulk darkened the doorway. "Let's go."

He led me toward the sleeping chamber, and I tried not to fidget behind him. When we reached the sleeping chamber, I stepped just inside the door and gazed at the soft sleeping bodies of the loris. For a moment, I almost backed out of my plan. How nice would it be to just lose myself among their warm fur for the night—even if I didn't sleep?

Heego slammed the door behind me, and the sound jerked me from my doubts. I whirled around and just before the bolt turned, I slid the vivi leaf through the crack in the door right at the latch. The bolt clicking into place was slightly dulled by the leaf, and I froze, waiting to see if Heego noticed. For a few silent moments, I swore he'd be able to hear the pounding of my heart, but then I realized it was the sound of his footsteps as he walked away.

Exhaling loudly, I glanced over my shoulder. The oldest loris, a quiet female name Plia, watched me with big eyes. I stared back, wondering if she'd wake any others or ask me what I was doing. But she only blinked, gave me a silent nod, and then rolled away to face the opposite wall.

I didn't waste time. Gripping the edge of the leaf, I began to rub the stem vigorously. The vivi leaf had an interesting property where it swelled when macerated. By the time my fingers were cramping, the stem and entire leaf had ballooned like a puffer fish. That was when I heard the soft click of the bolt sliding back as the swelling of the leaf unlocked it.

Shoving the leaf back into my shirt to hide the evidence, I slowly opened the door and peeked outside. Guards were never stationed outside our sleeping chamber, because no one expected the loris or a lone human to be able to get out. Not that we weren't smart enough, but there was nowhere to go. The only way out of the tower was that small window which was too high off the ground to jump. The only other way was a thick door with three bolts on the middle level of the tower which led into a main building of the fortress. It was impenetrable, even with all the vivi leaves in the world.

And well, there was one other way. And that was the way I planned to tell the Drixonian to go.

I descended the stairs to where the guards slept which were in bunks one level down. This was the part of the plan that I had to improvise for the Drixonian. In all my escape attempt fantasies, I'd never needed keys. But to free him, I needed to first get into the cell block, and second needed to unlock his cell.

About a dozen guards worked in the tower on a rotating basis. Some of them left to work in other areas of the fortress, but Heego was a constant here, which made me think he was a newbie or something. The tower was clearly shit duty, which made me a little happy that he was the low man on the totem pole.

The door to the sleeping bunk was open, which I knew it would be. They didn't lock it in case there was an emergency. The thing about the tower? It had a terrible fire plan. The only way out was a triple bolted door in the middle of a flight of twisty stairs. I'd considered bringing that up to Heego a few times, but knew my complaint about the lack of proper exits would fall on deaf ears.

I crept inside, my vision focusing quickly in the dark—another advantage of my alter. I wouldn't thank the Uldani for what they did to me, but at least my alter had some positives. Heego lay close to the door and his belt hung over a bedpost. There, catching the

flickering flames of the dying torch light, was the ring of keys. All I had to do was take them, free the Drixonian, and return them. Easy peasy lemon squeezy.

I stretched my hand out and slipped one finger through the keyring, then slowly lifting my arm to pull it loose from his belt. I held my breath, terrified that one would jingle and wake up the whole damn room of Joktals. My arm ached, and cold sweat dripped from my temples. The key ring slipped free and two of them clanged together for an instant before I quickly snatched them to my chest to dull the sound.

On my tiptoes, I stood frozen, listening to any change in the breathing patterns of the aliens in the room. But Heego didn't even flinch. So I took the opportunity, turned, and bolted the hell out of there.

It took thirty seconds to reach the bottom level, unlock the door to the cells, and speed inside. It was then I realized... that some of these prisoners could tell on me. I glanced at them quickly, but they all seemed to be sleeping. And really, it was too late now. Maybe I could try to give them some extra treats tomorrow with their morning meal. A bribe.

Fuck, I'd deal with it tomorrow. Who would believe them anyway? The human had stolen keys and let a prisoner escape? Preposterous.

I skidded to a halt at the end of the cell block and peered inside. At first, I didn't see him, and cool fingers of dread scratched at my throat, but then out of the shadows, violet eyes blinked at me, and then a blue body crept into view. Even though he'd been beaten recently, he didn't look too worse for wear. I had noticed he seemed to heal fast, a characteristic I was jealous of.

He approached me warily, eyes slightly narrowed, until he saw the ring of keys in my hand. Then his gaze shot to mine, and he barked out one word, "*Nit*," in a hoarse growl.

He said no. I was sure of it, but it was too late now.

"I know you don't know what I'm saying," I said as I spun the keys and began trying all of them in the lock to his cell. "But you have to get out of here. Tomorrow they will..." I swallowed. "You have to be gone by tomorrow."

He clutched the bars of his cell, and I felt his warm breath ruffle the curls at the top of my head. I refused to look up as I slid a key into the lock. A resounding click echoed in the hallway, and I went still.

I looked up slowly to see he stood only inches away with only the bars of his cell separating us. He stood over six foot to my five-four. Bulging muscles. Nostrils flaring around an ornate septum ring, and the shell of his ears littered with small rings and studs.

“Please don’t hurt me,” I whispered as I turned the key and swung the cell door open.

For a moment he didn’t move a muscle. His chest remained still, as if he stopped breathing, but those eyes were very much alive and they very much did not leave my face. Grabbing the keys from the lock and pressing them to my chest, I swallowed and took an unsteady step back.

“Go,” I gestured with my hand. “Please.”

I continued to take careful steps backward down the hallway, thinking he’d follow me like a dog. His eyes tracked my movements, and only when I was about to step out of sight did he step slowly out of his cell.

I waved my hands. “Keep going. I’ll show you a way out, but we have to hurry. I have to return the keys before Heego wakes.”

He cocked his head and pointed at me.

I shook my head. “I can’t leave. Just you.”

His black pupils dilated as he walked forward, matching every step I took back, like he was hunting me. My entire body shook with tremors and I had to grit my teeth to keep them from chattering. Outside his cell, his size and power was even more apparent. His presence overwhelmed me, and I felt every inch his prey. I didn’t dare take my eyes off him, and focused all my attention on every flinch of his muscles, waiting for the moment where he might strike me.

Suddenly, his eyes blazed with an inner flame, and I froze in my tracks. Apparently my fight or flight instinct was whacked, and instead I was a deer in headlights. “Wait,” I murmured just as he crossed his arms in front of his neck at the wrists. All along the

outside of his forearms, black curved spikes emerged from his scales and his lips peeled back into a violent sneer to reveal fangs.

I let out a scream as he lifted one arm in the air and began to slice it downward. Dropping to a crouch, I covered my head with my hands and waited for those wicked spikes to sink into my skin.

## FIVE

*VINZ*

I leapt over the human's crouched form and planted my feet firmly in Heego's chest. Before he could let out a cry of alarm, I raked my machets across his mouth. Blood gushed, and he let out a gargled snarl.

He slammed into the ground on his back and immediately tried to buck me off, but I wasn't budging. I'd spent all my time in that cell imagining what I'd do if I ever got my hands on one of these Joktals, and after the blow I'd seen him deliver to the human, I was eager to pay him back. Triple.

These fleckers didn't have many weaknesses, but I'd managed to catch him by surprise. Pulling his whip from his belt, I lassoed his bony upper arms together before they could slam into my head, which would absolutely mean lights out for me. He pounded my ribs and kidney with the fists of his lower arms, but I barely even felt the blows. Bringing my right arm up to my shoulder, I slammed my machets down into the side of his neck, plunging them deep, before raking them back across his throat.

Blood spurted from his gaping wound, and his wild eyes rolled. As his body bucked and shook as he went into his death throes, I rose to my feet. "Die slow, flecker."

I turned to find the human still in her crouch, eyes staring in shock at the dying Joktal. She gagged before clapping her hand over her mouth and collapsed onto a hip before scrambling back to avoid the pooling blood.

Heego still gurgled a bit, but he was dying. I ignored his weak protests and unhooked his belt from around his waist. I wasn't sure what kind of supplies he kept in the pouches, but I was sure I could use a few.

I turned and snapped the collar from the human's neck in one swipe, and then hauled her onto my shoulder. The key ring she'd been clutching clinked to the stone floor. At first, she hung limply, but as I took off down the hallway, she began to wiggle and protest. "Wait, wait." Her fists pounded my back. She made a strangled wet sound. "Please," her voice trembled. "This wasn't supposed to go this way."

Yeah, I would guess her plan had gone to shet the minute I'd sank my machets into Heego's neck. I could barely believe she'd risked freeing me, and despite how utterly terrified she'd been—I could practically hear her bones rattle as she'd opened my cell—she'd still risked her life to free me. *Me*. Why? She had to have done it so I'd help her escape. She might have figured out what I'd done to save her earlier. Well, luckily for her, she freed the right person. So why wasn't she happier?

She sniffled as I shut the doorway to the cell block behind me. Over my dead body would I go back to being a Joktal prisoner. Fleck that.

I fumbled with the supplies on Heego's belt as I ran up the winding flight of stairs. As we made it to the landing where moonlight shone through the lone window, my hand closed around a device that made me whistle low in triumph. I placed the human on the ground and pulled the implant updater out of its pouch. "Hold still," I muttered. The light caught on her wet eyes just as I selected my language and held the updater up to her implant behind her left ear. "Hey—" she managed right before I fired it.

I covered her mouth with my palm as she let out a muffled cry of pain. Tasha had done the same thing when we'd updated her implant, and I thought she was dramatic at the time, but with this



human, her pain annoyed me. Angered me. I found myself gritting my teeth and snarling at the way her eyes rolled as she fought through the pain.

Finally she shook her head as I shoved the implant updaters back into Heego's pouch. "You hear me?" I barked at her. She jerked at the sharp sound of my voice, and I fisted my hands. That was probably not the best first words of conversation, but we didn't have time.

She nodded.

"You said you know a way out?"

"Yes, but—"

"Where?"

She swallowed and twisted the bottom of her shirt with her fingers. "The kitchen."

I hated that I didn't know where any flecking thing was in this tower. "Show me."

"Okay, but Heego—"

"He's dying and will soon be dead." I gave her a little push up the stairs. "Let's go."

For a moment, her brows lowered over her eyes, and I caught the first flash of defiance before she firmed her lips and turned to run up the stairs. As I followed her, I smiled to myself. What had she wanted to say to me? I would like to learn some human insults.

I followed her to the next landing where she sped down a hall on silent feet. She turned the corner into a small room. Although dark, I caught sight of a kettle and few other cooking instruments but didn't have time to search before the human shoved a cloth pack into my stomach. I wrapped my hands around it with a grunt. "What's this?"

"Supplies." She didn't look at me as she pointed to a hole near the ceiling, barely big enough to fit my shoulders through. "That's the heating vent, and it leads directly out of the tower to the attached building. The only other way there is the triple bolted door on the middle level.

I blinked at it. "That will take me where?"

She stomped impatiently. "Down to the coal room, and from there you're on your own."

"On my own?"

“I have to get back to the sleeping chamber—”

“You’re not going back.”

“Sorry?”

I sighed and picked her up around the waist. She squawked in protest and hit my shoulder. “No!”

“You want to stay?”

“No, but—”

“Too late.”

I jumped on top of the stove, ignoring the screeching protest of the legs. After removing the vent cover, I hauled myself up into the hole, still holding onto the wiggling, protesting human. After replacing the vent—it wouldn’t do to help them find our escape route, I peered down the shaft.

“Oh God,” she went still in my arms. “I thought it would be like a tunnel. This is...”

“A slide.” I grinned. “Hold on tight.”

“Wait—!”

With a muted Drixonian war cry, I pushed off and slid down the shaft with a shaking human clutched to my chest. We descended fast—too fast from the shrieking sounds coming from the human but after I’d spent so much sedentary time in that cell, I found it flecking thrilling to go fast.

I let out a whoop, which quickly turned into a cough as I inhaled a mouthful of soot. Moments later, the shaft lit from below with a dim light, and I braced for impact, cradling the human as much as I could.

We hit a bin of coal like a rocket, and I winced as the sharp edges poked into my bare feet. I must have slammed my wrists on the walls of the tunnel on the way down, because they ached too. I shook them out with a grimace.

“Oomph!” the human whimpered into my chest. I uncurled my body from around her to take stock of her injuries but realized that was going to be a hard task—she was covered in soot nearly from head to toe. Her golden curls were barely visible through the thick powder, and when I glance down at myself, I wasn’t much better.

“Couldn’t have picked a better night-time camouflage,” I said to myself as I hopped out of the bin and then reached for the human.

She stretched out her arms, still watching me warily when I deposited her on the ground.

I took stock of our surroundings. As suspected, we were in a basement coal room, where bins of the black rock sat below vents leading to various areas in the fortress. Moonlight shone through a small window near the ceiling, and I shoved a lone crate over to stand on it and peer outside, where I was nearly level with the ground.

The courtyard of Joktalis was dark and still. What was different than when I arrived was a massive structure toward the side wall—a platform and a pole with long ropes tied to the top. They dangled loosely, weighted down by chains at the bottom. I tried to work out the length of the ropes in proximity to the top of the walls but grew a little frustrated because plans like this weren't my strength. Kutzal would have some sort of strategy figured out in mere seeks. That was why he was the drexel of our clavas. I strategized with my fists and mouth, which was how I got into this fortress in the first place.

I couldn't climb the walls, and I didn't want to draw attention to our escape, or we'd have those flecking nose hounds on our trail. Whatever purpose that structure had, I was going to use it for our escape.

I turned and motioned for the human who stood cradling her head in her hands, expression marred with pain. She probably had some injuries from that rapid descent, but we didn't have time to deal with them now. "Come here."

Once again she gave me that brief defiant look before she lowered her head and trudged toward me. Reaching down, I picked her up and shoved her through the window. "Move because I'm coming after you," I called a moment before I hauled myself through. My shoulders barely fit, and I had to grunt and wheeze to fit my bulk through. Finally, I was through, and went into a crouch in the dirt. We were nestled between two buildings, and I waited to see if any guards appeared. But there were no visible patrols. A couple of nose hounds lay near the gate sleeping, and once again, I realized the coal dust would benefit us by covering up our scent.

I stared at the structure with a frown. "What the fleck is that for?"

The human shifted next to me and then her soot darkened face entered into a patch of moonlight. Her light eyes shone. “I think that’s... where they planned to kill you.”

I whirled to face her. “*What?*”

“Why do you think I helped you escape? I overheard the juktals talking about killing you tomorrow.”

“How was that going to kill me?” I flicked a claw at the roped pole.

Her white teeth came out to nibble on her lip. “They planned to torture you first and send you in pieces to your people as a warning.”

My cora thudded in my chest, and I had to brace a hand in the dirt. My machets threatened to rise as I thought about Kutzal receiving my flecking hand or something. I would have made it through the torture and death, but to know that my brothers would have been tortured worse knowing what was done to me...

My breath stuttered out as I stared at the human. “I thought you helped me escape so I’d take you with me. You let me out of my cell,” I paused, “to save me?”

She nodded solemnly. “Is that so hard to believe?”

She’d told me I had to be gone by tomorrow, but I never in my wildest imagination expected anyone to do anything for me without expecting something in return.

“Yeah,” I answered honestly. “It is hard to believe. I thought you freed me to help you escape.”

“I hadn’t planned on it, no. Not yet. I was...” she shook her head. “I was waiting because I was scared.”

“But not too scared to risk your life to save me?” What was with this human?

She huffed out a dry laugh. “I guess I’m braver for other people than for myself.”

Those words were a punch in the gut. The breath left my lungs on a rush, and I gasped for air. I wanted to ask her if she read my mind, but then her hand settled on my arm as she gazed off into the distance, unaware of my internal breakdown. “What’s the plan now?”

I finally managed a sharp inhale. *Right. Escape.* I was having a hard time focusing. My head felt full, crowded, and it had to be this human’s presence flecking with me. I turned so my back faced the human. “Get on.”

“What?”

“Get on my back, and whatever you do, don’t let go.”

“How are we—?”

“Just trust me.”

“Trust you?!”

I turned to see her glaring at me below the defiant furrow of her brows. “A few minutes ago, I was worried you were going to eat me, and now I’m supposed to trust you with my life?”

“Well, I *didn’t* eat you,” I growled. “So that should go a little ways toward trusting me.”

“*Not* eating me is a very low bar when it comes to the first stages of trust,” she shot back, eyes blazing.

“How about this? Get on my back or I *will* eat you.”

She huffed out a frustrated back and then finally did what I asked and climbed on my back. I immediately stood and after making sure her arms were securely fastened at my chest, I took raced in the shadows toward the torture platform that had apparently been erected in my honor. I had already planned to use it to escape, but knowing they planned to kill me on it when the sun rose? Well this would make the escape that more delicious.

“What is your plan?” She whispered in my ear.

“You’ll see.”

“You’ll see isn’t a plan.”

“Well, it’s the one you’re getting.” I reached the platform and after a quick glance at the now sleeping hounds, said one last time. “I mean it, hang on.”

Her arms tightened around my shoulders, and her thighs squeezed my waist. “Hanging on,” she panted.

I took a running leap and grabbed the end of a rope. I saw the end now had barbed manacles that would surely have hurt like hell. I imagined all the little bits of me hanging from these various ropes tomorrow and wrinkled my nose in disgust. Barbaric. I deserved at least a warrior’s killing.

“Oh God,” she let out on a whisper when she realized what I was doing. The momentum of the swinging rope sent us airborne, and as soon as my feet left the ground, I began to climb—hand over hand, quick as I could.

A nose hound's head went up at the sound of the ropes clattered against the pole, and I scrambled quicker. Just as the rope swung out and we were moments away from crashing into the wall, I sliced my machets through the rope end, gripped it tightly, and swung my legs.

The human cried out against my shoulder, and I felt her blunt teeth bit into my scales to muffle the sound. I barely reached the top of the wall, and the tips of my clawed toes scrabbled at the rock just as I pitched forward, rope still in hand. The manacled bottom hit the wall with a clatter and I cursed.

The hounds were on their feet now, and any minute they'd like send up an alarm. Pulling up the rope quickly, I sliced off the manacled end and tossed it off the outside of the wall so it hit the grass below. After quickly tying the rope to a spoke at the top of the wall, I gripped it tightly and descended, bracing myself against the wall with my feet as I lowered us as quickly as I could.

The rope only lasted so long, and I had to jump the rest of the way. Hitting the ground in a crouch, I heard the baying of the nose hounds. Without hesitating, I took off at a sprint into the dense foliage.

## SIX

VINZ

I was a tracker, which meant I knew how to find tracks, and I also knew how to cover them up. Tracks weren't just footsteps—they were broken twigs, trampled leaves, and our scent.

I didn't want to give the Joktals too much credit, but they weren't stupid. They'd likely find out how we escaped, and once they did, the nose hounds would pick our coal-covered scent. It helped us leave, but we had to get rid of it as soon as possible.

Before we left the grounds, I grabbed my ax where I'd stowed it and nearly kissed the sharp edge. If only I'd had this behind those walls, I could have done some real damage. I slipped the handle in my belt and kept running.

I kept asking the female if she needed to sleep. From what I remembered, they had to rest every night—we Drixonians *liked* to get that much rest, but we didn't need it. And I couldn't forget how hard she'd passed out when she'd been too tired. But she kept telling me she was fine, and her eyes were very alert, so I took her word for it.

By the time the sun was rising, we had created enough distance between us and Joktalis that I thought it was time to get rid of the coal dust covering our bodies. My eyes stung and my throat burned with every breath. The female was wheezing, and red streaked the

whites of her eyes. I appreciated her lack of complaint, but I was going to have to talk to her about telling me about any injuries. I couldn't keep her alive if she didn't let me know how she was feeling.

To throw off the nosehounds, I climbed a tree and swung on a few branches until we reached a stream with slow-moving qua. Crouching down, I motioned for the human to get off my back, and she did, stumbling a few steps before righting herself.

I gestured to the qua. "Wash up." Her eyes drifted to the stream before returning to me. That wariness had returned, and she crossed her arms over her chest defensively. I narrowed my eyes at the action. "I want to wash off the coal scent before those nose hounds pick up on it."

"Right," she said quietly. "Um, can you..." she winced. "Can I wash without you watching?"

"Are you going to run away?"

"*Run away?*" The wariness faded as she let out an amused huff. "From *you*? I think we both know I would make it three steps before you caught me."

I stuck my chest out. "Just making sure." I turned around as she began to remove her clothes, and once I heard her wade into the qua, I also removed my clothes and waded into the shallow edge with my head down. Turning my back to her, I focused on washing myself. Cupping the qua and tossing it over my face and hair, I scrubbed my scales until I felt whole again. I hadn't been able to wash in that cell, and while I'd never been the cleanest Drixonian on the planet, I had begun to smell myself. It hadn't been pleasant. The coal scent had masked my stench, or the human might have been sick.

I dipped my hands in the qua again and watched the dust float away. From beneath the muck, a shimmery gold on my wrists caught my eye. Frowning, I pulled my hands clear of the water and blinked at the marks on my wrists.

I had to be seeing things. This wasn't... Fatas would never...

I blinked again. Then I rubbed my eyes.

But the marks were still there.

Afraid of my own hands, an animal sound escaped from my lips, and I fell back into the qua with a splash.



“*What’s wrong?*” The female screeched, reacting to my cry. I turned to see her glancing frantically at the water before she stumbled and swung her arms in an attempt to keep her balance. She screamed as she hit the qua with a smack. While the depth was shallow for me, the female was much smaller, and once I saw her head fall below the surface, I sprang into action. In two strides, I was at her side, pulling her up from the bottom of the stream where she gasped for air, sputtering and hollering while her hair whipped me in the face.

“Why’d you yell?” She writhed in my arms as her gaze frantically scanned our surroundings. “What did you see?”

Rubbing against me, her skin was slick and wet. I gritted my teeth at her close proximity, unsure what to make of it as my body rejected the touch while my mind wished to keep her at my side.

“Fleck this,” I murmured as I reached for her flailing hands. I grasped one of them and pulled her arm into my line of sight. Catching the light of the sun was the unmistakable gold loks on the pale skin of her wrist.

She let out another cry. “What is that?”

Next to each other, our wrists bore a matching pattern between two parallel gold lines like bracelets. I stared at them, and she did too, quiet now, before she reached up with her other hand and ran a finger over the marks. “My skin is smooth, like a tattoo, but what—?” Her gaze swung to me, not accusingly but actually *trusting*. “What are these and what do they mean?”

I hadn’t paid much attention to her eyes before. They were a light blue with a dark ring around the outside, and when she looked at me like she did now, my head spun, and my scalp itched. In my mind I swore I could hear a knock, like a rap of knuckles. *Intruder*, my brain screamed. *Reject*.

I dropped her wrist and took a step back. Making no attempt to cover herself, she stood in front of me completely nude with her hands hanging loosely at her sides. Her breasts hung full and heavy, her pink nipples pebbled from the cool qua. And between her legs a thick bush of golden curls hid her cunt from my view.

Then her hands twitched, and she slowly brought one palm between her legs. “What’s wrong?” she asked, and the wariness was

back in my voice.

I didn't look her in the eyes. I couldn't, because I knew those blue pupils would make me want to tell the truth. Unlike most Drixonians, I was a liar.

"Nothing's wrong." I turned my back to her.

"But what—"

"They don't mean anything." I bent down to continue washing myself.

"I don't believe you," she answered quickly.

"Okay." I sighed. Of course they meant something, but they didn't make sense. I was Vinz, a broken son of naught, and it would be a service to everyone for my family line to die out with me. Fatas was flecking with me again. Someone would fix this—Kutzal or Daz. Because no way was this female my mate, let alone a coveted and rare cora-eternal. We weren't a match. I was no one's match.

I glanced down at my cock, which remained soft and thick between my thighs. She'd been right in front of me, the most beautiful female I'd ever seen, and my body could only push her away.

No way would Fatas punish her and me. It was a mistake. It had to be. I'd die before I'd bond her to my flecked-up life.

---

*Amber*

He hadn't eaten me or violated me. Those were two important facts. But he was evasive with a bad attitude. Sometimes he seemed to hate my presence, but *he* was the one who forced me to leave with him.

Crouching in the stream, I rubbed my wrists while the blue alien leaned against a tree trunk on the bank, his back to me. He'd rummaged in the pack and found the pair of pants I'd smuggled out for him. They were a bit long, but he'd slashed at the ends with his

claws to hem them before shoving the remaining clean strips of cloth back into the pack.

Why hadn't he answered me about the wrist markings? We *matched*, which was eerie as hell. When we'd descended the coal chute, I'd felt pain in my wrists, but there'd been pain everywhere, so I hadn't thought it was anything special. They didn't hurt anymore, but my head was still pounding. Inside my mind was a door, and for some reason, I couldn't break into it. I tried to ignore it, but then something would urge me to knock. For some reason, I felt like I *had* to get inside. And that reason, try as I might to ignore it, felt tied to the blue alien currently giving me the silent treatment.

I didn't have any soap, which would have been wonderful, but the water went a long way toward making me feel clean. After rinsing my hair numerous times, I tied it up at the top of my head even though some curls would surely escape throughout the day.

"Coming out now," I called. He didn't respond. Not that it mattered. He saw me naked, and he had zero reaction except to stare in horror at my wrists. His gaze had taken me in from head to toe, but the soft, thick, light blue cock hanging between his legs hadn't even twitched.

I'd tried not to stare, but he was a work of art—muscled and defined with thick thighs and veined arms. I'd felt his scales when we'd been against each other in the stream and they were covered in a soft fur, almost like velvet. I suspected that would be one of the few times he'd let me get close to him again, as he'd seemed to want to put as much physical distance between us as he could.

After shaking off as much as the coal dust as I could, I dressed quickly even as I wished for a change of clothes. "Okay," I said to his back. "I'm dressed."

He turned around, and while he'd been direct before, now he seemed to avoid my eyes. "Let's go."

He made to turn, and I held out my hands. "Wait."

Stopping, he finally looked at my face. "What?"

"I—" *Where did I even start?* "Go where? I don't know who you are or where we're going. Why did you take me with you?"

"I'm Vinz," he grunted.

I waited, but he said no more.

“I’m Amber,” I responded begrudgingly.

He scrunched his nose like he smelled something bad. “Introductions done. What’s your other question?”

I threw my arms up. “Why did you take me with you? Where are we going?”

Something in his eyes shifted, and the corner of his lip curled in the beginning of a mischievous smile. “That was two questions.”

“I have a lot more where those came from.” I snarked back.

His lips curled more until he seemed to catch himself. The grin turned into a sneer. “Great.” The sarcasm dripped from his fangs like blood. “I took you with me because you’re a human. And I’m taking you to another human.”

All my frustrations with this blue alien slipped away at the mention of another human. “What did you say?”

He scratched at the side of his neck. “Another human. Name’s Tash or something.”

My knees buckled, and I reached for a nearby tree to keep me upright. “You know... you know Tasha?”

He nodded like it was no big deal. “Yeah. Lukent rescued her from the Wutarks and took her to Granit.”

I rushed to his side and grabbed his arm. He stiffened immediately, gaze homing in on where we touched. *Okay, no touchy.* I dropped my hands and forced myself to remain calm. “Is she okay? What’s Granit?”

He rubbed his forehead with a grimace. “Fatas, the questions,” he murmured under his breath.

“I’m sorry!” I cried. I’d always been the quiet one of our group and content to let Tasha or Trix do the talking, but I was alone now, and I couldn’t afford to be meek. “Actually, I’m not sorry. I’m not from this planet. I’m not from this freaking galaxy. I shouldn’t be here, but I am, and the only people in my entire world are my friends. We were separated and ever since then, I’ve felt like my heart has been cracked in two. So yeah, I have questions. So how is Tasha?” I stomped my foot, all calmness dissolved as frustrated tears slipped down my cheeks while my voice cracked.

Vinz, surprisingly, didn’t sneer. His jaw clenched, and he glanced away, hands on his hips before his gaze dropped to the ground. “As

far as I know, Tasha is safe. Lukent took her to Granit, which is the Drixonian capital city, because that is where she's safest."

I swiped at my wet face. "Lukent?"

His violet eyes held mine. "My best friend. He would die before any harm came to Tasha."

The way he said those words held a meaning I was missing. "Why?"

"Why?" He laughed softly, a little sadly. "Because we are Drixonians and that's what we do. Our creed is She Is All. We place females of utmost importance in our society, and we devote our lives to their safety."

"Even women not of your own race?"

He didn't even blink. "Yes, even if all our females were still alive."

I had to have heard him wrong. "I'm sorry?"

He gathered his pack on his back and turned away. "Our females are all dead from a virus. Have been for about one hundred and fifty cycles." When he glanced at me over his shoulder, that hard glare was back. "Any more questions before I take you to see Tasha?"

I swallowed. "Um... I guess, not now."

"Flecking great," he muttered. "Stay close to me and don't stop."

He took off at a brisk walk and I had to jog to catch up with him. Suddenly he stopped and turned to stare at me. I stared back. He looked for so long that I began to grow self-conscious. I touched my hair, where the curls were beginning to dry and pouf out around my head. I was sure I looked like a clown, but there wasn't any anti-frizz serum on this planet. "Is something wrong?"

His tongue came out to prod at a fang. Suddenly he turned and those black blades of his slid out of his forearms. I jerked away with a cry, but he ignored me as he slashed at a nearby vine, slicing a foot-long length.

He stepped behind me, and when I tried to turn around, he redirected my shoulders forward. "Um—"

"My blades are called machets, and I won't hurt you with them, so you don't have to be scared everytime I use them."

"Uh, okay. Thanks?"

His fingers tugged awkwardly at my hair, and I winced as he pulled on my scalp. "Ouch."

“Sorry,” he murmured, and he actually sounded sorry.

When he tugged again, my neck snapped back. “Vinz, what are you doing?”

He muttered a curse beneath his breath. “Tying your hair back.”

I blinked. “What?”

“Your hair. It’s long and gets caught on branches when we pass. I don’t want anyone to track us that way.”

The damp weight of my hair left my neck, and my scalp pulled tight, but not painfully so. A hand pressed down on the top of my head, almost like a pet. I cleared my throat, and Vinz stepped in front of me. He scrunched his lips as he surveyed his hair stylist skills and shrugged. “That’ll do.” He plucked one of his own locks. “Never learned how to do much with my own hair.”

“It suits you wild,” I said, without thinking.

His eyes met mine, flashed a dark violet, and then he turned away and strode off.

---

Vinz didn’t talk much, but while he pretended to ignore me, he was very much in tune to my actions. When I tripped over a tree root, his hand was there to keep me upright. When I started to get thirsty, he held out a canteen of water without me needing to ask him. He often changed positions around me, sometimes walking behind, or to my left, or to my right, and I began to realize he always walked on the side where he thought a threat could come from. When I was young, my father used to take me into the city every morning to visit the market where he’d buy me sticky buns that dripped down my arms and onto my clothes. And when we walked on the sidewalk, he’d always walk on the outside, closest to the busy streets.

I found myself grateful for this strange alien’s actions. He didn’t seem excited about this duty of protecting me, but he did his task like it was second nature.

We stopped around mid-day, and while my legs ached, I was still days away from needing rest. Vinz dug through the pack and found the food supplies I’d stowed away for him. He held a loaf of bread in

his hands for a moment before tearing it in half and handing me the largest piece.

I took it, and he quickly withdrew his hand before leaning back against a tree trunk to munch on his own half.

Before eating, I reached for the skin of water. It was one Earth habit I hadn't kicked—to drink water before a meal. Food always tasted better that way. Since there were many times I hadn't had a bit to drink, when it was available I took the opportunity.

After that, I settled back against the tree trunk and picked off bits of the bread. Eating slowly, I meant to savor it.

Patting the worn pack, Vinz asked, "Where did this pack come from?"

I watched his throat bob as he swallowed a large gulp of water from his canteen. "I packed it for you."

"Why?"

"Because they barely fed you. I knew you'd want to eat as soon as you got free."

"At least they fed me." He finished the bread and reached for a strip of dried meat. He chewed on it and braced a wrist on one bent knee.

"Why did you save me?" I asked.

"What?"

"When I..." I cleared my throat. "When I passed out. The loris said you told them to put me in that alcove and then you distracted Heego. Why?"

His eyes shifted. "I told you. *She is All.*"

"So why didn't you save the loris?"

"Once I report about the Joktals to my drexel, I'm sure we will do everything we can to rescue the loris. I rescued you because you were there, and because Tasha wouldn't shut up about needing to find her friends."

Why did he have to speak so condescendingly? "Well, that was nice of Tasha not to 'shut up' about us. I'm sure you would have done the same for your friends."

He finished the stick of dried meat. "I didn't mean it in a bad way. She really wouldn't shut up about it."

I couldn't figure him out. One minute he was snarky with a chip on his shoulder and another he was matter of fact and unbothered. "Am I allowed more questions?"

"I haven't decided yet."

I stifled a laugh at his put-out tone. I nodded at the weapon on his belt, a massive ax with an ornate silver head. "How did you know that weapon was stowed outside the walls?"

"I hid it there."

I frowned. "What?"

"I hid it there."

"Why did you hide it?"

"Because I was about to go inside their gates and I didn't want those fleckers to steal it." He petted the flat edge with gentle fingers. "It's my favorite possession."

"Why did you enter the gates?"

"The questions!" he growled.

Ugh, he was so *frustrating*. "Then elaborate!"

"To get you!" he hollered.

My annoyance quickly bled into surprise. "What?"

"I saw you in the window of the tower." He poked at the dirt and didn't meet my eyes. "I saw you and knew the only way to get you out was to get inside."

"But they... did you try to sneak in and they caught you?"

"No way to sneak in. The only way to get in was get caught."

"But what if they killed you?"

He shrugged. "I didn't think they would."

"You didn't *think*?"

"It all worked out. I didn't expect you to be the one feeding the prisoners, and I also didn't expect you to free us. But here we are."

He said it all like it was no big deal. They'd beaten him repeatedly and treated him like absolute dirt. All to rescue *me*. It'd been a little hard to take his word for it that his creed placed women of high importance in their society. Trust didn't come easy for me, but little by little Vinz was proving with his actions that I could trust him.

Suddenly his head went up, alert gaze staring into the distance. At first I didn't hear anything, but then I could feel a soft, nearly undetectable thumping rattling up my spine from the ground.



Vinz sprang to his feet, grabbing the bag, then me, before racing off like a shot. “Fleeking nose hounds,” he spat, and every muscle in my body went tight.

## SEVEN

*VINZ*

This time Amber didn't squawk, protest, or wriggle. Her body trembled against mine, and I could understand why since the howls of the nose hounds could now be heard in the distance.

I had thought we were far enough out of the Joktal borders now and into Wutark territory. Based on our dealings with the Wutarks, they were strict defenders of their borders. They must really want to kill me if they risked venturing into Wutark territory. I imagined a battle between a Joktal and those smelly, hairy Wutark flecks would be bloody.

Swinging the female onto my back, she had just wrapped her arms around my neck when I leapt up a tree trunk. Amber's breath heated my neck, and I could feel the beat of her cora against my back. Clawing my way to the sturdy bottom branches, I settled there on a crouch, scanning the treeline for the type of foliage I needed.

Spotting the type I needed, I took off toward it, racing over tree branches toward my goal. I learned how to climb trees well from the Kaluma, an allied race on our sister planet Torin.

The howling grew louder, and I could nearly feel the sizzle of the Joktal's whip on my back. Landing on the lower branch of a versillus tree, I climbed hand over hand up the branches until I reached the crude dens of the werble. A large brigger with a curved beak, they

pecked out large holes inside the versillus tree to hide their nests. I peered inside the hole in the trunk, relieved the next was old and abandoned. Not that I really cared about tossing about some werble chicks—they bred like crazy—but I got the sense Amber wouldn't have wanted that. After ripping off a chunk of bark from a nearby branch, I pushed Amber inside the den. I shoved my bulk inside after her then covered the entrance of the den with the bark to disguise our hiding spot.

A small amount of sunlight shone through the thin bark, and I could make out Amber's pale face and large eyes as she sat huddled against me. There was no room to move around, and I had to wrap my arms around her in order to fit inside.

Her fingers clutched my biceps, and I closed my eyes as the familiar itching settled over my scales. My cora pounded, and my head ached as my flight response kicked in. I told myself this had nothing to do with mating, that this was the same thing as carrying her to safety, but her hair tickled my neck, and her breasts pressed against my chest.

This was the only way. We had to hide above ground. We had to stay close. I told myself these words over and over again, but that didn't stop my stomach from rolling and my teeth from grinding together so hard, I swore I cracked a fang.

The heavy footfalls of the nose hounds rumbled up the tree trunk, and soon the voices of Joktal guards followed. I focused less on the feel of Amber pressed against me and more on what the guards were saying.

"Scent is too faint here, and I think the hounds have lost it," growled a Joktal.

"If we return without the Drix or human, Varquis will have our heads."

"I'll relish tearing that Drix bastard apart, but now I can't wait to sink my whip into the thin skin of that human bitch."

Amber's body trembled, and I tightened my arms around her on instinct. She seemed to turn into me, seeking comfort, and I felt my machets begin to rise. I would slice into every single one of those Joktal before they laid a hand on her.

"What did Barz'alk say?" A Joktal said.

I went still. I'd expected the Joktal and Wutark to be at odds but from the sounds of it...

"He can't tell the Drixonians he knows they crossed his border without revealing his alliance with us. Varquis laid into him for not enforcing his borders, so now he's got a whole army protecting his borders to keep the Drix and human *in*. They have no way out. We'll get them. It's only a matter of time."

"Let's head back to the stream where their scent was the strongest and try again."

Chains rattled, and a nose hound woofed. The steps retreated, but I didn't dare move. Despite my muscles cramping, and my throat screaming for water, I kept our position.

Finally, when the sunlight began to dim, I slid back the bark cover and peered outside. I couldn't hear, smell, or see any Joktals or nose hounds. I nearly fell out of the den and had to coax Amber out. She emerged with cautious movements and dried twigs stuck in her hair from the old nest.

She reached for me, and I shuffled away to make more room on the branch for her where I was crouched. Her hand hovered in the air for a moment. "Does it hurt when I touch you?"

Her question surprised me, and I heard that knocking in my mind again. The sound absolutely flecking terrified me. "No," I said stiffly.

"But you—"

"I just don't like it," I barked in my most aggressive tone. "I don't like to be touched."

I thought she'd ask why, and I was all ready with a remark for her to mind her own business but something knowing passed over her features, and she offered me a small smile with a soft, "Okay, I understand."

I blinked at her, wondering if someone had stolen the human full of questions and demands, but she remained quiet and pensive as she sat on the branch and stared off into the distance. The knocking in my mind stopped abruptly and for a moment I almost opened the door I kept firmly closed, locked, and bolted to look around outside.

At the last minute, I shook myself and clamped my jaws shut. No way, that door never opened. Flecking *never*.

I changed the subject. "I guess you heard them talking."

She bit her lip. “Yeah. Are the Wutarks the big hairy guys with tusks?” When I nodded, she sighed. “That’s who brought me here.”

“They took Tasha to their settlement. They planned to toss her off a cliff as a sacrifice.”

Amber’s gasp was nearly a shriek. “What?”

“Lukent rescued her.”

“A *sacrifice*?” Her face crumpled and she wrapped her arms around herself. “She must have been so scared.”

“And you weren’t scared?”

“I mean, sure, but I just had to do a little sweeping—”

“A little sweeping?” I laughed. “You and I both know you were put through more than that. I can’t imagine how scared you were when you first saw the Joktalis fortress. Don’t downplay what happened to you. It’s not a competition on who had it worse.”

I swung my legs below the branch, contemplating what we should do next, until I felt Amber’s eyes boring into the side of my face.

Squinting at her, I grunted, “what?”

“I was scared,” she said simply, and the trembling in her voice made my body go tight. “You’re right. I was really scared too.” She smiled then, and my focus dropped to the curve of her plush lips. My stomach warmed, and I curled my claws into the tree branch at the odd sensation. “You’re kind of hard to read, you know? One minute you’re barking at me gruffly and the next you say kind things. Do you always run this hot and cold or do I bring it out in you?”

No one ever described me as calm. That was why Lukent and I got along so well—he kept me together when I felt like flying apart. But he also treated me carefully, as he was one of the few who knew what I’d been through with the Uldani. Amber was gentle, but she also challenged me. Her presence scrambled my brain and sometimes it was a wonder I could speak clearly around her.

“You bring it out in me,” I answered honestly.

“Is that a good thing or bad thing?”

I didn’t respond. Because to tell the truth, I wasn’t sure.

---

## *Amber*

For a few days, we didn't change positions. While I remained safely tucked in the tree hole, Vinz would creep away on scouting missions, sometimes returning with a bloody, furred carcass which he cooked quickly before covering any remnants of a fire.

Now that we knew the Wutarks were guarding the border, our escape plan was a lot more complicated. And with each passing day, Vinz grew more and more agitated.

One evening, he crouched on the branch right outside our hiding spot with his tail slapping the bark with each frustrated exhale. I sat in the hole, slumped against the side. Fatigue was starting to set in, and I knew I was going to have to sleep soon.

"If I wasn't with you," I said to his back. "What would you do?"

His tail went still and turned slowly on the balls of his big feet. "What would I do?"

"Yeah."

"I'd find the spot on the border with the most Wutarks and take out as many as I could before they took me out."

I blinked. "Before they took you out? If you didn't get free, you mean?"

"I wouldn't get free. Not against a large number of Wutarks."

"Then why would you—"

"Because dying while fighting an enemy in battle is an honor for a Drixonian warrior."

"But what about what you want? A future?"

"A future?" He snorted. "What future, human?"

"You know my name."

"*Amber.*" He curled a lip like he hated using the syllables. "I have no future. This is it. The only reason I care about staying alive now is to get you to safety first."

"Why? Is it because of what the Joktal put you through?"

He laughed. Loudly. But there was zero amusement in his tone, and the sound sent a chill down my spine. "What the Joktal did to me was nothing."

I didn't think it was nothing. They tortured him almost every day. What had this alien been through in his life? "I don't understand."

"*You wouldn't.*"

The vitriol in his voice made me frown. "Are you angry with me?"

Shoulders slumping, he sighed. "No, I'm not angry with you."

Sometimes, the door in my mind seemed to swell from the inside like any moment it would burst, but the bolt stayed firmly in place. "Maybe I would understand," I said softly. "You never know. My life hasn't been rainbows and sunshine since I left Earth, I can tell you that."

His eyes met mine, and they held for a moment. The door's bolt slid open an inch, then stopped just as Vinz turned away with a snap of his neck, giving me the back of his head. "You should rest. You haven't been sleeping."

I knew that sleep was imminent for me. If I didn't rest on my own, my body would soon decide for me, just like it had in front of his cell. "I need to tell you something."

This time he turned around with an expression of concern. "Are you feeling okay?"

I nodded. "Yes, but I do need to sleep soon."

"So sleep."

"I will but..." I absolutely hated having to explain this. "When I'm sleeping, I don't wake up for about two days. Sometimes shorter."

"I won't disturb you."

"No, that's not—" I huffed. "You won't *be able* to disturb me. I won't wake up for anything, not until my body decides it's time."

His head cocked, and suddenly he seemed very interested. "Is that what happened in front of my cell? You were sleeping? I thought you passed out from Heego's blow to your head."

"No, that wasn't why. I had stayed up for too long, and my body decided that was enough."

"Are all humans like that?"

My breathing sped up, and goosebumps broke out on my skin. "No."

He was so close now, nearly blocking out the moonlight filtering in through the den's hole. Violet eyes pierced me. "Why are you different?"

I swallowed. "I told you my life hasn't been easy in this galaxy. How the Joktals treated me wasn't as bad as it could have been. I would know, because I had it worse."

His face was inches from mine, nostrils flaring around the ring through his septum. "Who treated you worse?" His words were nearly a hiss. "Tell me, Amber." This time my name was both a promise and a threat.

This conversation began with me, but I got the sense that I was dealing with something much more than me, and that Vinz was like a snake ready to strike. "It doesn't matter." I said. "That was another planet. Another lifetime."

"It matters," he spat in a voice that shook. "What was done to you will always matter."

I reached for him, only yanking my hand back at the last second as he flinched. "Was something done to you, Vinz?"

With a snarl, he whirled around and in two leaps, retreated to the very far end of the branch. He was maybe ten feet away, but the distance felt like miles. What had just happened? What were we even talking about?

"Vinz?" I called.

"Sleep, Amber." His broad back to me, he spoke through gritted teeth. "Please just sleep. I will keep watch."

I tried to stay awake, but eventually my eyes closed, and sleep took me under.



## EIGHT

*VINZ*

She slept like she was dead. Her body was limp, and her eyes moved rapidly behind her lids. I didn't leave her once. I ate a little, only catching a few small bilket that ventured up the tree and pissed from a high branch. I couldn't bear to leave her alone when she was so vulnerable.

That must have been terrifying for her to sleep around the Joktals and even me. I was thankful she was able to get some rest, but I couldn't stop imagining all the reasons for her odd sleep habits. While I didn't know much about humans, I knew they were diurnal and slept every night. The fact that she could be awake for several rotations was incredibly unusual and almost... not human.

With a damp cloth I wiped her forehead, which beaded with liquid. I'd tasted it and was surprised how salty it was. A few drops dampened the collar of her shirt, and I placed another cold damp cloth there too. She wasn't sick, was she?

Fleck, I was fussing over her like a healer. But I refused to go farther than arms' length from her, so I remained where I was, crouched over this small sleeping human. I'd been so annoyed with all her questions, but now I would have been eager to answer one. Two maximum. I wasn't that desperate. It hadn't even been two rotations, and I missed the quiet calm of her voice and the soft titter

of her laughter whenever she let herself. And her smile... Fatas, her smile. I propped my chin on my bent knees and sighed.

Heego, that flecker. I was glad I killed him. When he'd struck her, I swore I was going to burst out of my scales. How could anyone hit this female? Her skin was thin and delicate. She said another species had treated her worse, and my stomach rolled thinking of who it could be. I had my guesses, but I didn't even want to say the name out loud.

More time passed as I watched the sleeping female until finally her eyelashes fluttered and her lips moved. Slowly, she blinked awake and gave a start when she found me staring right back at her. Her hand flew to her chest, and she jerked so hard that her head hit the side of the den. "Ow," she moaned, rubbing the back of her head and squinted an eye at me. "Damn, you scared me."

"Sorry."

She shook her head. "It's okay." She dropped her hand and wiped her forehead with the back of her hand. "How long was I asleep?"

"A rotation and a half."

She nodded. "That's about normal. I didn't try to stay up this time." She yawned, and I marveled at how blunt her teeth were. She'd been able to chew meat, which surprised me.

"Are you..." she gestured to me. "Going to move? I have to pee."

"Are you okay?"

She opened her mouth, but then shut it and cocked her head, studying me. "Did you watch me?"

"The whole time."

A small smile teased the corner of her lips. "Why?"

"Because if I watched you, then I knew you were okay. I'm sure that's pretty flecking scary to sleep that hard and not be able to defend yourself."

She swallowed and with those captivating eyes on me, gave one decisive nod. "It's absolutely scary. I hadn't slept at all when I was with the Joktal. That was why I passed out. I tried to hold off as long as I could."

"As long as I'm around, I'll watch over you when you sleep."

Her smile grew. "Thank you, Vinz. I hope you're around for a long time."

My stomach warmed, and I almost smiled back until I remembered who and what I was. Clearing my throat, I made to back away when I realized that her hand rested on top of mine. I hadn't even noticed that she'd touched me. And even now, the feel of her skin against mine didn't repulse me. At all.

"Oh, sorry," she yanked her hand away. "I didn't mean to... I'm sorry. I'll be more careful. I know you don't like to be touched. I will respect that."

I couldn't look at her then. My throat closed, my vision wavered at the outside and I quickly turned around so she didn't see my near panic attack. Clearing my throat, I spoke in a slightly strangled voice. "I'll help you down so you can relieve yourself."

"Thank you," she responded quietly.

---

Now that Amber was awake, I felt comfortable enough to venture way from her for a short time. We needed some proper meat for a meal, and I had to scout the borders again.

Leaving her with some food and fresh water, I picked my way through the foliage until I was able to catch sight of the section of the border where I thought we could cross. After I confirmed the status was the same as before, I left as quickly as I came. Along the way, I shot a bilket for meal.

I returned to the tree and knocked on the trunk. A head topped with golden hair peeked out. "You're back."

"Come down for a proper meal."

By the time she picked her way down the trunk, I was roasting the bilket on a spit over a small fire for a meal.

She crouched next to me and watched for a while until her voice cut through the stillness. "I was an experiment."

A chill washed over me, and my cora skipped a beat. I could barely hear her over rushing sound in my ears.

“They wanted to see if humans could be kept awake longer and our senses enhanced,” she continued. “When I first arrived in the lab, they kept me awake for days on end. I don’t know how it is for you, but that’s a torture device for humans. It’s been used on prisoners of war. I thought I was losing my mind several times. There were days I could barely remember my name. And then they injected me with serums. Collected tissue for samples. Eventually I could stay awake for days, but it’s not natural. My sleep is too deep, and every time I let myself close my eyes,” she swallowed and a tear slipped down her cheek, “I wonder if I’ll wake.”

“Who did this to you?” I heard myself ask, even though I knew the answer.

“Uldani,” she whispered.

My fist clenched, and the spit cracked in my hand, plunging the bilket into the fire. I watched the flames engulf the carcass.

*“I don’t understand.”*

*“You wouldn’t.”*

The words I’d flung at her were coming back to haunt me. She *would* understand, but I couldn’t open my mouth and speak the truth of what I’d gone through.

“How did you get free?” I asked instead as I pulled the nearly burnt bilket from the fire. I picked off some of the meat that wasn’t too charred and handed the pieces to her.

She chewed the blackened bits. “We escaped on a ship, which crashed on this planet.”

I kicked at the fire to put it out. “Well, the ones who touched you are dead now.”

“They are?”

I rose to my feet and she followed slowly, watching me closely.

I nodded. I would know, since I’d killed a few myself. “They created the virus that killed our females. Their goal was to weaken us so that they could use us as muscle and labor. It worked... for a little while. We were devastated and adrift at the collapse of our female-led society. When we realized what was happening, we fought for our independence.” I skipped over some events, but that was all she needed to know. “When we realized they were abducting humans, we fought them again, this time to destroy their elite

society. The Uldani in charge now signed a pact that the atrocities they committed wouldn't happen again."

"Wow," she murmured. "I didn't know. We don't get the five o'clock news."

I didn't know what that was. "Well now you know." Her news had shaken me, and if I wasn't already grateful to her for saving me, I was beginning to see her in a new light. After all she'd been through, she still gave a fleck about others.

I slung the pack over my shoulder. "I'm surprised after what was done to you that you'd be willing to rescue a stranger."

She shrugged. "I wasn't sure it was the right decision at the time, but it was the one I made. And I credit my friends for keeping me human." She chewed on the inside of her cheek. "So you only know Tasha? Not Trix or Lu or—"

"Only Tasha," I answered. "But the Drixonians will work hard to find the rest of the females. I'm sure of it. It's one of the reasons Lukent took Tasha to Granit, to appeal to the head drexel named Daz."

She nodded. "Okay."

"He's mated to a human."

Her head went up like a laser shot. "What did you say?"

"His clavas rescued a bunch of women from a ship before the Uldani could get their hands on them."

"And they..." her eyes bugged out, "forced them to *mate* them?"

I sneered. "There was no forcing. Drixonians can be very charming when they want to be."

The fire I liked flared in her eyes. "I guess that trait skipped you, huh?"

I barked out a laugh, which surprised us both. "Female, you wouldn't resist me if I decided to waste my charms on you."

She snorted. "Okay, sure." Crossing her arms over her chest, she looked away with a huff. "*Waste my charms on you*. As if." Then she turned and speared me with a look. "So humans and Drixonians are sexually compatible?"

That heat swirled in my belly, and I felt an uncomfortable weight between my legs. I shifted my weight. "Very," I answered.

She held my gaze, and that weight grew heavier as a shudder slid down my spine. Her chest heaved, and from beneath her thin shirt, two small hard points appeared. Looking away quickly, she swallowed, and I watched her throat bob. “Did this Lukent like Tasha?”

“Of course he did.”

Her head whipped back to mine. “He did? Will he ask her to... be his mate? I don’t know your rituals.”

“He won’t.”

“Why?”

“Because he’s a son of naught.”

I handed her a bit of jerky with some hard cheese and began to walk. She jogged to my side. “What’s a son of naught?”

“We’re Drixonian outcasts.”

“Why?”

“The *questions!*”

“Then *answer!*”

She had a way of breaking me down until I blurted out everything. “Our fathers were deserters of the Drixonian army, and Drixonian society rule is to punish all his living male offspring. All the members of the Lone Howl clavas, which I’m a part of, is a son of naught.”

She wrinkled her nose like she smelled something bad. “That’s barbaric.”

“It’s not barbaric. It’s an effective deterrent. There aren’t many deserters.”

“But it’s not your fault!”

I shrugged. “Doesn’t matter.” I glanced at her sidelong. “So I can’t mate because I can’t procreate. My bloodline ends with me. I have the brand on the back of my neck to prove it.”

Her eyes went impossibly wide. “Who says?”

*Fatas, deliver me from curious females.* “Everyone.”

“Not me!” She stomped around me and stopped abruptly at my front. I nearly trampled her. “What are you doing?”

“So your society collapsed but they are still keeping this archaic rule? Who makes the laws now? Did you petition anyone?”

I threw my hands out to the sides. “It doesn’t matter. Who am I going to mate?”

“Maybe you’ll meet an amazing human female and fall in love.”

“I don’t know what love is.”

“That’s because you’ve never been in love.”

“No, I mean my translator doesn’t know the word.”

She bit her lip as a red flush bloomed on her cheeks. “Oh.”

She remained quiet, and I couldn’t help myself from opening my dumb mouth and asking a dumb question. “So what does it mean?”

Slowly her eyes met mine and a sly grin curled her lips. “Do you really want to know?”

“Nevermind,” I grunted, and stepped around her.

“Hold on!” She leaped in front of me again, and I planted my feet firmly, hands on my hips, as I looked to the sky for patience.

“Love is different for different people,” she began. “Romantic love between two people is about...” she made a clicking sound with her tongue. “Okay, I’ll describe what I think love is.”

“Get on with it,” I growled, even though I very much *did* want to hear her answer. I just couldn’t let her know about my curiosity. I’d never hear the end of it.

“For me, romantic love begins with respect. You respect each other. And you’re attracted to each other... when you touch, your belly gets warm and fluttery.” Her gaze had gone unfocused, and a soft smile played on her lips. I couldn’t take my eyes off her.

“And you don’t want to leave their side. You want to protect and care for them. You find yourself thinking about them all the time even when you’re apart.” Finally her eyes met mine. “You want to spend your life with them. That’s real love to me.”

And then I blurted out a question I immediately regretted. “Have you ever been in love?”

Her smile faded. “Romantic love?” Her gaze dropped. “Crushes and stuff. Sure. Real love? No.” She lifted her head. “But I still have hope I’ll find it. No matter the planet I’m on.”

“I hope you do,” I said hoarsely, and I meant every word. “I really hope you find love, Amber.”

## NINE

*Amber*

I really, really wanted to know where we were going, but I was ninety-nine percent sure Vinz would strangle me if I asked another question, so I kept my mouth shut. He'd let me know when I absolutely had to know something. After our conversation, he'd fallen silent with a scowl marring his forehead.

Meanwhile, I stewed about his situation. I understood different cultures and I was trying to be respectful, but I couldn't accept Vinz's treatment. After how he'd been shunned by his own people, he still abided by his creed. He had friends in the other sons of naught, as he'd said this Lukent was his best friend. I wondered what Lukent was like. What had Tasha thought when she first met him? Was he as frustrating as Vinz?

It seemed like Vinz's clavas wasn't completely ostracized, and I wondered what this Daz was like, as well as his human mate. He'd mentioned several females. I hoped they were happy and healthy and most of all, that their way of life now was as much of their choice as it could be.

I couldn't lie and say I wasn't happy to hear about the Uldani's demise. That civilization had been corrupt and cruel. Taking down the elite regime and letting the rest rebuild sounded like a good



thing. There'd been a few kind Uldani, but I'd had limited interactions with most.

We had been walking for what felt like forever when Vinz stopped and held his hand up, stopping me in my tracks as well. I knew enough now not to say a word. Instead I crouched down and made myself as small as possible. Crouching at my side, Vinz pointed ahead of us.

For a moment, I had no idea what I was looking at, but then my eyes focused on large shapes, like finding Where's Waldo. A white tusk moved into the light before once again hiding away, and I sucked in a breath. Three Wutarks were hidden in a densely packed area of dried foliage so their brown furry hides nearly blended in.

I didn't remember much of them. I'd only just woken when they'd delivered me to the Joktalis fortress, but even now I swore I could smell their stink on the breeze. I wrinkled my nose, and Vinz muttered under his breath. "Smelly mother fleckers."

"How are we going to get past them?" I whispered.

"We're not."

"Oh," I frowned. "Then how—"

"We're going through them."

I poked my finger in my ear. "I'm sorry. Did you say *through*?"

He hefted the ax in his hands and speared me with an intense glare as he repeated slowly. "Through."

"Wait—"

"Stay here and don't move. I need to sneak up on them because they're fast as fleck."

"Um—"

He grasped my chin and pulled my face close to his until his breath warmed my cheek. "In this situation, you have to let me do it my way. I won't let them get to you, okay?" He rolled his shoulders and stretched his neck with a feral grin. "I have some aggression to get out."

I pulled my lips between my teeth and nodded. He actually looked happy. Downright delighted. And it wasn't like I had sympathy for those warhog aliens. They'd stolen my friends. They'd hurt Trix. I hugged my arms to my chest. "Hurt one for me too."

He went still and his head swung to me. "What?"

I cleared my throat. "They stole my friends and burnt down our camp. Land a hit for me."

His grin turned manic. "Now I think I understand what love means."

My mouth dropped open, but I couldn't get another word out, as he suddenly leapt away on silent feet, ax at the ready with a white-knuckled grip.

The Wutarks moved slightly, and I could determine the outline of their bodies. But Vinz? Even while creeping through the vegetation, I could barely see him. His scales blended in with the blue and purple leaves.

Still, those Wutarks were huge, bigger than Vinz, and anxiety unfurled in my gut like a snake and tightened around my lungs. Soon, I could only hear my breath and the occasional snort of a Wutark.

A brief whistling sound rent the air followed by the thunk of a blade in a tree near the Wutarks. The trunk shuddered and leaves fell. A deep voice bellowed, followed by a rallying, excited cry that could only be Vinz.

Metal clanged on metal. Another bellow. I held my breath as I waited for the battle sounds to stop, as a wet smack, like flesh on flesh, sent a terrified shiver down my spine.

A blur streaked toward me, and I thought it was Vinz. I stood up, but as the blur drew closer, the color was all wrong for Vinz. This figure was massive, and brown, and had large tusks. I opened my mouth to scream just as a crack echoed off the trees around me. The figure came to an abrupt stop with an ax head cleaved through its skull. Blood leaked down the Wutark's neck. It took one step toward me, then two. Backing up, I tripped over a root and went down just as the massive body wavered and hit the ground with a thud.

Standing behind him was Vinz, chest heaving, face streaked with a dark liquid. His eyes were feverishly bright as he stepped on and over the body before falling to his knees in front of me. His hands roamed my body, from my face to my arms to my thighs, and I didn't miss the tremble in his fingers. "Are you okay? Did he touch you? Are you hurt?"

I stared at him, relief dousing the adrenaline roaring through my blood until I was able to spit out a few words. “Now who’s asking a lot of questions?”

His gaze shot to mine, and his eyes narrowed before he sat back on his haunches. His shoulders shook and then his head dropped as he wheezed with near silent laughter. “I guess that means you’re okay.”

“I’m okay.”

“Sorry, that one got away from me.”

I didn’t look at the body. “I noticed.”

He waved a hand at the fallen enemy. “Took care of it though. I was worried I lost my touch, but my accuracy is still perfect.”

“So there was a chance that the ax would have missed him and hit me?”

He held his thumb and forefinger about an inch apart. “Slight chance.”

“Vinz!”

He threw back his head and laughed. “I’m just kidding. I would have hit the tree over your head. Not you.” Leaping to his feet, he turned and wrenched the ax from the Wutark’s head with a sickening crunch. I held my hand over my mouth to hide my gag.

“I declare the borders are now open,” he gestured his hand with a flourish. “Welcome to the common land, female. Soon we’ll be at camp dining on stew and sleeping with proper furs.” He patted his stomach. “Can’t wait.”

---

We walked for nearly two days, only stopping to eat. This was one of the few times I found my alter convenient, as Vinz was able to stay awake for long stretches as well. I was burning through my energy fast, though, and I knew I’d need to sleep soon.

For a while we’d been walking among in a jungle-like climate, but soon the foliage began to thin and the air grew cold as we began a slow ascent. Along the way, Vinz had been rubbing his wrists for a while, and finally I asked him, “Do they hurt?”

He snapped to attention. "What?"

"Your wrists. Do they hurt?" I ran a finger over my own. "Mine are fine."

"They don't hurt."

He squinted at me before pulling the scraps from his torn pants from the pack. Wrapping them around my wrists, he arranged the fabric so they completely covered my gold marks. Then he met my eyes with a far more serious expression than I'd ever seen him make, and a tad of vulnerability swam in his eyes. "Don't tell anyone about these and keep them covered."

I tugged my hands out of his grip with a frown. "Why?"

He wrapped his own wrists with the remaining scraps. "Just please... until I tell you it's okay, don't tell anyone."

"Is this bad? Some sort of curse?"

His shoulders bucked with a snort as he murmured. "A curse. For you, maybe."

"What?"

He shook his head. "It's not bad. But my drexel will ask a lot of questions that I don't know how to answer yet. Do me this favor, please?"

Well, when he put it this way. "Okay. I promise."

He flashed a small smile. "Thank you."

We kept walking, and I so badly wanted to whine about my sore feet, but at least I had some sort of thin shoe. Vinz had been walking on bare feet since we left. But his were covered in a thick layer of scales that seemed to protect his soles from every sharp stick and rock.

He'd offered to carry me numerous times, but I wanted to pull my own weight. I tried not to limp, but he didn't miss my uneven gait. "Almost there," he assured me. I smiled in return, too tired to even pester him with questions. The only thing keeping me going was the possibility of seeing Tasha.

It was maybe another hour or two when we crested a small hill and stepped onto a flat shelf of rock. There, sitting around a large fire on a thick log, was a Drixonian who didn't seem at all surprised by our presence as he rubbed a cloth over a long silver sword.

We stood on a cliff, and in the distance, the sun shimmered off the surface of a large ocean. The smell of saltwater hung in the air.

Vinz held his arms out to his sides with a big grin. "Look who's back? And I have a present."

The large Drixonian propped the sword against the log and stood. He didn't smile, and his eyes narrowed at me slightly as he approached us. Then his attention shifted to Vinz just as he balled a fist and slammed it into Vinz's shoulder. "Where the fuck have you been?"

"Hey!" I called out without meaning to, but the meaty smack had to have hurt. And for fuck's sake, Vinz had already been hurt enough. But when the large Drixonian's purple gaze slid to me with a glare, I immediately dropped my chin. That didn't stop me from murmuring. "He's still healing."

"He's still healing," the alien muttered. "What is it with these humans worrying about our injuries?"

"I'm fine." Vinz flexed his biceps.

"You look fine," the Drixonian said. "Now where have you been?"

"Here and there." Vinz flapped a hand casually. "Running from nose hounds. Saving humans. Finding an entire city full of enemies hiding in Wutark territory. No big deal."

"*What?*" The Drixonian roared.

"Can we talk over some food?" Vinz sniffed the air and patted his stomach. "We're starving."

The Drixonian sighed heavily as he rubbed his forehead. "I'm Kutzal," he said to me. "Drexel of the Lone Howl."

"Amber," I said, feeling like a puny weakling under his intense gaze. It was very evident to me why he was the leader here. He terrified me, although Vinz seemed to find him harmless. But then, Vinz wasn't scared of much unless I was threatened. So that meant... I was safe here. Slowly, my shoulders unknotted, and I straightened my spine. "Nice to meet you."

"You're safe here." Kutzal's clawed fingers twitched. "I'm not very good with pleasantries."

Vinz snorted.

"I don't need pleasantries," I said. "Just safety, please."

Kutzal nodded. "Let's get you two fed. And then I want a full report."

"Yeah, yeah," Vinz said, walking around Kutzal toward the fire. "So what's cooking today?"

We took a seat by the fire, and it was then I noticed the top of a flight of stairs carved that descended down the cliff face. From there, a Drixonian emerged carrying a tray of steaming bowls. This one looked younger than Kutzal and Vinz. His face was very smooth, and his black hair wasn't quite as long. He smiled at me before handing me a bowl. Inside, large chunks of meat and vegetables swam in a thick broth. The aroma had me salivating.

"Qua?" Vinz asked.

The young Drixonian gave him a fresh skin of water, and he immediately handed it to me. Then he settled back on his log to focus on his own food. I stared at him, then at the water. As much as Vinz pretended not to care about anything, he sure noticed small details about me, like how I liked to drink water before eating.

From his belt, he pulled a length of vine and pulled my hair back into a quick ponytail. He'd done it a few times since that first awkward style, and he'd gotten pretty good at it now. I told him I could do it on my own, but he seemed to insist he could secure it better. He nodded at my bowl. "So you don't get your hair in it."

This was sort of our pre-meal ritual now, so I didn't even think much about it until I found Kutzal's gaze narrowed on us with an uncomfortable glare to it.

Before I could even dip a spoon into the stew, Vinz upended the entire bowl into his mouth. The broth dripped down his chin and onto his pants. He didn't even bother wiping his mouth as he glanced up. "Can I have another?"

Guilt twisted my stomach. He must have been starving eating nothing but gruel in the cell, and I'd noticed that he'd always given me the majority of the meat from any kill. I shoved my bowl into his hands. "Here, have mine." I glanced up at the young Drixonian. "Can you get me a bowl, please?"

He blinked at me with wide eyes. "Yes, of course."

As he hurried away, Kutzal continued to watch me closely. His gaze dipped to my hands, then back to me, before sliding to Vinz

who was once again pouring the entire bowl down his throat.

He dropped it on the ground and slumped forward to brace his arms on his thighs. "Fleck, that was good."

"Why are you eating like you haven't been fed for days?" Kutzal asked.

"He was barely fed in that cell," I said.

Once again, I earned a glare and decided to try harder to keep my mouth shut.

Kutzal's shoulders tensed, and his nostrils flared. "A cell?" He spoke with a deadly calm.

Swallowing, I pressed my lips together and bit down on my tongue.

After guzzling a skin of water, Vinz began to talk, starting with when he saw through the tower window at Joktalis. I zoned out a few times, as the young Drixonian returned with three more bowls of stew, and I ate one and half, while Vinz polished off the rest while talking. Kutzal listened intently, sighing often and other times gritting his teeth in anger.

When Vinz got to the part where he killed three Wutarks, I thought Kutzal was going to pass out. His head rolled back, and he stared at the sky for a long time while Vinz finally fell silent.

Finally Kutzal inhaled deeply and stared into the fire. "You and Lukent. So reckless."

"Where is Lukent?" Vinz asked.

"He's out trying to find the trail of the rest of the females."

"Did Axton and Tasha make it to Granit safely?"

Kutzal cocked his head. "Axton and Tasha?" His nubbed brow lifted. "Ah, no."

I nearly fell off the log. "What? No?"

"Axton and Tasha didn't go to Granit."

This guy was just like Vinz. He answered with as few words as possible. "Are they here? Is she safe?"

"They should be back soon," Kutzal said, seconds before footsteps could be heard traveling up toward the cliff. He gestured with a flick of his claws. "There they are."

Two Drixonians stepped out of the treeline first, and from behind them, I caught a glimpse of brown hair. Pale skin. Tasha's face lifted,

and I couldn't hold back my shriek. "*Tash!*"

I leapt off the log, nearly tumbling into the fire as I raced toward my friend who I never thought I'd see again. Tasha's face went up, and when she saw me, her eyes registered shock before she answered my scream with one of her own. "*Amber!*"

The two Drixonians slid out of the way just in time as we met in a crash of limbs and a lung-squeezing hug. The tears streamed down my face, and my shoulders shook as I sobbed and laughed, my emotions rocking like a storm-ravaged ship.

"Oh my God, oh my God," Tasha blubbered into my neck. Her fingers combed through my curls. "I never thought... Oh my God. You're here. You're really here."

She held me at arm's length and ran her hands over my face, my arms, and my waist. "Are you okay? Hurt anywhere? How did you get here?"

I turned and pointed at Vinz, who sat uncharacteristically quiet, his gaze locked in on one of the Drixonians who now stood just a little behind Tasha. He was large—taller than Vinz—and scars marred his face and chest. But his eyes were kind and shifted between Tasha and me while a soft smile played at his twisted lips. With his hands clasped behind his back, he cut an imposing figure.

"I'm fine," I said to Tasha. "Are you?"

She nodded, biting her lip as tears streaked her face. "I'm fine. In fact, I'm really good. And now that you're here, even better." She turned and brushed her fingers along the arm of the Drixonian behind her. "This is Lukent. He's..." she hesitated and then shot me a nervous smile. "He saved me."

"Vinz said you went to some place called Granit. Why did you come back?"

She squeezed my hand. "There's a lot to explain. Do you need to eat? Sleep?"

"I ate, and I—" I glanced at Lukent and at the Drixonians listening to our conversation. I wasn't eager for them to know about my alter. Did they know about Tasha? "I'm not tired."

"Let's talk in private." She grabbed my hand. "We'll head down to my hut."



I squeezed her hand back, still barely able to believe she stood in front of me. "I'd like that."

## TEN

VINZ

Talking in excited tones, the females descended the cliff stairs. Lukent walked toward me, and my world seemed to shift on its axis. The last time I'd left the Lone Howl camp, Axton had taken Tasha to Granit, and Lukent was out on a hunting mission.

Tasha was supposed to stay in Granit with the other human females and likely find a proper Drixonian warrior as a mate. She wasn't supposed to be here.

And Lukent most certainly wasn't supposed to have *flecking loks on his wrists*. My vision tunneled down, and I couldn't take my eyes off the gold bands. Tasha wore a long-sleeved shirt so I hadn't seen her wrists, but I would bet a stick of yuza that she bore matching ones.

"Vinz," Lukent said in his calm deep voice.

But to me, he sounded like he could have been on another planet. "Why—?" I heard myself say. My dry throat clicked. "Why do you have loks?"

"Brother," he said, softer this time, and I finally lifted my eyes to his. I hated what I saw in his purple eyes. Concern, caution, and a little bit of pity.

I had to snap out of this. Pity? No flecking way would Lukent pity me. "What's going on?"

“Sit.”

“I’m fine standing.”

Lukent sighed. “Don’t be stubborn. Sit.”

I looked to Kutzal and Axton to back me up on this madness. Why was no one losing their minds over Lukent’s loks. But they were already seated with their legs stretched out. Axton looked half asleep already.

“I feel like I’m in another dimension,” I murmured as I sat down heavily.

Lukent sat down, his body turned toward mine. “Brother.”

“I heard you the first time,” I spat. He only called me brother when he was about to say shet I didn’t like.

“Tasha and I are mates.”

I stared at the fire. This wasn’t supposed to happen to us. Any of us. Not the sons of naught. I didn’t give a fleck about me, but I couldn’t stand to see Lukent suffer. He was the best of all of us. “How did this happen?”

“It just did.”

I ground my teeth together. “We can tell Daz she died, and you can cover your wrists whenever we have to meet him. We can keep this a secret—”

“He knows.”

I whirled to Lukent and punched him in the shoulder. He winced. “He *knows*? How? How could you be so *stupid*?” Lukent was smiling, the stupid flecker. “Quit smiling.”

“It’s okay, Vinz. Daz is okay with it.”

“He’s okay with a son of naught taking one of his precious flecking females?”

Lukent’s brows lowered, and his fist clenched. “She’s not his female. The only female who belongs to him is his mate.”

“Whatever,” I muttered.

I rubbed my wrists and glanced at the cliff stairs. “Are the females okay?”

“What’s wrong with your wrists?” Kutzal asked.

Dropping my hands between my bent knees, I answered nonchalantly. “I was shackled and they’re a little raw.” I cleared my throat. “Amber’s are the same.”

I couldn't tell them about our loks. Lukent never belonged as a son of naught anyway. He was the most honorable and honest among us. But I wasn't Lukent. I wasn't like any of the Lone Howl clavas. I was something worse. I would never be allowed to mate, and I shouldn't be. I didn't want to be. I couldn't be.

Amber would be treated terribly just for being mated to me, and that I couldn't bear. She was brave, beautiful, and warm. I was cold, cynical, and tainted.

"Why were you so deep behind the borders?" Kutzal asked. "I told you not to."

I'd never tell Kutzal the reason I'd traveled as far as I did was all due to blond hair swaying in the breeze. The lock of blonde hair I'd braided into my own lay hidden beneath my dark mane. I should cut it out before anyone noticed, but I couldn't bear to part with it. I shrugged. "Does it matter now?"

"Vinz—"

"I got one of the females back. Four more to go. Everyone's happy. Can you spare the scolding?"

Kutzal rubbed his forehead. "So they knew about us before you ever entered?"

"Yes. They wanted to know what clavas I was from, and they had questions about Granit. They are a threat. Before we escaped, Amber said they were preparing for visitors. And my torture and execution was going to be the entertainment."

"If I got even a snip of your hair, I would have laid waste to the entire city," Kutzal's nostrils flared, and his big hands curled into fists.

I grinned at him. "Aw, Kutz. You like me. You really, really like me."

"Shut the fleck up," he growled.

"I, uh, killed three Wutarks at the border." I winced. "I wasn't clean about it."

Lukent dropped his head between his shoulders with a sigh.

"What?" I protested. "We know now that there is a reason they were protected their borders, and it was to hide the Joktals who've been preparing not so nice things for us, so why does it matter anymore?"

"Because we want a little time to tell Daz and lay out a strategy."

“Well... might need to speed up that timeline,” I muttered.

“Swear to Fatas, Vinz, you’ll be the death of me.”

“Nah, I’ll go first. We all know that.” I stood up with a stretch and smacked my stomach. “For now, I’m going to get clean, take a nap, eat, and then smoke myself into a stupor. In that order. Any complaints?”

Kutzal glared at me.

“I was in a cell and beaten for days. I think my arm got broken.” I wiggled it in his face. It had since healed but had hurt like a mother flecter when I’d heard the crack of the bone. “Be nice to me.”

“Go,” he growled. I took a step over the log on the way to the cliff stairs when he called out. “Tasha will take care of your human.”

I stopped and swallowed. My wrists burned, and the knocking in my head pounded. I turned and spoke words that felt like spikes on my tongue. “She’s not *my* human.”

They both stared at me, but I was done talking, for once. I turned and walked away, intent on that nap where I’d like dream about golden hair.

---

## *Amber*

“They what?” I screeched. “A *sacrifice*?”

“It’s fine now,” Tasha waved her hand with nonchalance, but I could see the slight tremble in her fingers. She had just informed me the Wutarks intended on tossing her off a cliff to her death as a sacrifice to their god. With a quick diversion, Lukent had saved her at the last minute.

We sat on the bed pallet in her room, covered in a thick fur that felt like a pillow beneath my butt. I leaned up against the wall with my knees pulled to my chest while Tasha lounged on her hip, head propped on her fist. The hut was just one room with a small door that led to a cleanser and expeller. It wasn’t fancy, but the furs were warm, and a lantern provided both heat and light. Fur cloaks hung on

hooks on the wall, and there was even an antler decoration that reminded me of a bar back home.

I reached for her free hand and held it. “Hey, we talked about this, remember? It’s okay to acknowledge the trauma of what we’ve been through. All of this has after effects that I don’t think we’re fully equipped to deal with.”

Tasha sighed. “I know. I think I’m becoming a little numb to it now.” She squeezed my hand. “What about you? Are you okay?”

I’d already told her about Joktalis, and she’d been horrified. Like her, I felt somewhat numb to the experience. “I’m much better now that I saw you. Do you know anything about the other girls?”

She shook her head. “We’re trying to track where they were taken. We visited our old camp which...” she blew out a harsh breath. “Was burned to the ground.”

“Burned,” I echoed on a near whisper. All that work we’d done to make a home for ourselves, gone in a second. But those were material things. What mattered was finding Trix, Neve, Lu, and Maisie. “Did you find anything useful yet?”

“Not yet,” Tasha said. “But we’re hopeful. The Drixonians are good trackers, and especially this clavas. I won’t give up as long as I live.”

“Me either. I’ll do anything I can to help.”

“Lukent said Vinz is a great tracker, so I’m glad he’s back. This whole time, Kutzal thought Vinz was fucking off, and instead he was imprisoned with you. What a coincidence that one of the prisoners you had to feed was a Drixonian. I don’t think any of the others would have freed you and kept you safe.”

“It wasn’t really a coincidence.”

“It wasn’t?”

“He said he came upon the fortress and saw me in the window—”

“Wait,” She stopped me with her palm in the air. “He just... came up on the fortress? Don’t let Kutzal hear that. There are boundaries that they are supposed to respect, and from what you said before, Vinz was *way* past those boundaries.”

I shrugged. “He said he just found it, and when he was searching the area, he saw me and recognized me as a human.”

“And then got caught?”

I chewed the inside of my lip. "Um, no."

"No?"

"He got caught on purpose so he could get inside to find me."

Tasha blinked, and then let out a long low whistle. "Lukent did a whole lot of sacrificing to save me but getting shut in a cell and beaten every day takes the cake. I did not expect that of Vinz either. He's kind of an asshole."

My spine snapped straight. "He's a son of naught. He's been treated like shit his whole life. He has a reason to be an asshole."

Tasha stared at me before speaking quietly, like trying to calm a riled beast. "I know, honey. Lukent is a son of naught too. I'm just saying that Vinz is a little rough around the edges."

I couldn't stop myself from defending him. Staring at the wall over Tasha's shoulder, I forced myself to keep the anger out of my voice. Sure Vinz was an asshole, but he was *my* asshole. "He is, but it's a coping mechanism."

Tasha moved her head until she met my eyes. "I've never heard you defend someone like you're defending Vinz. Not even yourself."

"He saved my life." It was time for a subject change. "What's Lukent like?"

"He's quieter than Vinz, but dependable, loyal, and caring."

"Caring?"

Tasha's cheeks reddened, and she glanced away. "Yeah, I..." she cleared her throat. "You know, making sure I eat and all that."

"Are you still getting nosebleeds?"

She nodded. "That was why I didn't smell you when we were close to camp. My nose was a little stuffed up. The first time my nose bled in front of Kent, he thought I was dying."

"Is his name Kent or Lukent?"

Tasha hesitated a moment. "I think I'm the only one who calls him Kent."

"After Vinz and I escaped and he mentioned your name, I thought I was dreaming. But he said you were going to some city named Granit? Why are you here?"

Sitting up, Tasha sighed. She slid closer to me and placed a palm on top of my knee. I pushed her hair away from her eyes, so grateful

I was able to touch and see her when I didn't think I'd ever be able to again. But her expression was uneasy. "What? Is something wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong but..."

"You can tell me anything. I think we all know judgement was thrown out the window long ago."

"Lukent and I—" Her teeth bit down on her lower lip.

My heart pounded as the heat of her palm warmed my knee. "You're what?"

"We're together," she blurted.

I cocked my head. "Together as in..."

"They call them mates. We're mates. Um, like, boyfriend and girlfriend, or whatever. But..." she clasped her hands together. "For life."

"So like married," I said slowly.

"Yeah."

I blinked at her.

She blinked back.

I took a minute to process this. "So humans and Drixonians are... compatible. Sexually."

She swallowed. "Yes."

I sat cross-legged and reached for her shoulders. "Were you forced into this? I'll run away with you right now if it's not what you want."

A smile crossed her face. "I appreciate the support, but no, I want this. I want him. I know it sounds crazy, and it's okay if you don't understand."

"I don't think it sounds crazy, and I do understand. I'm not judging you for finding happiness in the life we were dealt. I only want to make sure it's your choice."

Her eyes shone, and she sniffled a little as a tear leaked out the corner of her eye. "It's what I want, and it's my choice. He's amazing to me, and I trust him with my life."

I pulled her into a hug and breathed in her clean scent. Nuzzling my nose into her neck, I reveled in the warmth of her touch. "I'm happy for you. Don't ever worry about telling me things like this."

"Thank you, honey," she sniffled again. "I feel better now that you know."



I eased out of the hug and held her at arm's length. "Can we celebrate? I wish I could throw you a bridal shower."

She laughed. "Stop. I don't need appliances, and gift cards here are useless here."

I touched the fur cape wrapped around her shoulders. "This is nice. Where do I get one of these?"

"I'll tell Lukent to get you one. Or you can ask Vinz."

"I'll ask him."

"Come on," she pulled me to my feet. "I'm sure you're eager to get clean, and I got a cleanser with your name on it."

I could have cried with happiness. The only thing missing now... were the rest of our girls. And once I was back on my feet, I wouldn't rest until we found them.

## ELEVEN

*Amber*

Vinz was nowhere to be found, so Tasha asked Lukent to get me a fur cloak. I was more comfortable with it on, as the sleeves went down to my knuckles and covered the fabric ties hiding my loks. Tasha hadn't asked what they were for, and I didn't offer. I promised Vinz I wouldn't tell anyone, and I meant to keep that promise.

This area of land, up on a cliff and overlooking a sea, was cooler than I was used to on this planet, so the fur cloak was welcome. Tasha also gave me new clothes and sturdier shoes, which I was eternally grateful for. I'd tossed my old clothes, still stained with soot, into the water below.

Huts were built on ledges etched into the side of the cliff, connected by a network of stairs. A long rope bridge hung between another cliff in the distance where more ledges and huts were built.

The common areas remained on the top of the cliff which consisted of a large fire, Kutzal's hut which doubled as a meeting place, and a training arena for the warriors, and a cooking kiln. Strips of bloody meat hung nearby the fire, and large hides baked in the sun.

"Drixonians are made up of several clavases," Tasha explained as we walked through the settlement past some warriors braiding

each other's hair. "The clavas with the most power is led by Daz. He, along with a bunch of his warriors, have human mates too."

"More humans?"

She nodded. "I met them. They are happy and many of them have children."

"Children with... the Drixonians?"

"Yes."

"Wow..." I watched the two warriors rise from their hair time and begin to slice up the meat. "I bet those kids are cute."

"A-dor-able," Tasha smile.

"Do you want a little baby Lukent?" Grinning, I nudged her with my shoulder.

Her cheeks flushed, and she kicked at a rock on the ground. "I don't know. I guess so."

"Well, are there... condoms in this world?"

She snorted. "No."

"And you are...?" I poked an index finger through a circle made with my other hand.

Tasha rolled her eyes. "You can say sex."

"Well, are you?"

"Yes!" she yelled. The warriors cutting the meat straightened and stared at us. She laughed awkwardly and waved. "Hi there."

They grunted in response and then resumed their task. I was still stuck on this alien sex thing. Tasha glanced at me out of the corner of her eye. "Do you want details?"

"No," I sniffed and crossed my arms over my chest. "That's between you and your blue husband."

"Mate."

"Whatever."

We walked for a while in silence until she said cautiously. "A-are you grossed out?"

No, no I wasn't grossed out. I was... intrigued. I couldn't say I'd been thinking about sex while out with Vinz, but there were times I felt my bones go liquid when the warmth of his body was pressed against mine. But he didn't like to be touched, so Vinz and I wouldn't have the relationship Tasha and Lukent did. I tried not to be envious

of that. After all, Vinz was prickly, kind of an asshole, and had an anger problem. So I didn't want that bond with him... did I?"

"Amber?" Tasha asked, dipping her head to meet my eyes.

I quickly shook my head. "I absolutely am not grossed out. Lukent is hot. Kutzal is hot. Almost all these guys are hot."

Shoulders dropping with relief, Tasha smiled. "They are, aren't they? I didn't think Lukent was handsome when we first met, but then I got to know him, and now I think he's...wildly attractive." A flush went up her neck. "He's almost just so damn capable. The guy can skin a rodent thing, build a fire, cook it, and fight off like three enemies at the same time. That's hot."

In my head, I could hear the solid thunk of the axe blade slamming into the Wutark's head, and then Vinz's intense gaze immediately finding me. I never in my wildest dreams would have thought that would have been hot, but it *was*. In this galaxy, a man with a deadly axe throw was one you wanted by your side.

"I know what you mean." I smiled to myself.

"Do you like Vinz?"

I frowned at her immediately. "What? No. We're friends. Trauma bonded or something. But just friends."

"Just checking."

"Don't pressure me into romance just because you're happy and getting laid," I flicked her on the ear.

She laughed. "All right, all right."

Up head, Lukent sat with Kutzal near the fire with a variety of weapons laid out on thick skins. I gazed around, expecting Vinz to be nearby. Lukent was his best friend, so they'd be hanging out together... right? But Vinz wasn't around. I frowned. "Where did he go?"

"Huh?" Tasha asked.

I shook my head. "Nothing."

She stopped next to the skin of weapons and propped her hands on her hips. "What's this?"

"Cleaning the weapons," Lukent answered. "Want to help?"

"Is this a regular thing?"

"Not usually," Kutzal grunted. "But Vinz started a war."

"He did?" I asked.

Kutzal didn't look up at me. "It was inevitable. He just brought it a little closer."

Lukent reached for a weapon near my leg, and the fur cap around his shoulders drifted back to his elbows. When I caught sight of his bare wrists, my breath caught in my throat.

He had loks—golden bands marked on his scales in a pattern different than mine. But they were unmistakably loks. I hadn't noticed them before, probably because I'd been too consumed with the sight of Tasha. He didn't make any move to hide them. I glanced around, wondering if anyone was alarmed by these marks like I was, including Tasha, but she was kneeling at his side now, pointing to the weapons and asking questions.

I swayed a moment on my feet, and when I felt a strong hand on my elbow, I glanced up into Kutzal's hard gaze. His gaze roamed my face, and I swore he could see into my brain. "Are you okay?"

*Get it together, Amber.*

I slipped my arm from his grasp and cleared my throat. "Yeah, sorry. Just got a little lightheaded for a moment."

Tasha stood quickly. "Do you need to sleep?"

"No, I'm fine."

"You weren't gone long," Lukent remarked. "Did she not rest?"

Tasha's eyes met mine as my heart pounded. I didn't want to blurt out the details of my alter right here in front of Lukent, Kutzal, and a few other warriors roaming around.

"I'm okay," I said again.

"She rested a bit," Tasha said. "Don't worry. I know my friend."

Lukent seemed convinced, but Kutzal didn't. He didn't move from my side, and stood there looming over me, blocking out the damn sun until my skin began to itch and I stepped away.

Kutzal snorted at my retreat, and he wrinkled his nose as if in disgust before sitting back down at Lukent's side. Vinz had said that their mantra was *She is All*, Kutzal didn't seem very fond of me. Or Tasha for that matter. He mostly ignored her.

*And where the hell was Vinz?*

I gazed around, looking for his familiar build, but he was nowhere to be seen.

“Looking for Vinz?” Kutzal asked, and I could have sworn his tone held a bit of a sneer.

“I was,” I answered. “Is he okay?”

“He cleaned up, rested for a bit, and said he had shet to do. He wandered off.”

For some reason, that bothered me. I’d been at Vinz’s side for days, and while there were times I wanted to smother him in the dirt, I kind of missed him now. “Is he feeling okay? His shoulder had been bothering him since he fought the Wutarks.”

Kutzal popped a seed in his mouth and crunched it loudly. “He’s healed. Everything but his wrists.”

His gaze held mine, and a chill ran down my spine. I swallowed. “Yeah, his wrists were in bad shape. From the Joktal whips.”

“Ah, the whips.”

I narrowed my eyes at Kutzal’s snide tone, but honestly the Drixonian scared me too much to say anything. I thought Vinz was an asshole, but at least he had some humor to him.

“I thought he said it was the manacles you two were in?” Lukent said, his expression innocent.

I swallowed, realizing Kutzal was trying to lure me into some sort of a trap. Did he know? What was his game? “Sure, I don’t really remember. A lot of that time was a blur.”

“Why are you interrogating her?” Tasha stood up and glared at Kutzal.

“I’m not interrogating her.”

Tasha rolled her fingers on her arm. “Amber’s too nice to argue with you, and I was too scared at first, but there are some of us women who won’t put up with your shit.” She turned in a huff. “She is all, my ass.”

“She is all doesn’t mean I have to be nice, just that I have to keep you alive,” he called behind her back.

Lukent punched him in the arm, hard, and Kutzal bared his fanged teeth as his tail slapped the ground with a thundering thump.

Suddenly a massive Drixonian, bigger than Lukent and Kutzal, slammed a sword into the log between the two fighting warriors. “Knock it off,” he grumbled before sauntering away.

“Who’s that?” I murmured as I watched speak a few orders to a younger Drixonian.

“Axton,” Tasha said. “He’s nice and no nonsense.”

“And Kutzal is the leader?”

“He’s usually more mature. I don’t know what it is, but our presence brings out his asshole gene.” She threw her arm around my shoulders. “Come on, let’s go get some food.”

I wanted to ask her about Lukent’s loks, but that would lead to... questions. And I made a promise to Vinz. I’d find him and ask him about Lukent’s loks first. Plus, I had something else on my mind. “By the way, do they know...” I wiggled my fingers at her nose. “You know.”

“I told Lukent, but no one else knows.” She squeezed my shoulder. “I wanted all of you to have the choice to tell them. Lukent knows that you all have some alters, but it’s up to you who you want to tell.”

“I told Vinz,” I said softly.

“You did?”

“It’s hard to hide it. While at Joktalis, I tried to stay awake as long as I could, because I was terrified what would happen if they found me limp. I passed out in front of Vinz’s cell, and he distracted the guards so they wouldn’t find me. At the time, I thought he was scary as hell and that he wanted to eat me. But he saved me. Later, when we could communicate, I told him the truth. He watched over me the next time I had to sleep. I might have even slept better than when Trix watched over me.”

Tasha smiled. “These blue guys have a way of making you feel safe in even the most dangerous situations.”

I had to admit, even with Tasha at my side and a whole army of Drixonians around me, I still felt a little uneasy without Vinz around. But he had to show up soon, right? I was sure he’d have something to say about my new fur cape. I smiled just thinking about it.

---

*Vinz*

I tried to avoid her. And I succeeded in not talking to her, but I definitely did not succeed at leaving her alone. I tracked her progress in the camp from the moment she emerged from Tasha's hut wearing new clothes and a large fur cloak draped over her narrow shoulders. The sun shone off her golden curls, but her smile was even brighter as she beamed at Tasha. I cast my mind back to all the times she'd smiled at me—I remembered every one—but none had been like that.

I hadn't given her a reason to smile at me like that, and I never would, but it still hurt nonetheless.

I watched her talked to Kutzal and Lukent. I saw the moment she recognized the loks on Lukent's wrists. I expected her to ask about them or to show off her own, but all she'd done was sway on her feet in shock. When Kutzal touched her briefly, I almost sprinted across the camp and slammed my ax in his back.

I didn't like the way he looked at her—he knew something. Kutzal always knew something, because he was a cunning shet. I watched as she kept scanning the camp as if looking for something. I wondered if it was me, and then immediately cast aside that idea. She was likely just observing. Amber liked to know her surroundings.

Then she and Tasha walked toward the food stores, and that was when I finally forced myself away from my tracking of her. Which was hard as fleck. I'd gone from knowing everything about her to having no idea how she was feeling or if she was tired or hungry.

I dropped to a crouch from my hiding spot in the trees surrounding camp and gripped my head in my hands. All day, I swore my skull was going to explode, and if this knocking didn't stop soon, I was going to throw myself off a cliff. The only reason I didn't do it was because I wasn't sure how the loks bond would affect Amber if I died. If I remembered correctly, she'd be in pain. So now I had to keep up this miserable existence. I would until Amber took her last breath, and I hoped it was a long time from now—for her sake. For her, I'd endure.

But by Fatas, I ached to see one of her smiles sent my way. I had to find a way out of camp again without Kutzal asking questions.



Being here around her but not able to be *with* her was torture. Worse than anything the flecking Joktal put me through.

“What are you looking at?”

The voice right behind my ear made me topple over. I glared up at Baki, who stood bent at the waist, hands on his knees, peering into the camp.

Standing up with a groan, I brushed off my pants. “You scared the fleck out of me.”

“Sorry,” he straightened and hooked his clawed thumbs into his belt. “I didn’t know you were back. What took you so long?”

Baki never really knew what was going on. He was content to tend to his crops of yuza, a plant we dried and smoked when we wanted to relax or celebrate. The most pierced among us, he wore strands of beads in his hair, which was currently pulled into a messy knot on top of his head. As he stood, he rocked back and forth slightly. I used to think Baki wasn’t all there—he acted very disinterested in anything but smoking—until I’d seen him fight. He was vicious as fleck, smart, and quick. But as soon as the battle was over, he was back to lazing around the camp like he hadn’t just decapitated several enemies.

“Got caught up,” I answered, not bothering to get into it. “What are you up to?”

He pointed to a basket at his feet filled with large yellow five-pointed leaves. “Gathering some yuza to dry. We’ll use most of my stock tonight.”

“What’s tonight?”

He shrugged. “I don’t know. Kutzal just said to have some yuza rolled and ready to go.”

“Need some help?”

“Sure.” He handed me another basket. “Only pick the leaves larger than your hand.”

“Got it.”

His yuza field lay on the outskirts of camp, and I went to work picking the yuza leaves while Baki watched me closely to ensure I wasn’t picking too-small leaves. I’d rarely seen him concentrate on something so seriously. The yuza stalks stretched as tall as me, and soon I had half my basket filled.

“Heard there’s another female,” he said suddenly.

My hand slipped, and I snapped an entire stalk in half. Baki let out a low growl. “Watch what the fleck you’re doing.”

“Sorry,” I muttered. “And yeah. There’s another female.”

“What’s she like?”

He didn’t sound interested, more like he was just making conversation, but the questions still rankled me. What was she like? Beautiful. Smart. Selfless. Instead, I answered. “I don’t know. Like the other one, I guess.”

Baki straightened and swiped at his forehead with the back of his hand. “You mad about something?”

“No, why?”

“You’re not talking as much as usual.”

I grinned at him. “Not used to carrying the conversation, huh, Baki?”

“Not really.”

“Well here’s some news for you. I killed a few Wutarks when I was gone.”

That perked him up. “Oh yeah? When can I do it?”

I laughed. “You’re the only one who responded like it’s a good thing.”

“I knew those fleckers were trouble since the beginning. I didn’t like the whole border idea.”

“Why didn’t you say anything?”

He shrugged. “I knew it wouldn’t last.” Rolling his shoulders, he swung his full basket. “Guess I should stretch, right? They’ll retaliate soon.”

“Yeah,” I said with a sigh as I gazed up at the burning sun. “They’ll retaliate soon. Maybe with some friends.”

Baki didn’t ask more questions. He’d fight when called upon. All we had to do was point and say, “they are an enemy,” and Baki wouldn’t ask questions. “Maybe this is why we’re having a celebration tonight,” he said. “Kutzal always likes to give us a break before a war.” He smiled. “And we have females to fight for now. At least one of them is ours.”

“Ours?”

“Well, Lukent’s. But she’s a Lone Howl, so that means I’ll kill for her.”

“Right,” I murmured. “Me too.”

He nodded at my basket. “That’s enough. Want to help me hang them to dry?”

Why not? I didn’t have anything else to do but feel sorry for myself. “I’m your assistant for the day.”

He slapped my shoulder. “You’re my favorite, Vinz.”

“Life goal achieved.”

Shoving me with a laugh, he headed off toward camp, and I followed closely behind.

---

I leaned back and exhaled into the night sky. The yellow smoke blurred the starlight for a moment before drifting away on the breeze. We’d had a feast, and then Kutzal had broken out the yuza sticks and a new supply of liquor made by one of Daz’s warriors.

Turned out the celebration had two purposes—my return along with Amber’s rescue, and a way to blow off steam before the battle preparations started. Some scouts had already reported some rumblings at the Wutark settlement. They’d retaliate for the deaths of their warriors, and we’d be ready.

I’d eaten my meal in my hut and had only ventured out now when I saw Amber had left with Tasha. As they’d walked down the stairs to their hut, I’d noticed Amber kept looking for... something.

I wasn’t stupid. I couldn’t avoid her forever. But my head was too crowded to think straight. The yuza had helped dull the knocking sound, and now it seemed to blend in with my heartbeat. For the first time in many rotations, I felt a little at peace.

Apparently I was exuding fleck off vibes, because no one wanted to be around me, even Baki. He was in a crowd of younger warriors showing off his yuza rolling skills. I had half a stick left, and my vision had started to darken on the edges. Maybe I could actually sleep tonight.

The fire crackled in front of me, and I gazed into the flames just as a shadow fell over it. I glanced up, expecting Lukent, but instead met the light eyes of Amber. A radiant smile split her face. "There you are!" she exclaimed, hopping in front of me with an energy I hadn't seen from her before. She held her arms out at her sides and spun. The fur cap draped over her shoulders flared out and then swirled around her legs when she came to a stop. Still beaming, she ran her hands down the front of the plush fur. "What do you think? I feel like a Drixonian."

Backlit by the fire, her hair glowed, and her light eyes reflected the moonlight. I'd seen her drink some of the spirits, and a light red blush stained her cheeks. I'd never seen anything so beautiful in my life.

"It looks great," I managed to croak, unable to come up with something caustic to send her away. All that work I'd done to avoid her, and she still managed to find me...

She dropped down on the log next to me and clasped her hands in her lap. "Where have you been? I've looked for you all day."

"I was busy," I answered, and when her eyes lowered in hurt, I heard myself say. "I'm sorry. I thought you'd want time with Tasha."

That got her to smile again. "I still feel like I'm dreaming that we're together. Did you know that her and Lukent are..." she lowered her voice to a whisper, "Mates?"

I could barely speak as her last word felt like a machet to the gut. "I did."

Amber plucked at the edge her fur cape. "She's really happy. Did you talk to Lukent about it? You must have been surprised."

"A little." An understatement.

She turned on the log to face me, and inhaled sharply as if gearing up to say something. "D-does it encourage you at all? She said everyone accepts it, and it doesn't matter if he's a son of naught." Her blunt teeth nibbled her bottom lip. "So that means the rest of you can have a future too, right?"

No, that wasn't what it meant. "Maybe some of us."

That knocking was back in my mind. "What about... you?"

I took another drag on the yuza stick and sent the smoke wafting into the sky. "Not me."

I could feel her next to me nearly vibrating, and it flecked with my head. “Vinz—“

“I’m going to sleep.”

“What?”

“I’d like to sleep now.”

“I—okay,” she said slowly. “I thought... can we hang out tomorrow, maybe? I wanted to see your hut.”

She was killing me slowly. “I don’t think so.”

“O-okay, I mean, if you’re busy again we can take a rain check.”

I hated the hesitation in her voice. I’d put it there. She’d arrived happy and beaming, and I’d reduced her to an unsure mess. But I couldn’t do anything for her. I turned to meet her eyes, and she winced as if the sight of me hurt. I imagined I didn’t look too hot, as her face wasn’t in focus. “Sure, I’ll introduce you to some of the other warriors.”

Her brows dipped. “Introduce me? It’s okay, you don’t have to do that.”

“You might want a mate,” I murmured. The pounding slammed my skull and I closed my eyes as my head spun. “Not me though. Never me. Doesn’t matter what I want.”

“What do you want?” she whispered, and I could have sworn I felt her warm breath on my cheek.

“Doesn’t matter.”

“What do you want, Vinz?” she whispered again. The knocking. The pounding. “Just open the door.”

I turned away from her and let myself slump to ground. “Go away, Amber. I don’t want anything.” The knocking stopped, and the last thing I felt before I drifted off into oblivion was a soft tug on my hair.

## TWELVE

*Amber*

I knew Vinz didn't like to be touched, but a mark on the back of his neck caught my eye. I slowly pushed this hair to the side and inhaled sharply at the burned scales. He'd mentioned being branded as a son of naught, but to actually see it in the flesh hurt more than expected.

I let his hair drift back into place when my fingers brushed against a braided section of hair hidden at the nape of his neck. A light piece—drastically different than the dark masses of his hair—caught shone in reflected moonlight.

Frowning, I tugged the braid free, and my heart skipped a beat. Woven into the strands of his hair was length of blond locks. All Drixonians had dark hair—ranging from black to gray. None had blond, and this was too light to be Tasha's hair. The texture was different than a Drixonian's too—it had a curl to it that reminded me of my own hair. The strand *looked* like my hair, but that made no sense. When did he acquire my hair, and why would he keep it?

I found myself standing at that door in my mind, and every fiber of my DNA told me that I needed to open it, that it was imperative I break it down by any means necessary, but I couldn't bring myself to turn the doorknob. I had to be invited inside.

Maybe this hair wasn't mine. Maybe he was in love with another human—Tasha mentioned there were more at the main city. Just the thought of him accepting the touch of another woman felt like a stab to the gut, and my reaction surprised me. I dropped the braid and covered it with the rest of his mane before sitting back on my haunches. He stirred, lips moving, and a shudder ran down his spine before he once again went still.

What was it about this big Drixonian? There were many more warriors here, plenty that had been nothing but kind to me, but no matter where I went, I looked for Vinz. Always for Vinz.

I tugged the fur cloak from my shoulders and laid it over his sleeping body. Patting his hip through the thick fur, I stood and walked slowly back to my hut. Every footstep felt like I had five pound weights in my soles. I yawned, looking for Tasha to let her know I needed to sleep, but she was already shackled up for the night with Lukent. I'd only ventured out for a chance I'd see Vinz.

I'd expected for us to banter back and forth as we always did, but he hadn't seemed happy to see me. In fact, my presence only seemed to make him depressed, which made me feel like shit. I had tried to tell myself he wasn't avoiding me, but now it was pretty clear my suspicions were right. He *had* been avoiding me. But why? What did I do?

I missed the way he handed me water before every meal and was always ready with a jungle-made hair tie. I missed his stupid grins and his snide remarks. Everything about his energy tonight was off, and I wanted to fix it.

But it wouldn't be tonight. It wouldn't be for a day or two. I descended the cliff stairs to the ledge with the hut that had been given to me. Stepping in to the empty room, I suddenly wished for the warmth of the lorries. I hoped they were okay.

Tugging off my shoes, I stripped out of my pants and climbed into my bed pallet in my shirt and underwear. Tasha would come looking for me in the morning, I was sure of it, and once she saw me sleeping, she'd make sure no one bugged me. I tugged down the fabric covering my loks and ran my fingers over the golden marks. Something about seeing them settled a disturbance in my soul. I wondered what they meant and wished Vinz would talk to me. I'd

liked seeing our matching loks, and I couldn't imagine something so pretty would mean anything bad. At least, I sure hoped not. Sighing, I covered the loks again.

I closed my eyes and drifted to sleep, dreaming of doors and golden braids.

---

I opened my eyes and blinked at the wall. Sunlight streamed in through my window, and the smell of saltwater drifted inside on a breeze. Senses heightened after my sleep, I could hear voices outside, and listened for the one voice I wanted to hear the most.

I didn't hear it.

Groaning, I rubbed my eyes. Why was Vinz the first thing I thought of when I woke up? What did that stupid Drixonian do to me? I dropped my hands back onto the bed pallet with a thump.

Another smell hit me, and I glanced over to see a kettle and a plate of fruit sitting on a table beside my pallet. "Tasha," I murmured with a smile. I poured myself a steaming cup of tea, kept warm because of the kettle, and popped a hunk of sweet fleshy fruit in my mouth. Sitting up, I stared out into the calm sea as I blew on the mug of tea. This was a view people would pay buckets for on Earth.

After eating some more and finishing my tea, I used the expeller to pee and then washed myself in the cleanser. Feeling fresh and rested, I reached for my clothes. Spotting my fur on the end of my bed pallet, I went still.

The last time I'd seen it was when I'd laid it over Vinz when he slept. Had he returned it to me? Had he been here when I slept? I glanced around to see if he'd left any sort of clue that he'd been inside, but everything was as I'd left it except for the tray of food.

Sighing, I dressed and clasped the fur cape around my shoulders. I had to go talk to Vinz. He'd been out of it that night on the fire with whatever stuff they smoked, and I'd been more tired than I realized. We could converse with clear heads now.

But as I made my way up the stairs and around the camp, Vinz was nowhere to be seen. Kutzal greeted me, and Axton grunted in



my direction. A few other warriors I recognized said hello, and the younger warrior who always delivered food asked me if I needed anything to eat. I turned him away, full from the tea and fruit, and starting to feel uneasy the more time went on without sight of Vinz.

I turned to head back down the stairs when Tasha leapt up the last few, panting slightly. "There you are. I thought I smelled you moving about. Do you need to eat?"

"No, I ate what you left in my room. Thanks, by the way."

She frowned. "I didn't leave anything in your room."

My stomach contracted. "You didn't? But there was fruit and a tea kettle. I thought you put it there for me to have when I woke up."

"That wasn't me." She frowned. "I checked on you and saw you were sleeping, so I told everyone you were resting."

"So that was..."

"Vinz?" I asked.

She cocked her head. "What's going on with you two?"

I glanced around, seeing that warriors were watching us, and worried they could overhear us. "Let's talk in my hut."

Tugging her along with me, I jogged down the stairs to my hut's ledge and then pulled us inside. Ensuring the door was shut firmly behind us, I took off my cape and sat down on the bed pallet. Tasha joined me, her expression concerned. "Is everything okay?"

"I don't know." I pulled my legs to my chest and dropped my chin on my knees. "Vinz has been acting so weird since we got back. I mean... we're not you and Lukent, and that's fine, but I thought we were friends. The night before I slept, we talked by the fire and..." I blew out a breath, feeling like I was gossiping about Vinz behind his back. But this was *Tasha*, and I had no one else.

"Okay, let me get settled. This sounds like it'll take a while." She pulled her arms free of her fur cape while I stared at the ground. "Can I have some of the tea?"

"Help yourself."

"Want some?"

"Sure."

I heard the sound of liquid pouring into two cups, and then a hand appeared in front of my face. I accepted the cup with a sigh, but at the sight of Tasha's bare wrists, I let out a choked sound and

dropped the mug on the ground. The hot liquid splashed on her legs, and she yelped. “Amber! What the hell?”

I tugged her arm closer to me and ran my fingers over the golden markings. “Why do you have—?” Shit, I had to play dumb. “What are these marks?”

Tasha grimaced and met my eyes. “I was going to tell you, I swear. But I felt like it was all too much at once.”

Lukent had the markings too, I remembered now, and if I recalled correctly, his matched Amber’s... just like mine matched Vinz’s. My mouth went dry. “What do they mean?”

She sat down next to me, and our fingers slipped together. My wrists were still covered, since I’d promised Vinz. Her loks were a gorgeous pattern, like waves.

“They are called loks, and this is going to sound like a lot so bear with me.” I only nodded as my gaze remained on her loks. “The Drixonians have a mating bond, and it is initiated when our blood is spilled by an enemy. I was struck by a Wutark hard enough that I bled. Lukent saw it happen, and said he felt like he’d been struck too. And when he killed the Wutark who spilled my blood... the bond is confirmed. These matching marks appear on our wrists—Lukent has them too, as you probably saw—almost like an invisible tattoo. It’s the strangest thing. It hurts at first too.”

I knew all this, but I didn’t tell her, as the words spread their thorns in my throat to prevent escape.

“It means we’re fated mates. They call them cora-eternals. And I can feel him in my mind—we can’t read each other’s thoughts or anything, but I can feel his emotions and he can feel mine. He’s like... a sandstorm in my mind. They call it an aura.” Her fingers squeezed mine. “I know it sounds crazy. Can you... can you look at me? You’re pale.”

I finally lifted my head to hers, but the thorns in my throat had snagged into my flesh and wouldn’t budge.

Her hands cupped my face. “Are you okay?”

I nodded and finally managed to evade the vines to say a word or two. “I’m fine. Just surprised is all. You’re right... it’s a lot.” My voice ended on a whisper.

“It is a lot,” she echoed, her expression concerned. “I’m sorry, we came here to talk about you, and now we’re talking about me. What did you want to say about Vinz?”

I shook my head despite the ache in my heart. I so badly wanted to whip off my wrist covers and show her the truth, but I’d promised Vinz I wouldn’t tell a soul. And a large part of me was... jealous. Embarrassed. She had gorgeous matching loks with her mate who didn’t hide them at all, and the male who I matched wanted nothing to do with me. Why? What was so wrong with me? I ducked my head so Tasha wouldn’t see the tears brimming in my eyes.

“Everything’s fine with Vinz. I just, uh, need to talk to him. Do you know where he is?”

She tapped her chin. “Last I heard he’s in his hut.”

“Do you know where it is?”

“I can ask Lukent. Do you want us to take you?”

I nodded. “Please, Tasha.”

She eyed me. “Are you sure you’re okay?”

“Yes,” I said as firmly as I could. “Still just adjusting, I think. My emotions are a bit all over.”

“Ah,” she patted my hand. “I understand that for sure. Take all the time you need.” She stood and grabbed her fur cloak. “Let’s go see Vinz.”

I tugged on my fur cape as well, doing my best to hide my shaking hands. When we left our hut, Lukent was waiting outside.

When Tasha asked him where Vinz’s hut was he pointed across the rope bridge. Tasha turned green. “You mean we have to walk...?” She gulped as she touched her chest with trembling fingers. Tasha hated heights maybe even more than she hated the Uldani.

“Just stay here.” I squeezed her hand. “I can walk across myself.”

“I can walk with you,” Lukent offered.

I waved him off. “No, I’ll be fine.”

“I can do it,” Tasha said hoarsely, and I laughed.

“No, you’ll make all of us nervous.”

She bit her lip. “I feel bad.”

“Don’t.”

“We’ll watch you, okay?” She linked her arm in Lukent’s. “To make sure you make it across safely.”

“It’s that one, right?” I pointed to a ledge with a small hut and a clothesline with some shirts swaying in the breeze.

Lukent nodded.

I hugged Tasha. “I’ll see you soon.”

“Be safe!”

I set out across the swaying bridge. The ropes were thick and sturdy, but the crashing of the waves hitting the rocks below sent my heart racing. I wasn’t scared of heights, but this felt like something out a movie. Vinz couldn’t have a hut closer to camp? Of course not. Instead I had to trek across a creaking bridge at an insane height. Nothing about that stupid alien was easy. The thought made me snort laugh.

About halfway across, I glanced over my shoulder to see Tasha and Lukent standing right where I’d left them. Tasha waved, and I waved back.

Eager to get to the other side, I walked faster, and eased a sigh of relief when my foot once again touched down on solid ground. I took a moment to gather my courage, because crossing that bridge was nothing compared to the words I had to say to Vinz. Marching up to his door, I rapped my knuckles on the wood paneling.

A scuffling sound came from inside, followed by an annoyed, “What?”

I wanted to burst through like a wrecking ball, but I took a deep breath and called out, “It’s me.”

For a moment, he didn’t respond, and then I heard two quick thumps, followed by a muttered curse, before the door flung open. Vinz stood in the doorway wearing nothing but a pair of pants. His hair was a knotted mess all around his head, and he rubbed bleary eyes. “Amber?”

“Can I come in?”

He swallowed and his eyes drifted over my shoulder before they focused back on me. “Look, I—” He blew out a harsh breath, and my stomach churned. Was he not even going to let me in? I could feel my fragile shell beginning to crack. If he wasn’t going to let me, then I would shatter right here on his doorstep.

I pushed up the sleeve of my cloak, ripped off the fabric around my loks, and held it in front of his face. “Why didn’t you tell me?” I whispered.

He flinched, as if I’d struck him, and he grabbed his head with a wince. “Amber,” he said softly.

“I saw Tasha’s loks.”

He squeezed his eyes shut and grabbed the back of his neck. “So you told her about yours, then.”

“No,” I answered quickly. “I kept my promise to you.”

His head went up, and his brow furrowed.

“But,” I went on. “I asked her to explain what they mean to me. And when she told me the truth.” I shook my head. “Do you know how that made me feel?”

A muscle in his jaw ticked. “I can explain—”

“Explain what?” My voice cracked as I felt my shoulders buck with the beginnings of a sob. “That you were rejecting me as a mate?”

His eyes went wide, and he grabbed my arm. Yanking me inside, he slammed the door behind me. My back hit the wall, and then he was in my space, crowding me with his big body as his arms caged me where I stood.

Words failed me as his violet eyes burned into my soul. “I didn’t reject you.”

“You told me these meant nothing, when according to Tasha, they mean everything to a Drixonian. So why did you lie to me? If you didn’t want me, you could have just told me.”

He slapped the wall near my head to silence me. “*I didn’t reject you. I’m rejecting myself as your mate.*”

Struck dumb, I stared at him. “I’m sorry?”

He spun away and gripped his hair, tugging on it as he paced back and forth. “No honorable Drixonian male in their right mind would reject you.” He faced me, and it was then I noticed he wasn’t wearing any wrist covers, so his loks glimmered against his blue scales. “But I’m not right for you. I can’t be your mate.”

“If this is about you being a son of naught, I don’t give a single fuck about that. And this whole clavas has accepted Tasha and Lukent—”

“I’m not Lukent!” He thumped his chest twice, and the sound bounced off the walls. “This has nothing to do with being a son of naught and everything to do with me.” His shoulders slumped, and he exhaled roughly as his muscles seemed to give out on him.

“I don’t understand,” I took a step forward. “What aren’t you telling me?”

His eyes met mine, and what I saw simmering in the purple depths froze my blood in my veins. Pain, anguish, and shame. “I’m broken.” Words failed me as I stared at this once proud Drixonian who now swayed on his feet like his chest had been cracked open. “When the Uldani had us, most of the sons of naught were given the shet jobs, but I was *special*, I guess.” He spat the word like it was a poisoned barb. “They wanted me to impregnate a female. Any female. So they’d strap me to a bed and bring in any species who they deemed could be compatible.”

My knees knocked together, and I had to reach out for the wall to keep myself upright. Every word felt like a spike to my brain, and I couldn’t imagine how hard it was for him to speak his truth.

“But I couldn’t perform. No matter how much they touched me and prodded me and tried to seduce me, my cock never even got hard.”

Bile rose in my throat, and I pressed the back of my hand to my mouth. I wanted him to stop speaking, but it was like he’d released the dam now and couldn’t stop. I understood now why he didn’t like to be touched, and I wanted to wail at the injustice of it.

“I’ll never be a proper mate to you.” His eyes bored into mine. “I can’t pleasure you. I can’t fill you with my seed and see your belly swell with my chit. I’m as good as dead, and the only reason I haven’t thrown myself off the cliff is because of my brothers now...” he swallowed. “Because of you. If I die, our bond will cause you pain. So I’ll stay alive for you, Amber. But I can’t be your mate.”

He took a staggering step to the door as if to leave, but I stepped abruptly in front of it. He jerked to a stop, chest heaving. “Please move.”

I shook my head.

“Amber, please—”

“I’m sorry,” I finally found words as I fisted my hands at my sides and steeled my spine. No way would this conversation end here. “I’m so sorry that happened to you.”

He didn’t respond, and his face didn’t change.

“But I don’t accept this. You didn’t ask me for my opinion. You rejected yourself before asking me what I want.”

“I’m flecked up,” he pleaded. “I hear what the other warriors say about me, and I don’t bother confirming or denying anything. But I’m known as the reckless one. The crazy one. I refuse to bring you down with me. I don’t want anyone thinking less of you because I’m your mate.”

“I don’t care about that. And we don’t need to physically mate. There are other ways to be intimate.”

His eyes flashed. “It is paramount to a Drixonian warrior to pleasure his female with his cock. It *matters* to me.”

The conviction in his voice raised the hair on the back of my neck. I had to be respectful of his culture, but how did I get him see that it didn’t matter to me without patronizing him?

I tried a different tactic. “Why is there a lock of blond hair braided into yours?”

He jerked back, like I’d shocked him. “What?”

“I saw that night. At the fire.”

His jaw worked, and he glanced away and down before answering. “I found the hair stuck to a twig and then followed the trackings to Joktalis.”

“So it’s—”

“It’s your hair.” He lifted his head. “I went there looking for you, and I wasn’t going to leave without you.”

My heart swelled. “What do you want, Vinz?”

“It doesn’t matter—”

“You said that already, but it matters to me. In a perfect world, would you take me as your mate?”

His breath shuddered out as he rasped in a broken tone, “I’d follow you to the end of this life and into the next.”

## THIRTEEN

*VINZ*

She smiled at me, and I'd never seen that smile before. There was a hint of sadness to it, but her eyes shone warmly and for a moment I lost myself in them. Soon, she would accept that I was too broken and would turn away, but for a few precious moments I pretended otherwise.

But then she didn't turn and walk out the door. Instead, she took a step toward me. Surprised, I didn't react. She took another step forward, and I took one back. She kept that warm smile on her face as she slid the fur cape off her arms and dropped it to the floor. The tip of her pink tongue prodded the corner of her mouth. "Will you... try something with me?"

She took one more step forward, until her chest always brushed mine, and that one action along with a slight intake of her breath, sparked a flare of hope in my gut. The dry timber of my insides reacted immediately, and I could do nothing to douse it, no matter how hard I tried. I swallowed, and heard myself ask, "Try what?"

Her slender fingers played with the hem of her shirt. "Will you touch me?"

At first, I swore I heard her wrong. "Touch you?"

Her eyes drifted to the bed pallet beside us, and I didn't miss the way her chin wobbled with nerves. "You don't like to be touched, and



rightfully so. You associate that with being held against your will. But what if you touch me and I don't touch you?"

My breath left my body and it felt like a full yora went by before I could suck in more air. "Amber—"

"Please," she whispered. "And if you don't like it then I'll accept the rejection."

I owed it to her, didn't I? And I had to admit that I ached to know what her soft skin felt like. "But what if you don't like it?"

"I'll let you know if you do anything I don't like. I trust that you'll stop." She paused. "Do you trust me not to touch you in return? You can tie my hands if you like."

I shuddered. "No, no restraints. On either of us."

"Oh," she winced. "Sorry, you're right."

"I trust you." I said the words without even thinking of them first, as if my cora knew before my brain. I really did trust her. She'd even kept her promise to me from the one friend she had.

She held out her hand and beckoned me with her fingers. "Come closer, then."

I never in my wildest dreams thought this would be the outcome of telling her the truth. I'd never told anyone—not even Lukent—although I was pretty sure he'd figured out what happened to me. I had always been the outcast of the outcasts, but radiant Amber stood before me with trust in her eyes.

I cupped her cheek and the soft skin her face rasped along my calloused palms. "You're so brave," I whispered.

She smiled, and her eyes glistened with unshed tears. "You are too."

I had seen some Drixonians interact with their mates, so while I didn't have the proper pleasure training most warriors did, I wasn't completely ignorant. I pressed a hesitant kiss to her forehead, then her nose. Pulling back, I asked, "Did you like that?"

Her lips parted, and I felt her sweet breath on my face. "Don't worry about that right now. Just touch me how you want to touch me. Explore."

"I—"

With a shaky sigh, she gripped the bottom of her shirt and pulled it over her head. She wore nothing underneath, and I took a

surprised step back as her breasts drew my eye.

She didn't stop there as she toed off her shoes and slipped off her pants until she stood only in a small scrap of fabric that covered her cunt. Her pale skin was dotted with small brown marks, and a few scars marred her stomach. Something stirred in my groin, and my stomach cramped.

Her nipples pebbled in the cool air, and she shuddered as tiny bumps rose all over her skin.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"Nothing."

"Why is your skin bubbling?"

She glanced down with a frown. "Bubbling? Oh," she smiled. "That happens when I'm cold."

Not even thinking, I scooped her up and crushed her against me. She let out a yelp as I dropped both of us to the bed and then drew the fur up to her chin. Tucking it around her, placed the back of my fingers on her forehead. "Warm enough now?"

She rolled her eyes. "Vinz, I was... naked on purpose." Then her smile dropped and she looked me square in the eye. "Did you not like it? Did that make you uncomfortable?"

"I didn't like that you were cold."

"Okay..." she drew out the word.

"I very much liked looking at you."

Her smile returned big and bright.

"But I can tell you're nervous, and I don't want you to do this for me out of pity."

"Pity?"

I nodded.

She rolled onto her side to face me, but I noticed she took a lot of care not to touch me. "I felt drawn to you before the loks. Even when I thought you'd eat me. You take care of me, make me laugh even when you're being frustrating, and I find when you're not around I miss you." Her light lashes brushed the top of her cheeks as she blinked slowly. "And I'm attracted to you. I want you to touch me, Vinz, and that takes a lot for me to say. A lot was done to my body without my permission too."

Her words broke something loose inside me. She did understand, more than most could, what I went through. That hope continued to burn, raging through my blood as this beautiful human female gazed up at me like I held her world in my tainted hands.

“Vinz?”

“Yeah?” I rasped.

“I’m not cold anymore.”

This time her blue eyes shone with something else, a rising heat laced with lust. With one finger, I hooked the top of the fur at her collarbone and tugged it down slowly to below her breasts. Plump and topped with dark pink nipples, her flesh begged to be touched. When I lifted my hand, my fingers shook. I cupped her breast and swiped a thumb across the beaded nipple. She sucked in a breath, and a scent perfumed the air. I inhaled the sweet and musky aroma, and once again felt that aching in my groin. I’d never felt it before, but something about it... was pleasant. Like a good hurt.

Leaning down, I pressed my lips to her nipple, and when she thrust against me, I opened my mouth to take her inside. Lashing the hard bud with my tongue piercings, I sucked harder when she made a pretty keening sound. I glanced up to see her biting down on her bottom lip as a red flush rose up her neck to stain her cheeks. I liked touching her like this, and she liked it too. Was this what mating was like?

Her hands rested over her head, crossed at the wrist where her loks shone gold against her pale skin. I lifted one hand and speared my fingers with hers until our wrists touched. Inside, me, the fire reached the door I kept firmly closed. The flames licked at it, darkening the wood and it would only be a matter of time before the entire thing went up in flames.

For once, I didn’t flecking care. Burn the whole damn door down. Let everyone see what was inside. Why did I care when I had Amber laying beneath me, her eyes shining with heat—*for me*.

I inhaled deeply and pushed the fur lower until she kicked it free. Her thighs rubbed together, and I spotted a damp spot on the fabric covering her cunt. Was that...? Was she...?

I glanced up to see her cheeks a bright red. She rolled her lips between her teeth before she whispered in a husky voice. “I’m wet.”

Everything in my gut felt heavy. Loaded. I reached down to adjust myself and made a strangled noise in my throat when my fingers brushed sensitive skin.

Amber shot up, her breasts jiggling as she did so, and I couldn't take my eyes off them.

"Vinz?" she called out. "Are you okay?"

But her voice sounded like it was in a tunnel. I could barely make out the words. All I could focus on was the expanse of flesh in front of me, and her messy hair surrounding her in a golden halo. The smell of her wet arousal hung in the air, drugging me better than anything Baki could grow.

Through my pants, my fingers closed around the very hard shaft of my cock.

"Vinz?" she called again.

I couldn't answer. I pressed on her shoulders until she once again lay flat on the pallet and then slid lower down her body, until my face was even with that damp spot on the fabric over her cunt that I couldn't stop thinking about. I closed my mouth over it, sucking up the dampness and tonguing it aggressively.

Amber started to thrash on the bed. Her hand brushed my hair, but then as soon as it did, her hands were gone and once again clasped above her head. Her thighs shook, and my mouth filled with saliva as I craved more of her taste. With one swipe of my claws, I shredded the rest of her coverings to reveal a nest of wiry golden curls glistening with her arousal.

I buried my face in her cunt, sucking on her wet flesh until my face was covered in her and my chin dripped with her juices. I speared her with my tongue and prodded at a hard bead nestled among her folds that made her squeal my name.

I didn't stop, not even as her heels dug into my back and her thighs pressed on the side of my face. Drunk on her taste and smell, I lost myself in her taste until she let out a cry while her entire body shuddered. Her inner walls squeezed my tongue, and I wiggled it to reach every last bit of her as she thumped the bed with her fists as she shuddered again and again.

"Stop," she whimpered. "Please... so sensitive."

I lifted my head, licking the remnants of her from my face as she panted below me. Glassy eyes drifted down my chest and then she gasped. I looked down to find I'd pulled my cock from my pants. The shaft was thick with blood, and the bulbous head swollen to a dark blue. A light fluid leaked from the tip.

"Vinz," she whispered, eyes so round they nearly took up her whole face. "You're hard."

I could barely grasp what was happening. All I knew was that Amber tasted delicious, and I needed to release the tension in my body before I went insane. My balls hung heavy and tight, and my cock ached with a pleasure pain that I'd never felt before.

"I-I—" I stuttered out. "What do I do?"

Her eyes lifted to mine, and she didn't hesitate. "What feels good?"

Instinctively, I stroked my shaft, squeezing when I reached the tip. A groan fell from my lips. "This."

"Do that," she whispered breathlessly. "Stroke yourself, Vinz."

"Oh Fatas," I murmured as my body bucked. Pressure built in my lower spine as I stroked faster. I dropped to brace myself on one hand over Amber and I met her eyes just as world exploded.

Colors burst behind my eyes as my body floated up and away. Thick ropes of cum flew from the tip of my cock to land on the soft skin of Amber's belly. Pleasure spread out to every limb and every strand of my hair as the door in my mind flew apart in a burst of flames.

I collapsed at Amber's side, heaving, shaking, unsure if I was in a state of bliss or agony. That was when her arms closed around me, and she pressed my face to her chest. "You opened the door for me," she whispered. I felt the hot splash of a tear land on my cheek. "You opened it. And Vinz... you're *beautiful*."

## FOURTEEN

*Amber*

Vinz's arms curled around my stomach and locked tight. His head burrowed into my chest as if he was trying to fuse himself against me. I dodged a sharp horn from poking me in the eye as he nuzzled deeper.

Ever since our loks had appeared, I'd had this nervous feeling like I was *missing* something. And now that the door of Vinz's aura was open, I no longer felt anxious. Behind the door was a kaleidoscope of colors, shifting and swaying in the breeze like a kite. The colors dipped and spun like a bird that had just learned to fly. And in my hand was the string keeping him connected to the present.

His long dark lashes fluttered against my skin as his breathing slowly returned to normal. Finally he lifted his head, and his eyes shone with a reverence I'd never seen directed at me. His fingers drifted cupped my cheek with a gentle touch I didn't think he was capable of. "I can feel you," he said softly. "No one else could have opened that door and made sense of what was behind it. For as long as I can remember, I've been in pieces. And now you're there, holding me together and keeping me there."

I smiled at him as I placed my hand over his. "I got you."

A puff of air escaped his lips. "I don't deserve—"

“Don’t tell me you don’t deserve me.”

He pressed his lips shut and scrunched them to the side.

“Was that what you were going to say?”

I could tell he thought about lying for a moment, until he conceded with a nod.

“For as long as I can remember, my days have been about counting how long I have until I need to sleep. But then you came for me.” I found the braid hidden at his nape and tugged. “I never would have had the courage to escape on my own.”

“You’re courageous to me.” He hooked a leg over mine as if we weren’t already plastered head to toe. “You came in here and made yourself vulnerable for me.”

“It was for you. But it was for me too. I’ve always been able to be brave for other people, but for myself... I lacked the courage. Until it came to you. The thought of never knowing what we could have been forced me to cross that stupid rope bridge. I felt in my soul that there was something wonderful behind that door, and I wanted it for myself.”

“It’s yours,” he whispered, brushing his lips along my jaw. “If it wasn’t for your bravery showing up at my door...” he shook his head. “I don’t know how much longer I would have lasted. I stalked you around camp since we arrived. I couldn’t bring myself to talk to you, but I couldn’t let you out of my sight.”

“I looked for you.”

“I know,” he winced. “I saw.”

“Don’t do that again,” I tapped him on the nose.

“You can’t get rid of me now. I’ll be stuck to your side.”

*Rap-a-tat-tat!*

The door nearly burst on its hinges as someone knocked heavily on the other side and a deep voice called out, “Vinz?”

I tried to leap from the bed to cover myself, but Vinz’s weight kept me down. He seemed to have no intentions of moving. He snarled over his shoulder at the door. “What?”

There was a pause before the voice, which I now recognized as Lukent, spoke again. “Is Amber in there?”

“She is, now go away.”

I smacked him and shot him big eyes. “Vinz.”

“What?” He snapped. “We’re busy.”

“Vinz.” This voice was Kutzal’s. “Come out.”

“How many of you are out there?” he growled.

There was a murmur and then the sound of someone counting. “Like... half a dozen?” That was Tasha.

“Oh my God, Tasha’s there.” I pushed on his shoulder, which was an absolutely immovable object. “Get up!”

“I don’t want to,” his eyes flared. “I have you in the furs and I’m not getting up—”

“Vinz!” I whisper shouted. “We can get right back in, but this is weird and—”

“Amber?” Tasha called.

“What’s going on in there?” Lukent said with another heavy knock on the door.

With a howl of rage, Vinz spun from the bed in a blur of black hair and blue muscle. He pulled up his pants and marched to the door, where he opened it maybe half an inch, enough to poke an eye out. “What?”

Finally free of my alien mate’s weight, I leapt from the bed and tossed my fur cloak around me. I rushed to Vinz’s back and tapped him on the shoulder. “Open it wider.”

“No,” he said like a petulant child.

I kicked his shin. “Open the door.”

With an irritated huff, he swung it open, and for a moment the light of the setting sun blinded me. Gripping my cloak closed with one hand, I shaded my eyes with the other to find a whole damn crowd outside—Tasha, Lukent, Axton, Kutzal, plus a few other Drixonian warriors, one carrying a tray of food, another with a few skins of water, and a few more with weapons. I blinked. “What’s going on?”

Tasha’s eyes were huge as she took in our appearances. I didn’t blame her. My hair was a wreck, I smelled like semen, and Vinz’s face was a mask of pure rage... but he also smelled like... well... *me*.

“Um...” my friend swallowed. “Just a... welfare check?”

“What’s that?” Vinz barked.



I rolled my eyes. "I'm fine. We were just... talking. We had some things to talk about." I nudged his ribs with my elbow. "Right, Vinz?"

But Kutzal was staring at Vinz's wrists, because his loks were on full display glittering in the sun's rays.

Vinz grabbed my arm, shoved up the sleeve of my cloak, and held our clasped hands in the air. "We're mates."

A rush of heat flooded me over his bold declaration. He went from avoiding me to outright claiming me in front of everyone who mattered to him.

Tasha clapped her hand over her mouth, Lukent's eyes bugged out, and I thought Kutzal was going to burst a blood vessel in his neck.

"Another one," Axton murmured as if bored and turned to walk away. After dropping off the trays of food and water, the other warriors followed him, leaving us behind with a pissed off Kutzal, a shell-shocked Lukent, and a very mirthful Tasha. Seriously, I could see her eyes twinkling as she tried to hold in an excited squeal.

I noticed that Lukent hadn't taken his eyes off Vinz, and my mate was meeting his stare head-on. Lukent took a step forward. "Are you okay, brother?"

Vinz's arm shook slightly as he lowered our hands. "I'm good. Better than good." He tugged me against him and nuzzled his nose into my hair. "She's a goddess."

Tasha swiped at her eyes. "No one deserves to be called a goddess more than Amber." She took a step toward me, and Vinz immediately blocked her advance as if protecting. I glared up at him. "She's my best friend and wants to give me a hug."

"Oh," he murmured. "Okay."

But he didn't move. I managed to get around his big body but could only hug Tasha with one arm because Vinz had a death grip on my other hand. I would have complained, but then... this was what I wished for. And he did warn me that he'd be stuck to my side.

"I have a lot to explain," I whispered in Tasha's ear. "Later."

"*Yeah*, you do," she snorted before pulling back to give me a wide smile. "But take your time. Sorry we bugged you, but it had been a while and you were acting weird earlier. We wanted to check on both of you."

“That was kind. We’re good.”

Tasha held up my free hand and admired the golden loks. “Beautiful.”

Tears blurred my vision. “Thank you.”

She stepped back to reveal Kutzal standing close behind with his arms crossed over his chest. He gazed at me steadily without speaking.

“You knew, didn’t you?” I asked.

“From the moment you stepped into camp.”

“Then why do you look like you want to kill us?” Vinz asked.

“Because you lied,” his gaze swept to Vinz. “Anything else you want to come clean about now?”

Vinz started to shake his head and then grimaced. He scratched the back of his head. “Uh, so, I didn’t like... get caught by the Joktals. I actually found a piece of Amber’s hair stuck on a branch and...kindasortagotcapturedonpurposetorescueher.” He inhaled swiftly and offered a cheeky smile. “There you go. We’re good now.”

“You little—” Kutzal reached to swipe at him, claws out, but Vinz jumped back, tugging me with him.

“Hey!” He was no longer amused. “My mate’s here, you flecker.”

“Yeah, well, next time you’re alone, I’ll be taking a pound of flesh.”

“*Well*,” Vinz drew out the word like a taunt. “I’ll never be alone again, so good luck.”

Kutzal pointed at him. “Listen to me. Do not risk yourself again without asking us to support you.” His nostrils flared, and for a moment the cold veneer dropped from his eyes and a fire burned from within. His voice deepened to a full-bodied rasp. “Don’t any of you fleckers know what you mean to me? Do you have any idea what I’d do if anything happened to one of you?”

Vinz was slack-jawed, and Lukent looked crestfallen. He put a soft hand on his friend’s shoulder. “Kutzal—”

With a snarl, Kutzal shrugged off his hand and backed away. “If you give a fleck about me,” he guttered out with spittle flying, “Then stay alive until we’re old and gray, or so help Fatas, I’ll never forgive you.”

With that last parting shot, he turned on a heel and marched back over the rope bridge. The entire thing swayed violently, and I was shocked he made it across without the entire thing snapping under the weight of his aggressive stomps.

“Fleck,” Vinz muttered. “He really *does* like us.”

“Of course he does,” Lukent smacked Vinz on the head. “You heard what he said. Stay alive.” He took Tasha’s hand and followed Kuztal. Waving over her shoulder, Tasha called, “Find me when you’re ready to have a girl’s chat.”

I waved back with a smile before Vinz tugged me inside and threw the door closed. A second later, we were both naked, back in bed and Vinz had himself wrapped around me like a big blue pretzel.

---

*Vinz*

“Is Kutzal not happy that you rescued me?”

I was distracted by her skin. It was just so smooth, and I traced my finger from one dark brown dot to the other until I made it down to the curls between her legs. The smell of my seed mixed with her scent drove me wild.

“Vinz?”

I pressed a kiss to the top of her curls. “No.”

“No, he’s not happy?”

“He’s never happy.”

“That’s not what I mean.”

“No, that’s not why he’s unhappy. He hates that I make reckless decisions, and my most reckless was definitely getting caught on purpose to make it into Joktalis to find you.”

“He’s not wrong.” Her fingers played with my hair. “It *was* reckless.”

I lifted my head. “The only thing I regret is if I died, no one would have known you were there.”

She narrowed her eyes. “No, I don’t like talk like that. Kutzal is right. No more reckless selfless decisions. We’re a team now, right? What will I do if something happens to you?”

I planted my elbow in the fur and braced my head on my fist as I looked up her body. My palm slid up to touch a breast and she smacked my hand. “Focus,” she hissed.

I was a fast learner. If I wanted to touch, I had to talk. “I’m not used to having to think of someone else. Sacrificing myself for my brothers was what I did. But now I have *you* to live for. When I’m fighting our enemies, I know I have happiness to come home too. So you can bet this sweet cunt I’m coming home by any means necessary.” My statement made, I laid down at her side again. Something gurgled inside her belly and I lifted my head. “Are you hungry?”

She bit her lip with a small smile. “I guess I am.”

I suddenly remembered the food and qua outside. I retrieved it quickly and crouched on the floor by the bed pallet while Amber sat up with the fur tucked under her arms. I didn’t like that her skin wasn’t as exposed, but I guessed I’d tolerate it for the meal.

I handed her a skin of qua, which she took with a blushing smile, and then tied her hair for her off of her face.

After that, I ate my own food quickly. I hadn’t realized how ravenous I was, but after spending my seed for the first time—and learned my cock could harden—I was famished.

Amber ate better than I’d seen her eat in a long time, and soon the trays were empty except for a few scraps. Amber drank on the bed, drinking the rest of her skin, while I knelt watching her. One slender pale foot poked out from beneath the fur. Drawn to it, I ran a claw up the arch of her sole.

Yelping, she immediately tucked her foot back under the fur. Alarmed, I withdrew my hand. “Did I hurt you?”

“No,” she laughed. “My feet are ticklish.”

“Ticklish?”

She cocked her head. “Are you ticklish?” Before I could answer, she said quickly. “You probably don’t know, do you?”

I shook my head. I did, in fact, not know. But I was wary because of the mischievous gleam in her eyes. “What do you plan to do?”

She bit her tongue between her teeth and shimmied forward. "Put your arms out like this." Demonstrating, she held her arms straight out from her body.

Frowning, I did as she asked. With the tips of her blunt nails, she ran them up my rib cage toward my underarms, but she didn't get very far. Unbidden, a shiver ran down my spine, and I let out a yelp as I clapped my arms at my sides.

Amber pulled her hands back just in time and let out a pealing cackle as she clapped her hands. "You *are* ticklish!"

I pounced. She fell onto her back with a squeal as I wiggled my fingers all over her ribs and neck. She begged me to stop, but I only did so when she was curled away from me, tears of laughter streaming down her cheeks as she gasped. I braced myself over her grinning. "Who won?"

"It wasn't..." she panted. "A competition." Uncurling, she flopped onto her stomach, arms and legs akimbo. "It's not fair anyway, your hands are bigger."

With the fur twisted around her ankles, so much skin was on display, from the slender nape of her neck to the gentle sloping of back, and the round globes of her ass. I palmed one side, and she sucked in a breath, eyes instantly heating at my touch.

Folding her arms under her face, she watched me as I ran my hands down the backs of her thighs and then up between her legs. There, I cupped her sex, dipping a finger into her wet folds.

The heaviness between my legs returned almost instantly, and I glanced down to see my cock hanging stiff and full between my legs. My arms shook, still barely able to believe that what I thought wasn't possible was indeed happening... thanks to the golden-haired goddess in my furs.

"Vinz?" she whispered. I glanced up and met her eyes. "Can I try something?"

"Yes," I answered instantly.

She smiled. "Roll on your back."

I did immediately, and she rose above me, her breasts swaying beneath her. The smell of arousal hung thick and heavy in air. Her lips pressed against mine, and I sank into the furs as she parted my lips and sank her tongue inside. I tasted her back, reveling in her

taste before she ended the kiss all too soon. Then she was prowling back down my body. Every once in a while the stiff peak of her nipples brushed my scales, and my cock stiffened further.

When she reached my groin, she glanced up at me with a cunning smile before she lowered her head over my cock. Unsure what she planned to do, I held my breath. When her lips closed over the head of my cock, submerging the tip in a hot, wet heat, I hollered.

She didn't stop, only continued to suck me in until her lips came to about the middle of my shaft. Her throat bobbed and she pulled off my cock with a loud exhale. "You're pretty big, so I think that's all I can take."

I was beyond understanding what she meant. All I could think about in that moment was the incredible feeling of my cock in her luscious mouth. Panting, I stared at her. She cocked her head, one curl slipping from the hair tie. "Did you like it?"

Still speechless, I nodded. With a smug smile, she once again took me into her mouth. Hollowing out her cheeks, she sucked me down. My brain went haywire. My vision went white around the edges. My balls rumbled with the need to spend my seed, and when she pulled off again, I pounded the bed with a groan.

"Hold on," she murmured with wet, swollen lips. "I have something better."

"Goddess," I said softly, as she rose up to straddle me. I gripped her thighs, and the smell of her ripe cunt made my cock jerk.

Her fingers closed around my shaft, and before I could comprehend what was happening, she lowered herself onto me. My cock entered her slowly, and the tight heat of her cunt squeezed my shaft just right that I finally understood what bliss meant. She pitched forward, catching herself on my chest with her palms as she wiggled her hips until I was fully seated inside. Her lashes dipped as her chest heaved. "Are you... are you okay?"

I could only nod, and her smile widened as she tossed her head back and lifted up once before plunging back down on my cock.

I saw stars. I saw Fatas. I saw the future. Her inner walls squeezed my shaft, and my body took over. Rolling us, I laid her out flat on her back my golden goddess and thrust into her. She let out a

cry and her fingers delved into my hair. “Yes,” she arched her back against me. “Just like that.”

“Fleck yes,” I growled and pounded into her tight body. I was flying high, my colors running wild, but held together by the amazing creature below me. With every squeeze of her cunt, she welcomed me into the perfect home of her body. Suddenly her inner walls rippled, she yelled out a hoarse cry, and bucked as she came on my cock.

“Never letting you go, my goddess,” I rasped as I soared us to new heights with every thrust. “Perfect for me. Made for me. Like I was made for you.”

Her eyes opened blearily, and the smile she beamed at me was better than the sun. My body locked, my cock pulsed, and I released into the tight cunt of my cora-eternal. The orgasm ripped down my spine, exploded in my balls, and I felt the aftershocks in every scale on my body.

I gathered my mate in my arms, and I did the one thing I never did—I thanked Fatas for everything that had happened in my life... since it all had led me to my golden goddess.

## FIFTEEN

*VINZ*

My legs shook, and my scales itched. My fingers twisted together, and I couldn't seem to get my hands to stop moving.

"She's fine. She and Tasha are tucked away in her hut having a girls' night or something like that," Lukent said.

We sat around the fire on the cliff that evening, and I glanced at the stairs leading to Amber's ledge. "Should we check on them? Have Trapt stand guard outside the door?"

Lukent's brow lifted. "Guard for what? No one is getting to them unless they go through us first." He braced his elbows on his thighs. "You have to be able to let her out of your sight."

"Why?" I snapped, irritated at flecking everything. I wanted to be back in bed with Amber, skin against skin, her breath wafting over the head of my cock...

And just like that, I stiffened in my pants.

I'd gone my whole life thinking I couldn't be aroused and now I couldn't seem to get my cock to soften. Ever.

Lukent barked my name, and I turned to him with a jerk and a scowl. "What?"

"Relax."

"No."

"Want some yuza?"



“I need to be alert for threats.”

Lukent dropped his head in his hands. “Fleck, you’re going to be even more annoying now.”

In the darkness, a shape approached and by the confident gate, I knew right away it was Kutzal. He took a seat near me and placed a torn pair of pants in his lap. From his pocket, he produced a needle and began to stitch the tear closed. After his rare display of emotion outside my hut, he’d acted like it never happened, and I was content to not revisit the conversation.

I watched him pull the needle through the thick leather and decided I needed something to do with my hands. “Want me to do that for you?”

He glanced at me out of the corner of his eye. “You sew crooked.”

“Who cares?”

“I care.”

I slid on the log until our shoulders bumped and stretched my neck to survey his sewing. Pointing to a series of stitches, I said, “That’s not straight.”

His glared at me. “Why are you sitting so close?”

“Because I want to.”

“He did that to me earlier,” Lukent sighed. “Now he wants to touch all the time. It’s exhausting.”

“So you want me to stay traumatized and unhappy?” I pouted at him.

“No, but we’d like you to give us personal space.” Kutzal shoved me away with his elbow.

I slid right back and hooked my chin on his shoulders. “Please, drexel? I’m cold.”

“Cold,” Kutzal muttered, giving up and returning to his sewing. “Your body is hotter than ever.”

I turned my head to rest my temple on Kutzal and focus on Lukent across from me. “I miss Amber.”

“It’s been not even one yora since you’ve been apart.”

“Do you think she’s happy? Eating? Did we give them enough qua?” I stood up. “Maybe I should check—”

Kutzal’s hand came up, grabbed the end of my hair, and yanked me back down. “Re-lax.”

“Already tried to tell him that,” Lukent said.

I shook my leg, which bumped Kutzal’s elbow and caused him to stick the needle in his thumb. “*Vinz!*” he bellowed.

I held up my hands and moved away. Not far. Just... out of bumping distance.

“Tomorrow at daybreak, we begin defense adjustments,” Kutzal said. “Scouts have reported the Wutarks mobilizing. I suspect they’ll be here in a few rotations.”

Well that was enough to make me forget about missing Amber... for a little while anyway. The idea of battle used to excite me, but for the first time, a thorny ball of dread bounced around in my gut. “How many?”

“Enough to pose a problem.” Kutzal bit off the thread and flapped the pair of pants before tossing them on the log beside him. He placed his palms on his thighs and straightened his back. “But not too many. Barz’alk underestimates our power.”

Barz’alk was the leader of the Wutark settlement, a big flecker who seemed to think he was unbeatable and could dictate how things would go on this planet. Daz had been content to maintain a truce if we each kept to ourselves. But now we know the Wutarks were stealing human females and were protecting the Joktalis, who very much wanted to do us harm.

“Have we heard from Maddic or Relk?” I asked.

The most patient among us, Maddic had been picked by Daz to learn how to fly a Drixonian cruiser. I’d been jealous of him when the announcement was made, but I also knew it was the right decision. I would have crashed the aircraft in no time, while Maddic was more sensible. As for Relk... well, none of us had seen Relk for about a cycle, but I was confident he was still out there somewhere.

“Signals have been spotty, and I now suspect the Joktalis have been flecking with it, so contact with Maddic is gone. And Relk...” Kutzal shook his head. “Who knows?”

“Have you let Daz know about the current situation?”

“I have only been able to reach him briefly, just enough to know they are safe in Granit and to send them a warning about the Wutarks and Joktalis.”

“Tell him not to send aid. We can handle it.”

Kutzal snorted. "I told him the same thing."

We lapsed into silence, and that was when my leg started to shake again. "Think I should check on the girls?" I asked Lukent.

A fist-sized fruit sailed through the air and smacked into my forehead. "Ow." I rubbed my injured face. "That hurt."

"Good," Lukent barked. "Now shut up and find something to do that's not bugging the females."

---

## *Amber*

"I respect that you didn't tell me," Tasha said. "I realized this wasn't about me. This was about the promise you made to Vinz, and keeping that promise was the right decision."

We swung together on a large hammock that Lukent had built for Tasha outside of their hut. The sun set over the water, and the rays reflected off the sister planet, Torin, casting the sphere in reds and oranges.

"Thanks," I said, clinking my wooden cup with hers. "I think so too."

Tasha had obtained a fermented fruit drink from a warrior named Baki that tasted enough like wine that I could pretend I sipped a Pinot Grigio. Along with some hard cheese, a flat cracker, and dried fruits, we were having a proper girls' night.

Instead of a movie, we watched the ocean, which provided more entertainment than I anticipated. Gray birds circled overhead, sometimes dipping to gulp that water. A few times, I saw wriggly, eel-like tails disappear into their beaks before they swallowed them down their gullets.

Every so often, water would ripple from below, and dark shapes twisted and writhed beneath the surface. "So you know what sea life is like here? I'm curious why the Drixonians don't have ships."

"Apparently," Tasha sipped her wine with a pleased gasp. "Torin and Corin are made up of pretty strict land and sea species. The two

do not like to cross. Lukent said he's seen large ships broken up by tentacle monsters."

"Tentacle monsters?"

"I can't remember what he called them... something with a g. But he described them like giant squid."

I made a face. "Yikes. Okay, so land it is. That's fine. I'm not great at swimming anyway."

"That's why this camp on the coast is easy to defend. No one is crossing the sea to get to us."

I plucked at the fur blanket tucked around my waist. "Do you feel guilty? That we're here safe and the rest of the girls are...?" I bit my lip.

Tasha rolled her head to face me. "I did, until Lukent told me that my staying alive is the best way to help them. We think the Wutarks may attack soon, so we can't leave camp, but as soon as we're able to again, we're going to work on finding their trail. I won't rest until we find them."

Her hand reached for mine, and I laced our fingers together. "I won't either."

"You know Trix is alive. Lu and Maisie are hopefully together. And Neve..." Tasha swallowed. "I hope Neve is okay."

"She's strong and capable."

"I know, but she's small and so sensitive."

I nodded in agreement. Neve didn't have an alter, as far as we knew. Sometimes I'd thought it was that she was highly intuitive to others' feelings, almost like an empath, but Neve told me she had always been like that. It was why I worried about her the most—what had they done to her, and did she have some dormant alter that would come alive in the future?

"We can't do anything for them now," Tasha said. "We have to support this clavas now in what comes next. I've learned to take each step one at a time or I get overwhelmed and anxious."

"That makes sense."

Tasha turned on her side and tucked a hand under her head. "So how is Vinz now that you two accept your mate bond? He seems... well, still a little crazy but more grounded."

“He’s been through a lot... more than some of the other sons of naught.” I didn’t want to get into detail, because Vinz’s past was his story to tell. I chewed the inside of my cheek. “He spent time in the Uldani lab too, Tasha.”

Her lips parted, and a small moan escaped her throat. “No.”

“So he has reasons for the way he is.”

“Kent told me the same thing, actually.”

I nodded. “So cut him some slack, is all I’m saying.”

“I’m sorry.”

“No, it’s okay. He is a lot to handle, but he’s beautiful and bright. He just needs someone to hold his strings.”

“And that’s you,” Tasha smiled.

“That’s me.”

“You’re going to have to dig in your heels more than once with him, I’m sure.”

I rolled up my sleeves and slapped my biceps. “I’m working out in anticipation.”

Tasha giggled and raised her wine cup up and down. “Does this count?”

“Absolutely.”

Our peals of laughter bounced off the cliff walls.

## SIXTEEN

*Amber*

Vinz's arms hugged me so tightly that I wondered how we hadn't fused together overnight. His colors rested quietly on the ground, rippling occasionally but close enough I could reach out and stroke them in my mind. The colors seemed to preen under my touch.

Sometimes I could doze off in a twilight state in between bouts of deep sleep, which was what I tried to do now. But my body wasn't tired, and my mind wouldn't stop whirling with plans and strategies to find our friends.

Vinz's eyes opened, the purple glowing like a living amethyst in the dark.

"I'm sorry." I stroked his hair. "I'm keeping you awake, aren't I?"

"You don't need to be sorry. I can feel you thinking though. The string holding us together is shaking and moving."

I pressed my lips together. "I was going to suggest getting out of the bed so you can sleep, but I guess that won't help if it's my aura keeping you awake."

His claws scratched my back gently. "What are you worried about?"

"It's a long list, Vinz."

"Tell me."

I sighed. “The Wutarks. Finding my friends.” I tugged on the string in my mind and his colors jerked. “Keeping you alive.”

“I will handle all of those for you.”

“Vinz...”

“I will fight the Wutarks. I will help find your friends. And I will keep myself alive.”

I cupped his cheek. How had I not noticed how handsome he was the first time I saw him? I’d been too afraid at the time to admire his high cheekbones and strong jaw. “I trust you.”

He nuzzled into my neck, where he spoke a few more muffled words. “I’m trying to trust myself.”

“What’s that mean?”

He rolled onto his back to stare at the ceiling. “Sometimes during battle, anger overtakes me, and I get reckless. It’s a wonder I haven’t been killed yet, and there were many times I wished for an honorable death on the battlefield.” His head rolled to face mine. “But I don’t want to do that anymore. I’ve thought a lot about what Kutzal said to me. And I have you... I can’t do something stupid and lose you.”

“We’re a team.” I laid my head on his shoulder and laced our hands together on his chest. “When you feel yourself lose control just remember I’m always with you.”

He pressed a kiss to the top of my head. “My perfect mate.”

I rose up above him and lowered to press my lips to kiss. He’d just licked at the seam of my lips to sweep inside when a distant clanking sound broke the stillness of the night.

Vinz shot up so fast that we nearly collided heads and leapt off the bed in one fluid move. “That’s the warning for an attack. Get dressed,” he ordered in a low, emotionless tone. I’d never seen him move so fast—in seconds he was dressed in pants, boots, and a furred leather upper body armor.

I dressed too and had just tossed my fur cloak around my shoulders when Vinz’s door burst open. Holding a torch, Trapt stood in the doorway along with a very nervous Tasha. The flames of the torch reflected off the whites of her eyes, and fear slid its cold fingers around my heart.

With his axe tucked into a wide belt and the end of his tail studded with a cuff of spikes, he strode toward Trapt. The flames lit

up his face, and the fingers around my heart tightened.

I'd seen Vinz fight, and he dealt with enemies almost with glee. But this Vinz was already breathing hard, and his fists clenched and unclenched at his sides. "Why aren't there more guards?" Vinz barked at Trapt.

The younger warrior straightened his spine, and I had to respect him for that because Vinz was absolutely terrifying right now. "Kutzal said we need everyone available to fight."

Vinz swore and his tail slapped the ground before he whirled to me. After shoving a knife into the pockets of my cloak, he then gripped my shoulders with his big hands. Purple eyes swirling and shifting, he swallowed. "Trapt will be taking you and Tasha to our bunker. If anyone enters that's not a Drixonian, you stab them. Keep stabbing them until they don't move. And then stab them some more. Do you understand?"

An attack. Bunker. Stabbing. My head spun, but I had to keep it together or Vinz would go off the deep end. Our mind link was great until I fumbled the string. I clutched it with a white-knuckled grip. "I understand. I'll be fine."

He didn't move. His jaw worked, like he meant to say something.

"We need to go now," Trapt said from behind Vinz.

My mate swiveled his head with a wicked glare. "I *know*."

Trapt's hand shook, but he held firm.

"Come on, Amber." Tasha held her hand out. We'll be together."

I lifted onto my toes to press a kiss to Vinz's chin. "I'll be fine. You stay alive."

He nodded and when his hands dropped from my shoulders, I went to Tasha. I took a step outside the door when Vinz's voice uttered in a gravelly tone. "Amber." I looked over my shoulder to find him standing with his hands on his hips, chin up and out. Those purple eyes bore into me with an almost plea. "Hold tight."

I felt the prick of tears at the back of my eyes. "With everything I have."

---



Tasha was shaking, and I was sure it was a combination of worry for Lukent and the rest of the Drixonian warriors and her absolute fear of heights. She'd had to cross the rope bridge at night, and now we were walking on a cliff ledge only as narrow as our feet.

Her knees buckled, and her foot slid off the edge. Trapt and I grabbed her in time, but we heard the distant clatter of rocks sliding down the cliff face to splash into the ocean below.

Tasha's entire body trembled, and I knew I had to do something, or we'd never make it to the bunker. Even if I was nearly just as terrified myself. Vinz's colors in my mind had formed into dark, snapping teeth.

I gripped Tasha's hand tightly. "Mowing the lawn."

For a moment, Tasha didn't react, and then she coughed out a hoarse laugh. This was a little game we always played especially when our situation seemed dire. We repeated things we didn't miss about our lives on Earth.

"W-weeding," Tasha's teeth chattered, but at least she answered. "O-one time I got stung by a wasp in the armpit."

"See? No wasps here."

"What is a wasp?" Trapt asked.

I glared at him for messing up my game, but Tasha answered. "Um, flying assholes. Their stingers have venom."

"Oh, we have something like that. We call them hunners, and they are about the size of your hand," he answered casually.

Tasha choked. "Excuse me?"

"They don't like the cold, so we don't get them much."

"Much?" I shrieked.

The cliff face suddenly dipped, and we found ourselves standing before a massive rock. "We're here," he announced.

Tasha sagged against the cliff face, as far from the ledge as she could get. "Oh thank God."

"Thank *me*." Trapt's eyes glittered. Was he... smirking?

"Okay, oh wise leader. How is this a bunker?" I asked.

He gestured for Tasha to move and then he wrapped his big arms around the boulder. With a grunt and a shudder, the rock moved, revealing a cave that was likely full of worse things than the hunners he mentioned.

“Do we...” Tasha swallowed. “Have to go in there?”

He nodded. “We keep it maintained. You’ll see.” Tasha looked at him askance, and he sighed. “Want me to make sure it’s clear first?”

“Yeah that would be great,” I muttered. I realized there was some urgency to our situation, but that didn’t mean I wanted to trade one way to die for another.

He strode inside without a single bit of nerves. Tasha and I peeked inside as he swung the torch around. The fire showed stacks of furs, crates of supplies, and some odd column in the center that rose floor to ceiling. He turned to face us. “This okay?”

We nodded and stepped in together, hand in hand. Trapt stepped around us and rolled the boulder closed.

The only light was the flickering torch, but Trapt quickly walked around the perimeter of the small cave, lighting wall sconces as he went until every corner of our bunker was illuminated.

He shook out the furs a few times, and my nose twitched before he piled them up and gave them a satisfying pat. “Sit, females.”

Tasha and I shuffled over as he began to dig through some crates. “Would you like some qua? We also have some jerky and pique.”

Pique were a sweet nut that reminded me of honey-roasted peanuts. But my stomach protested at the thought of eating. “I’m okay.”

“Me too.”

Trapt leaned back on his haunches and watched us. “You’re sure?”

We both nodded.

“I’m sorry you got stuck with watching us,” I said.

Trapt immediately rose to his full height and puffed his chest out while his tail curled in the air. “I’m proud to receive this assignment. It is the ultimate honor to fight to defend females.”

“Oh.” A warm flush heated my cheeks. “Well then, thank you, Trapt.”

“Yes, thank you,” Tasha echoed.

Suddenly, a low buzzing came from the ceiling, and a small shower of dust floated down. Tasha stood up immediately, fists braced at her side. “Get out your knife, Amber.”

Trapt shook his head. "That's a good sound. The bikes. It means the Drix are mobilizing."

"The bikes?"

Tasha's brows rose into her hairline. "Haven't you seen the Drix hover bikes?"

"The motorcycle-looking things?"

"Yeah."

"I saw some of the warriors working on them, but I wasn't sure what they were. They had no wheels."

"That's like..." Tasha waved her hand. "Who they *are*. Each clavas is like its own alien motorcycle club."

Trapt stood near the column in the center of the room. "Come here," he beckoned me. "You can see."

I rose and walked over to him. With gentle hands, he positioned me in front of the column, where I now noticed a set of two lenses like binoculars. After adjusting the height of the lenses with a lever, Trapt pointed to them. "Look through. You will be able to see."

I took a shuffling step forward and peered into the lenses. At first, I wasn't sure what I was looking at, until I realized the column was like a submarine telescope enabling me to see the happenings up on the surface of the cliff in the common area and in the distance, the line of trees leading down to the mainland.

There was still a distant rumbling that sounded like a swarm of bees. The campfire was flickering softly, but otherwise, I could detect no movement. Suddenly a blur flashed between two trees, and I sucked in a breath. I gripped the cool metal of the column. "Trapt, I think... I think someone's here." I pulled back and pointed to the lenses. "I saw something."

Eyes narrowed, he leaned in quickly, and after a few seconds tightened his jaw. Pulling back, he nodded. "The Wutarks are here."

I looked through the lenses again as the blurs began to materialize into large, hairy shapes. I'd been asleep when they'd stolen us from camp, but I'd been awake by the time they delivered me to the gates of Joktalis, and the memory of the feel of their thick arms and hot smelly breaths would forever send a chill down my spine.

"Trapt..." My voice shook.

His hand briefly touched my shoulder. “Don’t worry. Kutzal knows how to defend this camp.”

I swallowed and nodded. As the first Wutark broke through the treeline, the buzzing revved to a higher decibel. The telescope shook against my cheeks, and most dust and stones from the ceiling rained down on our heads. But I refused to look away as dark, flying shapes soared into the air ridden by blue aliens with long dark hair.

The Drix were attacking.

Distant war cries rattled down the telescope and through the walls. Laser fire flew from the bikes as they descended on the first wave of Wutarks. Bellowing with rage, a few Wutarks went down before a second wave of the hair warthogs unleashed a volley of arrows into the air. One of the bikes wobbled in the air and free fell to the ground behind the treeline. I gasped, trembling, as I tried to find Vinz.

The Drix in the air returned laser fire, breaking up the archers, and soon the Wutark advance had dissolved into chaos.

And then a Drixonian entered my view—he stood tall with a large sword strapped to his back, wearing a full set of leather armor, and his entire tail coated with a spiked plating. Machets lifted on his arms, top of his head, and all down his back, Kutzal cut an absolutely imposing, terrifying figure as he stood stone-faced with determination. I understood then and there why he was the drexel of the Lone Howls.

Behind him was Axton, two swords spinning in his hands, Lukent behind with a machete-like blade, and bringing up the rear of their small grouping was Vinz. He stood with his axe fisted in his big hands, face streaked with dirt like war paint, and his golden loks flickering in the moonlight.

“Vinz,” I whispered.

“What’s going on?” Tasha asked.

I reached for her blindly, and when I felt her hand, I tugged her to me. I moved aside long enough for her to look in the telescope herself. A shudder ran down her spine, and I soothed her with a hand on the back of her head. Teeth gritted, she pulled back. “I hope they rip apart these Wutark fucks.”

“They will.” Trapt stood with his machets out and a massive blade in hand. I nodded to him with respect and then once again paid attention to what was happening on the surface. As much as I didn’t want to see the battle, I felt like I owed it to Vinz.

Behind Kutzal, Axton, Lukent, and Vinz, rows of Drixonains—members of the Lone Howl—stood obediently.

The Wutarks, seeing the ground battle, let out a series of shrieks and raced toward the line. Kutzal lifted his hands and crossed them in front of his neck at the wrist. The rest followed suit, the motion rippling over the gathered Drixonian warriors like a wave. And then, Kutzal shouted a word I couldn’t decipher. The Drixonians dropped their arms at their sides, machets at the ready, and charged.

My stomach dropped to the floor as the two armies met in a clash. Their bodies were backlit by the fire, making it hard to determine who was who. All I could see was arcs of blood scatter in the air as weapons clashed and sliced and crunched.

The bikes continued to circle the air, but the archers were no longer effective, either because they were dead or had resorted to hand-to-hand combat with the Drixonians. And I could now make out why the Drixonians were considered the legendary warriors that they were. Fast despite their size, their machets cut through flesh and bone like a hot knife through butter. Their laser fire was deadly accurate, and most of all—they fought with a steely calm.

Kutzal slashed and spun with grace while Lukent hacked, and Axton crashed through the Wutarks like they were nothing but children. Vinz... Vinz was a blur, leaping and twirling his axe with a grin on his face.

When I lost sight of him in the dark, I panicked until he came into the viewfinder again, his face streaked with blood but that same wicked smile on his handsome face.

“They’re winning,” I whispered, stepping back for the viewfinder when more Wutark bodies joined their comrades on the ground. I blinked at Tasha. “They’re winning.”

“As they should be,” Trapt said, still maintaining his position at the front of the bunker.

Tasha leaned in and watched the remainder of the battle while I stood nearby, swaying a bit on my feet as I processed the violence.

Soon, the rumbling on the surface of the cliff fell silent. I no longer heard the clash of weapons and the cries of the dying.

Tasha and I sat down on the furs, finally managing to drink a little water and eat some pique. Trapt didn't move, and he stood with his back to us, one leg slightly braced behind him, as he faced the boulder ready for any threats.

I couldn't be sure how much time had passed as Tasha dozed on my shoulder, but a voice outside the boulder jolted her awake. "She is All," came the deep tone from the other side.

Trapt rolled back the stone and standing in the round entrance of the bunker, backlit by the sunlight heralding a new day, were Vinz and Lukent.

---

*Vinz*

Fight still raged in my body. I wasn't settled. This battle was over, but the war had just begun. There would be more Wutarks, and I knew that the Joktalis were just waiting for the right time.

Before retrieving Tasha and Amber, we'd tossed the dead bodies of the Wutarks off the cliff into the freshas below. As for the Lone Howl, we had no casualties, but one warrior who was shot off his bike would take a while to heal from his seriously mangled leg. Our healer promised he'd recover though, and he'd received special attention from Kutzal, which he'd gloried in.

Amber and Tasha helped the other less wounded warriors who lay around the cliff's surface amid pools of blood and discarded weapons. I snarled at a few who seemed all too eager at the females' attentions, although I couldn't blame them.

I'd picked an arrow out of my arm, and the wound seeped black blood until the wound slowly clotted. I held it in my hand, checking the handiwork of the weapon. Holding a basin full of bloody qua, Tasha walked by me and stopped suddenly. Her wide eyes focused

on the arrow in my hand before lifting slowly. “Where did you get that?”

I pointed to the hole in my arm. “Out of there.”

She dropped the basin, and the qua splashed over her feet, but she didn’t even react as she snatched the arrow out of my hand and fingered the notched end. Suddenly she whirled around and began picking up arrows off the ground before tossing them aside quickly.

“Tasha?” I asked just as Lukent walked over to us. He walked with a slight limp after being stabbed in the thigh. He’d heal by sundown.

Tasha was muttering to herself and drew the attention of Amber, who finished bandaging a young warrior’s arm and stepped to her friend’s side. “What’s going on?”

Tasha shoved the arrow in Amber’s face. “This arrow is different than the others. Recognize it?”

Standing nearby, Kutzal plucked the arrow from Tasha’s hand. He studied the tip and ran his fingers down the shaft until he reached the end. Carved into it was a five-pointed leaf.

“Oh my God,” Amber whispered, her eyes wide. “How did they get that?”

“What’s special about it?” Kutzal asked. He had no injuries and didn’t even look as if he’d just slaughtered a dozen Wutarks on his own.

“That belongs to Trix.” Tasha met his eyes. “Our friend. That’s her arrow.”

Amber’s hands shook. “Why would they use her arrows? What if she’s...”

Tasha shook her head. “Don’t even say it.”

“I don’t have a good feeling about this, Tasha.”

Lukent’s mate tugged on her hair and let out a low growl. “I don’t either.”

Kutzal continued to study the arrow and ran his fingers over the carvings. A muscle in his jaw worked, and he gazed out into the treeline deep in thought. Then he stuck the arrow into his sword sheath. “Let me know if you find anymore.”

He strode away, leaving a shell-shocked Amber and Tasha. I gathered my mate into my arms and held her. The relief of finding

her safe and sound in the bunker had been immense. I had felt in my mind that she was safe, but I hadn't believed it until she stood before me.

"We'll find your friends," I assured her. "All of them."

"Seeing her arrow was a shock," she murmured against my chest.

"I know." I squeezed her tightly.

---

That night in our hut, Amber climbed into the furs first. By her body language, I knew it was time for her to sleep before she ever said anything. She swayed slightly on her feet and her eyes were unfocused. It'd been a long day of tending to the wounded. I'd tried many times to get her to rest with Tasha, but they'd been determined to see to every wound, even a scratch.

I wore a bandage around my arm which I didn't even need. The arrow hold had mostly closed, but Amber had insisted on it.

Joining her in bed, I pulled her to me. I hadn't let her out of my sight all day, and the feel of her warm body next to mine worked to calm the aggression still battling for a fight in my blood.

"I need to sleep," she murmured.

I smiled. "I know."

"But I'm also..." her legs shifted together, and a low moan escaped her lips. "I just don't know if I can stay awake long..."

Already shifting down her body, I settled myself between her legs. She smelled fresh as she'd just emerged from the cleanser, and her folds were already glistening with dew. I plucked at her clit, and she slipped her fingers in my hair. "Vinz..."

After one long lick, I blew a cold puff of air on her heated flesh. She shivered. "Thought of this when I fought," I murmured as I swirled a finger at her entrance. "And I felt invincible."

She moaned as I dove into her cunt to lick and lap at her cream. Heels digging into my back, she writhed on the bed as I speared her with my tongue. She came quickly on a shuddering cry, and I knew before I finished cleaning her up that she was asleep.



I lifted myself above her to stare at her flushed face and closed eyes. Her chest rose and fell with even breaths. My muscles calmed, my head cleared, and I gathered her in my arms for a deep sleep.

---

I was jolted awake by a strong hand gripping my hair. Swinging my machets, I connected with something solid before the cool, sharp edge of steel dug into my throat. Forced onto my knees, I blinked into the darkness.

Draped over the shoulder of a Wutark was my unconscious mate. Two more stood next to him, and at least one was behind me holding a blade to my neck. The furs of our bed were rumpled, and I could still taste my mate on my tongue. The sight of her limp body stole the breath from my lungs.

Some questions flitted around my mind—how did they get to our hut undetected? And what did they want with Amber? But I didn't dwell on them now. The first priority was getting the filthy flecking hands off my mate. In my mind, the string of my colors lay unattended in her slack hand.

“Drop her and maybe I'll let one of you live,” I growled.

The Wutark let out a throaty chuckle and gripped the back of her upper thigh. I nearly went feral. “You'll be dead before you lift a finger.”

“This is our camp, our territory—”

“And we're taking your female. Make a sound to wake anyone and we'll slit your throat.” The Wutark behind me pressed the blade deeper into my skin.

I went still. Any other time, I would have shouted my head off and thrown myself on that blade blissfully for a female. But now I hesitated. Amber had asked me to stay alive, and so had Kutzal. But if I remained silent, they'd take my mate. My *mate*.

Rage lit my blood as my cora pounded. The string in my mind lifted, floating away from Amber's lifeless hand. My thoughts scattered and for a moment I was back to the Vinz I'd been before. Ungrounded. Reckless. Coming apart at the seams.

Suddenly, her finger in my mind twitched. I focused on that, waiting for a sign, anything, before I speared myself with a knife to save her. Her hand twitched, and her fingers lifted. They brushed the edge of the string as it hovered out of control. Then, with one dizzy lunge, she grasped it into her fist.

My world came into focus. My colors settled. I listened to the sound of the night outside our hut and met the Wutark's gaze who held my mate. "I'll find you, and I'll rescue her."

He grinned, and mucus dripped from his nose as he snorted. "I'm looking forward to seeing you try."

A searing whistle reached my ears a moment before the knife at my throat went slack. The Wutark behind me fell to the ground, a laser hole in his temple still smoking. The Wutarks lurched for the door just as it swung open. Standing in the doorway was Axton, machets out and twin swords flailing in the moonlight. He cut down the two Wutark's, leaving the last one for me. He didn't get far. Sliding on the ground, I chopped at the tendons above his hooves. Bellowing in pain and rage, he dropped Amber. Before she hit the ground, I scooped her up, and Axton swung his blades together with a clang of metal. The Wutark's head hit the ground a moment before the rest of his body.

Axton wasn't even breathing hard. He wiped his blades on his armor, and then turned to the doorway. Kutzal stood there, arms across his chest, eyes glowing fiercely. He strode toward where I stood holding a lifeless Amber. His hand gripped the back of my neck, and he crashed our foreheads together with a clunk.

I didn't dare to speak. Kutzal was not an affectionate drexel or friend. This display of respect between Drixonians was one he rarely used. His breath panted hot on my face, and his eyes bored into mine. "I'm sorry," he whispered. "I'm sorry that I couldn't protect you from the Uldani's cruelty, but that will never happen again. I'll always have your back."

Clutching Amber with one arm, I gripped the back of his neck and squeezed. "I wavered."

"I know," he said softly.

When the Wutark's had me on my knees, I had heard the barely there clink of a sword outside. "Amber kept me grounded. And I

trusted you.”

Kutzal nodded, and when he released me, he was once again drexel of the Lone Howl. “I’ll get some warriors to come take care of the bodies. Sleep in Tasha and Lukent’s hut for now. They are waiting for you.”

“Mmm... sleepover,” Amber murmured.

I glanced down in shock to see she had one eye open. “Are you awake?”

“Barely,” she whispered. “Just had to...” she opened and closed her fist. “Hold on to you.”

I brought our foreheads together and clutched the back of her head. “And you did. You held on so well, mate.”

“Good,” she murmured, eyes closed again. “Sleep now.”

“Sleep,” I smoothed her hair off her forehead as I stepped over the Wutark bodies on my way out the door. “Sleep well. I got you now.”

## EPILOGUE

*Amber*

It'd been about a week since the Wutark attack. We'd learned they'd killed one Drix guard before stealthily making it to our hut. We'd since learned through some scouting that the Wutarks were in trouble with the Joktals for allowing the Drix to breach their borders, so they thought returning me would appease the Joktals.

We honored the fallen warrior and cleaned up the camp. Kutzal took the death of one of his warriors hard, and while he was already a little unpleasant to deal with on a regular basis, after the battle, he didn't talk in much more than growls. Vinz could get him to smile very rarely, and I could tell my mate was hurting over Kutzal's pain.

Communications were still spotty with Granit, and Kutzal said he believe the Joktals were messing with our signal to prevent contact with the city. While he was reluctant to leave the Lone Howl camp, he felt it was most important for him to meet with Daz quickly, so he left on a mission to Granit.

Lukent was left in charge as the temporary drexel of the remaining warriors at camp. Tasha stepped up into the role of first lady with ease. The warriors looked up to her, and she treated each of them with a firm kindness that they respected. I was a little too soft, and the warriors coddled me more than looked up to me. I was

okay with that. I had Vinz, alive and well, connected to my hip and didn't have much emotional energy for dozens of other warriors.

Today, he was supposed to be training, but instead he was helping me pick the seeds of a wheat-like crop that we'd later grind into a flour. While Tasha and I had never been asked to work, we enjoyed helping the camp in any way we could. I didn't want to sit idle.

Vinz crouched near me with a stem stuck in the side of his mouth like a farmer. He was less *helping* and more *lazing about*, but I didn't care and enjoyed his company. I skimmed the stalk with my fingernails to pick off the ripened seeds. His colors in my mind rippled and swayed, which I'd learned meant he was content.

When I sat my basket down for a quick snack break, Vinz took that as a sign he could lay down and stretch out among the crops. A few winged animals flapped over head and let out a series of caws.

I held out a tein bar studded with some dried fruits, which tasted enough like a protein bar for me to pretend it was. "Want some?"

He stretched his neck until he could close his teeth around the edge of the bar. Then he settled back down with his head on his folded arms. He grinned at me as he chewed. "Thanks."

"Did you and Axton find anything this morning?"

Every day, the two scouted the woods around the settlement, looking for signs of Trix's arrows and any Wutark tracks.

He shook his head. "I'm sorry. When Kutzal gets back, we'll continue the wider search."

I sighed. "I understand. I just miss her. I miss them all."

He rolled onto his side and propped his head on his fist. "They're alive. I know they are. And because they're alive, we'll find them. And we'll bring them home."

I patted his arm. "Thanks."

He laid back down, and I decided the sun was so warm that I stretched out beside him. Wincing, I pulled a dried stem out from under me that was poking me in the butt before laying my head on his biceps.

His hand curled to lazily stroke my hair. My heart warmed, and I could barely believe that after all I'd been through that I could be this content.

“Did you find love yet?” Vinz asked softly.

At first, his question caught me off guard, but his words plucked at a memory in my mind, a previous conversation we’d had where I explained to him what love was. At the time, I’d told him I hadn’t had real love, but that I’d hoped to find it.

I rolled onto my side to face him. He stared up at the sky, but slowly his head turned to face me. Violet eyes glowed with a warm light.

“I did,” I answered.

“Yeah?” he smiled. “Who’s the lucky male?”

“Hmmm...” I tapped my lips. “He’s big and carries a sharp axe.”

“Sharp axe, you say?”

“And he has long dark hair that he never combs.”

“Maybe he likes a messy look.”

I rolled onto my stomach and propped myself on my elbows. “And loves me back.”

Vinz’s eyes crinkled. “Does he?”

I nodded. “I know he does. Because he gets what love is now. To respect. To trust.”

Vinz’s fingers curled around the shell of my ear before brushing along my jaw. “He didn’t think love existed. Not before her.”

“And now?”

“Now it’s everything.” He dropped the pretenses and leaned closer. “Life used to be a passage of time between battles but now that passage of time... it’s what I live for. And it’s what I fight for.”

I pressed my lips to his and whispered there, “I love you, Vinz.”

Eyes glittering, he hugged me to his chest. “And I love you, my golden goddess.”

*Thank you so much for reading *The Alien’s Surrender*! I’d appreciate it if you drop me a rating and review on Amazon and Goodreads!*

*If you’re new to my books, please check out my [website](#) for my bibliography and reading order.*

What's next? Trix and Kutzal's story in  
[THE ALIEN'S BATTLE.](#)

***I offer myself as bait... but am I really just a pawn?***

*Trix: The red aliens make me a deal I can't refuse—help them fight their enemies and they'll rescue my friends. I agree to act as bait to lure the blue Drixonian leader. But the heated, knowing look in his violet eyes makes me suspect I made a bargain with the wrong aliens...*

*Kutzal: This female isn't like the others. She's prickly, cold, and shot me with an arrow. I want her. But she thinks I'm the enemy, and unless I can find a way to communicate despite our language barrier, her friends will be the ones at risk. I never back down from a battle, so this is one I will win.  
And then I'll claim my mate.*

[PREORDER NOW!](#)

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ella Maven is the pen name for a multi-published USA Today Bestselling author who decided to finally unleash the alien world that had been living in her head for years. (Is that weird? Probably). Her books feature dominant, possessive aliens who are absolutely devoted to their humans.

She lives on the East Coast with her completely normal husband and two spawn who sure seem alien some days.





ALSO BY ELLA MAVEN

*Drixonian Warrior Series*

Anna and Tark: [The Alien's Future \(prequel\)](#)

Daz and Frankie: [The Alien's Ransom](#)

Sax and Valerie: [The Alien's Escape.](#)

Ward and Reba: [The Alien's Undoing](#)

Miranda and Drak: [The Alien's Revenge](#)

Gar and Naomi: [The Alien's Savior](#)

Xavy and Tabitha: [The Alien's Challenge](#)

Nero and Justine: [The Alien's Equal](#)

*Stolen Warrior Series*

[Rexor](#)

[Mikko](#)

[Fenix](#)

[Zecri](#)

*Mates of the Kaluma*

[Hunted by the Alien Assassin](#)

[Protected by the Alien Bodyguard](#)

[Claimed by the Alien Chieftain](#)

[Rescued by the Alien Outlaw](#)

*Outcasts of Corin*

[The Alien's Sacrifice](#)

Standalones:

[Claimed by the Demon Alien](#)