

Run Away to Mars

By

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Smashwords Edition

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Chapter 1

“You gonna make it?” Audrid asked as she peered back at her husband, Torias.

He was two meters behind her, huffing out breaths as he climbed the steep ridge. She stopped and stood there, admiring his strong muscular arms and chiseled form through his sweat-soaked black T-shirt as she waited for him. A little smirk crept across her face.

“Of course,” he replied, flashing her a smile as he pushed himself up the steep hill.

A couple of minutes later, he made it to where she was standing on the ridge. He slung his arm over her shoulders, his heavy breaths filling the air. They both peered out at the Mars vista as the dusty red Ares Mountain range stretched out as far as the eye could see. The simulator did a good job of recreating it, right down to the hot sun as it beat down upon them. The only thing it couldn’t replicate was the change in gravity. The colony’s gravity plating was set to Earth, and there was no changing that.

“Should we keep going?” she asked, leaning onto him with a smile. She relished the feeling of his strong arm around her. She glanced over at him. “Or do you need a rest break?”

“I don’t need a break,” he replied as he leaned over to kiss her temple.

“At least have some water,” she said.

She lifted his arm off her and turned him around so she could retrieve the canteen from his backpack. She twisted off the lid, taking a sip of the cold, refreshing water before handing it to him. She watched him guzzle it down as water dripped down the sides of his mouth. Afterwards, she put it back in his pack, and they continued hiking up the ridge toward the peak, with her leading the way.

An hour went by, and she could feel the beads of sweat rolling down her forehead. She wiped them away with the back of her hand before they could trickle into her eyes. She sucked in a deep breath as she pushed herself harder up the steep ridge. She loved the feeling of a good workout. It helped her nerves and kept her mind free of work. As long as she kept pushing herself, she could keep those worried thoughts at bay. And she needed to. All too often, work consumed her.

She stood at the peak as she waited for Torias. He was several meters behind her now. He was fit and strong, but no one could keep up with her, so she couldn’t fault him for that. She was always the strongest and the fittest, the one with the most resolve to push through pain and fatigue to triumph. That was her growing up in a competitive family full of controlling people who just wanted to be the best.

“This seems like a good place to have lunch,” he said through heavy breaths as he met her at the peak.

“I agree,” she replied as she looked out at the dusty horizon.

She glanced over at Torias as he took off his backpack. The back of his T-shirt was soaked with sweat, making the shirt cling to his skin. She admired his muscular form. Even through the shirt, it was obvious that he had spent a lot of time in the gym. She took off her own backpack and sat next to him, cross-legged, so their knees were touching. They both peered out at the distance before them as he removed two sandwiches from a lunch bag in his backpack. He handed her one, and she started eagerly digging in, suddenly realizing that she was hungry.

“It’s beautiful here. I wish we could do this for real sometime,” she said between bites as she looked out at the rusty red landscape and the sun poking through the light layer of Martian cloud cover. The Ares Mountains were her favorite place on Mars.

“Technically, we can,” he replied.

She glanced at him as she took another bite of her egg salad sandwich. “We’d have to wear environmental suits. Who wants to hike in one of those?”

“True.”

She sighed as her thoughts turned to work. The moment she stopped pushing herself physically, the thoughts that had been filling her head for weeks would surely return. She was eagerly awaiting news on her project proposal. She was a geologist with United Earth’s military, and she had submitted a proposal to lead a project exploring the Hades Caves for resources. Mars had so many unexplored caves, and their colony, New Horizons, needed those resources. She had submitted the proposal three times now. It was rejected the first two times for minor petty reasons, which frustrated her to no end. Waiting to hear was sending her on edge. She sucked in a deep breath and slowly let it out.

“Hey,” Torias said softly as he put a gentle hand on her shoulder. She glanced over at him. “You’re a million miles away.”

“Sorry.”

“Your proposal?”

“Yeah,” she said with a sigh as a frown etched her face. “I’ll try to push that aside. I should be focused on us. This is our anniversary, after all.”

“You say that with a frown, but I’m not going to take offense. I know that look on your face is about the proposal and not our marriage,” he said as he smiled just a little, squeezing her shoulder.

“Torias,” she said as a warm smile spread across her face. She turned to face him, looking deep into his eyes. “You know I love you, and I love being married to you. It’s been a good first year.” She leaned in to give him a peck. She could taste lingering egg salad on his lips.

“I agree,” he said with a wide grin.

When they had finished their sandwiches, Torias pulled out two gooey brownies and handed one to his wife. She took a bite into the fudgy chocolate, relishing the taste.

“Delicious,” she muttered between bites.

Torias was always filling her up with good food. His baking and cooking skills were gifts from his mom. He always talked about how much time he had spent with her in the kitchen while he was growing up. He might have left her behind to start a new life on Mars when he was 18, but he never stopped cooking and baking. He said it was his connection to her and happier times. When his dad died, his mom replaced a loving father with an abusive stepfather, and everything in Torias’s life went downward from there. Cooking and baking were his connection to the good things in life, to those memories he treasured.

She noticed him smiling at her as he licked his lips. She could feel herself blushing as she smiled back.

“You have a little icing on your lips,” he said.

He gently put his hand on the back of her head and pulled her in for a kiss. It was messy at first as he licked icing off her lips before kissing her. She could taste the rich chocolate as their tongues met. She melted into him as her heart fluttered in her chest. He pulled away with a smile as he gazed into her eyes.

“Delicious,” he said breathily.

“The brownie or the kiss?”

“The kiss,” he murmured before pulling her back in.

He parted her lips with his tongue as he explored her mouth. She let him deepen the kiss as she felt something stirring deep in her lower belly. A tingle, a flutter, a warmth. It was radiating outward as it filled her up.

She smirked as she got on her knees. She grabbed him by the shoulders as she continued to kiss him hard. She deepened the kiss, her heart fluttering as she pushed him backwards until he was lying on the ground, gazing up at her with those beautiful blue eyes. She hovered over him as they kissed, their tongues dancing until breath became absent, and they were forced to pull away. They rested their foreheads on each other as they breathed. She was panting as she licked her lips, staring down at him with a hunger.

When they had caught their breaths, they dove back into the kiss. That twinge in her belly only grew deeper and stronger. She pulled away as she felt herself growing wet. She couldn’t take things farther in the simulator. She did have standards.

“Should we hike?” she asked breathily with a smirk.

“If you’re asking if I’d rather hike than do this...” he started to say as he pulled her into a soft kiss, “then you don’t know me very well.”

“Oh, I know you,” she said with an amused smile as her face hovered inches above his. “I know you and all your thoughts. But we have all evening to do more than this.”

She kissed him again briefly before pulling away with a little smirk. She bit her lip as she stood up and held her hand out for him. He just looked at her with a sigh as disappointment filled his eyes.

“Come on, Torias. The day is wasting away,” she said as she stood there, impatiently waiting for him.

“Fine,” he said as he grabbed her hand and stood up.

“Don’t look so disappointed,” she said. She tugged on his arm, pulling him toward her until her lips were lingering on his. She parted those lips as her tongue explored him. She felt that stir deep in her belly again as she forced herself to pull away. “There will be plenty more of that tonight, captain.”

A devilish smirk inched its way onto her face as she mentioned his rank. She knew she was only turning him on more. She watched as his eyes darkened, the hunger deepening in them.

“You’re a tease,” he said as he took her by the waist and his tongue delved into her mouth.

She let him deepen the kiss as she wrapped her arms around his neck. His skin was slippery from sweat, but she didn’t care. All she could think about was stripping that sweaty T-shirt off him as she pulled him into the shower. Thoughts of work disappeared as delicious butterflies filled her belly and a warm lust crept up her cheeks. She pulled away as she bit her lip, just gazing into those soft blue eyes.

“I love you,” she said as she caressed his cheek. “It’s been a good year. And many good years before that.”

“I love you too,” he said as he looked at her. She could feel him tugging on her soul as he stared deep into her eyes. She just gazed back for a moment as she let out a contented sigh.

“We should hike,” she said with a little smile.

“Let’s hike then.”

Over an hour later, they finished hiking the ridge in the simulator and ended the program as Mars disappeared and a plain black room appeared. They both pulled towels out of their backpacks as they wiped the sweat dripping off them. Torias watched her as she blotted her face. Those beautiful ice blue eyes stared back at him for a moment as a little smile crept onto her face. She slung the towel around her neck before putting the backpack on. She was watching him the entire time, that smile growing into a smirk.

“I see you staring at me,” he said with a coy smile.

“It’s nothing you don’t do to me, Torias,” she said. “I’m just admiring how good you look in a sweaty T-shirt. You can’t blame me for looking.”

“Stare all you want. I’m an old man. I’ll feel grateful if you still find me hot.”

“You’re not old,” she said with a chuckle.

“I just turned 40 a few weeks ago. That’s middle-aged. You, on the other hand, are young and beautiful at the tender age of thirty-two. How did I get so lucky to end up with you?” he asked as he softly kissed her on the lips.

“I have no idea,” she said with a smile before walking through the doors to the bright corridor.

He followed her, blotting his head a little more with the towel hanging around his neck. They walked through the recreation complex and onto Orinoco Street before cutting into the central arboretum and across New Horizons until they hit the residential sector. They then turned left onto Rubicon Lane.

The Colony6 project, as it was often still referred to by military personnel, was the sixth attempt at colonizing Mars in the last 100 years, and the only successful attempt. In the last 20 or so years, it had grown to 10,000 residents, a mix of the United Earth military and civilians. Torias had gone from a cocky 18-year-old private to a high-ranking official. It afforded him and his wife some perks, including one of the nicer apartments that looked out into a quaint park.

Torias placed his hand on the palm print reader beside their door as it clicked unlocked. He followed Audrid into an open-plan living space with a small kitchen just left of the door that faced the spacious living room. Outside the living room windows was a view of the Ares Mountains through the crystal-clear glass of the main dome. Below was a quiet little park. He took his backpack off and put it on the kitchen island before noticing the little smirk on his wife’s face.

“What?” he asked, intrigued by that look.

“Join me in the shower,” she said, not waiting for a reply as she walked into their bedroom, stripping her sweaty clothes off directly into the hamper. He just watched her, admiring her gentle curves and smooth, unblemished, ivory skin. “Torias, you need to lose some clothes too.” That smirk only grew as she eyed him.

He quickly stripped off his layers of sweat-soaked clothes and tossed them haphazardly onto the floor of their bedroom before following her into the bathroom. She turned the shower on and stepped inside. He followed her, cranking the water temperature up. He liked it hot, especially when he was sharing a shower with her. Soon, steam was starting to fill the room.

He grabbed her bar of coconut soap and ran it under the water before handing it to her. He took his own bar of soap and began washing himself as he watched her. She took her time, running the bar of soap across her clavicle, around her breasts, and down her belly, leaving behind a slippery trail of soap. She put it aside as she started to massage the soap into her body, creating a nice, thick lather across her breasts and belly.

He wanted to touch her so badly as he watched her, his mouth gaping open. He let out a soft breath as she started lathering the soap into her nipples. She seemed to sense his need to touch her because she stopped and gave him an inviting look as she dropped her hands to her side. He

started to rub the slippery suds around her body, starting with her breasts. He massaged them as he thumbed her nipples. She let out a soft gasp as he pinched them with a little smile.

He moved on, spreading the soap across her toned belly and into her belly button. He skimmed his hands up and down her torso with his feather-soft touch as her gaze intensified. He gently turned her around and took the bar of soap as he rubbed it along her back. He put it aside as he washed her back, spreading the soap around until it was thick with suds. He ran his hands down her back until he was at her ass, cupping both cheeks. He knelt behind her and ran his hand up and down her leg, slathering the slippery soap. He massaged the suds into her foot, getting between each and every toe as she lifted her foot for him. Then he switched legs, trailing his hands up her inner thighs until he was just shy of her folds.

He stood up after, still behind her as he leaned down and kissed her neck gently, his hands stroking her biceps. He started trailing kisses across her shoulder as his hands reached around and massaged her breasts. Coconut wafted up his nose as he breathed her in.

“Torias.”

“Hmm?” he murmured between kisses.

“We’re supposed to be showering.”

“Oh,” he said as he started kissing her other shoulder.

She turned to face him as she gently pushed him aside with a playful smile and began rinsing the soap from her body. He just chuckled a little, grabbing his own bar and washing himself as he watched her under the stream.

When he was clean, he took the bottle of coconut shampoo and poured it generously into his palm. He started massaging it into her scalp as she moaned. He tangled his fingertips into her long, almost-black hair until it was white with soap bubbles. He continued massaging her scalp, getting his fingers in deep.

“I like your hands,” she said as she let out a soft breath.

“Oh?” he said with a knowing smile as he massaged harder and deeper into her scalp. She let out a little moan.

“I can’t wait for later when they do even more to me,” she said in a husky voice. She let out another moan, longer this time, as she let it reverberate in her throat. “Oh...” she murmured. “So... good...”

He just smiled as he massaged her. When he was done, he rinsed her hair off, finger-combing her long strands until they were free of suds. She turned to him, pushing him under the shower stream as she started getting his hair wet. She poured coconut shampoo onto his hair and started massaging it into him, giving as much attention to his scalp as he had given her. Tingles spread across his body, making their way slowly down from his head until they were fizzling out his fingertips and toes as he let out a breath. She was a lot rougher than him, and he liked it as he groaned. When she finished rinsing his hair, she finger-combed it until it was slicked back and

out of his face. He smiled as he pulled her into a soft kiss, running his hands up and down her wet, smooth back until he was cupping her ass.

“We’re wasting water,” she said as she pulled away.

“We’re saving water by showering together,” he countered as he started trailing kisses across her jaw until he was at her ear. “We’re being good residents of New Horizons.”

“We should get a metal,” she said, letting out a soft gasp as he nibbled on her ear.

“Yes, I’ll anonymously submit our names for metals,” he whispered into her ear before suckling on her lobe.

“What will the metals be for?” she asked breathily.

“Hmm...” he breathed out into her ear before trailing kisses down her neck. “Most diligent, water-conscious residents.”

He started suckling on the crook of her neck as she let out a little purr. A moment later, the water turned off, not that he noticed. He just sucked her neck before biting down lightly.

“Torias,” she said after a moment. He grunted as he started trailing kisses across her shoulder. “I’m cold and dripping wet.”

“Oh,” he said as he looked up at her. “Well, I wouldn’t want that.”

He stepped out of the shower and handed her a towel before taking his own. He watched as she towel-dried herself, admiring how she captured every inch of her six-foot-tall body with that towel. She was so diligent about getting every inch of herself dry. And then she hung up the towel so it was perfectly aligned. He just haphazardly tossed his towel on the rack as he watched her brush her hair. It was long and straight. It landed halfway down her back. He just wanted to run his hands through it.

“I can feel you watching me,” she said as she gazed at him through the mirror.

“Can’t help it,” he said as he grabbed his hairbrush and joined her at their double sinks.

She smiled for a moment, blushing just a little. She continued brushing her hair, making sure she reached every inch of those dark, long locks. His eyes were transfixed on her completing this mundane task as she stood there naked.

“I’m going to check on the status of my proposal after this,” she said as her face tensed and the smile disappeared.

She sighed as she put down her hairbrush and walked out of the bathroom. He ran the brush through his hair a couple more times before following her into the bedroom. She was throwing on her uniform, a navy-blue jumpsuit with science insignia patches on both biceps. Although it wasn’t form fitting, it still showed off her beautiful figure. He loved how tall she was and how long those legs were. It was like they went on for miles when he ran his hands up and down them, or when he trailed kisses up her inner thigh in bed. They were the same height, meaning

their lips aligned perfectly. No need for one of them to lean down and crane their necks to reach each other.

He threw on an old gray T-shirt with the Colony6 logo on it and black joggers as he watched her twist her hair up into a tight bun. She caught his eye in the mirror as she smiled at him briefly before going back to her task. She had such a focus. He watched as she slid each pin in, creating the perfect smooth bun. He just wanted to take each pin out and run his hands through it. And that was exactly what he was planning to do that night.

“Okay, I’m going to head out,” she said as she closed the distance between them. She gave him a quick peck on the lips. “Get everything ready for our evening of cooking and baking while I’m gone.”

“Any preferences?”

“Brownies,” she said, kissing him again, this time slower and softer. She pulled away with a twinkle in her eyes. He knew she was imagining those fudgy chocolate brownies.

“Brownies it is,” he said with a smile as she turned and headed out of their apartment. He watched her go, admiring her firm ass in her uniform. “See you soon, sergeant.”

“I won’t be long, captain,” she said with a little grin before leaving.

He just smiled, thinking about how he was going to run his hands over every inch of her body tonight. But first, they were going to make brownies and have a romantic dinner. He started getting ingredients ready as he waited for her.

Chapter 2

“Doctor Riley, what a surprise!” a sarcastic voice said as soon as the door to the Special Projects Office opened.

Audrid saw the director of special projects, Lieutenant Jared Weston, glaring at her from his desk. She sucked in a deep breath and walked up to his desk, trying to stand respectfully before him.

“I came to check on the status of my proposal, sir,” she stated firmly.

“At ease, Audrid. I expect to see you no less than once a day to pester me about your proposal. And look, it’s almost the end of my workday, and I’m just seeing you for the first time. That’s actually quite a treat,” he said, flashing her a smile.

“Jared, you could just stop stringing me along and approve my proposal. Then I’d be out of your hair for good,” she said as she gave him an annoyed look.

“You would be out of my hair only until the next time you have a project to propose. Something tells me you’ll never be out of my hair for good. Look, I haven’t made my decision yet. I’ll see you tomorrow, when it’s time to pester me again.”

“Jared, can’t you just tell me if you’re going to approve it already?” she asked with a sigh as she crossed her arms. “You know it’s the best proposal. The others are no good.”

“You think expanding the egg lab is no good? We have a whole shipload of new colonists coming in from United Earth. They need to eat. And frankly, your husband would be lost in an egg shortage. How would he bake for you?” He had a smug little grin on his face as he flashed her another smile.

“We have plenty of eggs,” she replied as she narrowed her eyes at him.

“Not with the way your husband bakes.”

“Jared, seriously,” she snapped. “I didn’t come here to debate my husband’s use of eggs. I came here for my proposal. Are you going to approve it or not?” Her voice was hard as she stared at him unwaveringly.

“You’re no fun, Audrid. Never could take a joke. Not really sure what Torias sees in you,” he said with a chuckle.

“He loves me,” she said through gritted teeth as her eyes bore into him. “Now, my proposal?”

“Relax. Why don’t you just go home and enjoy your anniversary? I know Torias is looking forward to spending it with you. You’re right; he does love you. And here you are on your special day, pestering me. Didn’t you take today off to be with him?” He leaned forward at his desk, staring hard at her as he raised a brow.

“I don’t know why my husband is friends with you. You’re so... ugh! You’re just stringing me along. You don’t even care about the proposals you get. You just play mind games. Well, you know what, Jared?” she said with a huff, raising her voice. She tried to find the words to finish what she was saying, but she was so frustrated that she felt like she was going to boil over. Finally, words spewed out of her. “You have all the power here. So go ahead and string me along. I’ll see you tomorrow because I’m going to pester the hell out of you until you damn well approve my proposal!”

He just laughed as he sat back in his chair. She glared at him, clenching her fists.

“Look, I’m almost done deciding. I’ll let you know by the end of the day tomorrow, I promise. Now, don’t come back. I’ll tell you when I’ve made my decision,” he said as his face relaxed into a smile.

“Tomorrow, then?” she asked as she sucked in a breath.

“Tomorrow. Now, go enjoy your anniversary. That’s an order, sergeant.”

She nodded curtly and turned to leave. The minute she was out of his office, her whole body sagged. She leaned against the wall, taking a deep breath. Tomorrow. She had to survive just one more day of not knowing. She took another couple of deep breaths and then headed back to her apartment.

Torias was exactly where she expected him to be when she arrived. He was in the kitchen, thumbing through a paperback recipe book. It was practically a family heirloom. It was full of stains, fingerprints, and handwritten notes. His mom had passed it on to him when he was a teenager. He treasured that little book. He looked up at her with a smile as he put it aside.

“Well?” he asked as he raised his brows.

“Jared said he would tell me tomorrow, for sure,” she said as she frowned.

She picked up the recipe book and started flipping through until she found the brownie recipe. She admired all the handwritten notes next to it. She could distinguish Torias’s notes from his mother’s through his handwriting. He took the book back and placed it on the counter face down, open to the page of the brownie recipe.

“This is a good thing, so why the look?” he asked as he furrowed his brows.

“I’m just tired of being strung along. I don’t even know why you’re friends with him. He’s a jerk,” she said with a sigh as she leaned against the counter.

“He’s not a jerk, and he isn’t stringing you along. He’s just doing his job,” he said as he closed the distance between them, taking her waist in his strong hands. He leaned in to peck her lips.

“Do you want me to talk to him?”

“No. I want to get this project on my own merits. I don’t need my husband to talk me up,” she said as she gave him an annoyed look.

“Okay, I won’t then,” he said with a sigh as he stared at her for a minute. “What can I do to cheer you up?”

A little smile spread across her face as she caressed his cheek. “Just be you.”

“I can do that,” he said as he leaned in, softly taking her lips in his. He lingered on them for a moment before slowly pulling away with a smile. “Should we make those brownies now?”

“Yes, brownies,” she said as her face brightened.

He kissed her cheek and then picked up the recipe book and started looking over it. Audrid glanced around the kitchen. The island had ingredients laid out across it. There were eggs, cocoa, flour, simulated butter, and everything else they needed. New Horizons was mostly self-sustaining as long as one got used to a vegetarian diet. They grew the crops they needed in special biodomes and used labs to grow eggs in special incubators. She picked up an egg as she held it up to him.

“Apparently, these are in high demand. The egg lab expansion might get approval over my project,” she said.

He gently grabbed the egg out of her hand as he placed it back in the carton. Then he went up behind her and draped his arms around her waist as he kissed her neck softly.

“At least we’ll have plenty of eggs. I can bake for you day and night. I can make you cookies and brownies and cake to your heart’s content,” he murmured between kisses.

“If you do that, you’re going to have a 400-pound wife. Perhaps we can just stick to the normal amount of goodies,” she said as she turned to him and pulled him into a kiss.

“Mmm...” he mumbled into the kiss. “If you insist...”

He started trailing kisses across her jaw until he was at her ear. He suckled on her lobe for a moment, tickling her as she giggled a little.

“Torias, the brownies,” she said with a smile.

“Right, brownies,” he said as he pulled away. “Sometimes it’s hard to concentrate with you in the kitchen.”

“Oh?” she asked as she raised a brow. “If you would prefer to bake alone, I can go make myself scarce.”

“Don’t you dare,” he said before pecking her on the cheek. “Okay, we need to start by melting the butter.”

She watched as he grabbed a saucepan and stuck it on the stove, turning the burner on. She found the stick of butter among the ingredients on the counter and handed it to him. He sliced off just what he needed and added it to the saucepan. She stood behind it as she watched it sizzle and melt, filling the room with the delicious smell of melted butter. She leaned over and kissed his ear softly as he stirred it. She started nibbling as he let out a little laugh.

“Sorry, am I being too much of a distraction again?” she asked as she started suckling on his lobe. “Because I can stop.” She moved her soft kisses down his neck as he moaned.

“Luckily, I have a very good attention span. I can concentrate on multiple things at once,” he said as he removed the saucepan from the heat. She handed him the cocoa as he stirred it in. “Start beating some eggs and sugar together.”

She followed his instructions, and soon the sound of the beater filled the room. The jarring noise grated on her. He put a hand on her shoulder to let her know it was done and then took the bowl from her. He added everything together and stirred in some vanilla. She grabbed the bottle from him, taking in the aroma of it with a sigh.

“I love vanilla,” she said as she put the bottle down.

“I know you do,” he said with a smile as he stirred the mixture.

“You know me too well,” she said as she draped her arms around his shoulders from behind and kissed his ear again.

“Well, you do sniff the vanilla bottle every single time we bake together. You’re a creature of habit. It’s hard not to know you too well.”

He turned his head until he was taking her lips in his. She pulled away with a smile as she gazed into those beautiful blue eyes. It was as if she could see deep inside his soul when she looked into them. There was love and warmth staring back at her. She felt herself blushing just a little. He pecked her on the lips before turning his attention back to the mixture.

“Okay, we’re ready for the pan. Just need to grease it first.”

“Greasing the pan,” she said as she took some butter on a napkin and started spreading it around the pan.

She got a little butter on her fingertips. She stuck them in her mouth as she sucked off the butter. He watched her with a little smirk before taking the pan from her and pouring the batter into it. She watched as he stuck it in the oven, admiring his tight ass as he bent over. As he stood up, she went up behind him and cupped both cheeks, startling him.

He turned around quickly, wrapping her up in his arms as he pulled her into a kiss. He wasted no time parting her lips as his tongue explored her. She deepened the kiss as she draped her arms around his neck. His hands were on her back, pulling her body against his. Eventually, they pulled away breathlessly, resting their foreheads on each other.

“We still need to make the icing,” he said without moving his forehead off hers.

“Let’s make icing then,” she said as she pulled him into another kiss, just lingering on his lips for a long moment before reluctantly pulling away to grab the recipe book.

“We need to cream the butter and confectioner’s sugar,” he said as he grabbed a clean bowl.

“If you’ve memorized this, why do you even bother with the recipe book?” she asked as she handed him a bag of confectioner’s sugar. He opened it and scooped in a couple of cups.

“This is my bible. I don’t bake without it,” he said firmly. “Now hand me the butter.”

He started beating the butter and sugar together as the jarring sound of the beater filled the room again. She waited impatiently for it to finish as she stood beside him, watching it spin. As much as she hated the sound, it made her feel good watching it beat the hell out of the butter until it was a fluffy mush. Afterwards, he added in the cocoa and some vanilla and continued beating it.

“Taste test,” he said as he scooped up some icing into her mouth. She sucked on his finger, relishing the taste of it dipped in chocolate icing.

“Delicious,” she said. “Maybe you need to taste it too.”

She dipped two fingers into the icing, took a heap of it, and slid her fingers into his mouth. She could feel his warm tongue as he licked it off. He sucked her fingers as she pulled them through his lips slowly. She was about to take her hand back when he captured it and kissed it with a little smirk.

“You taste good,” he murmured as he continued kissing her hand. “I bet your lips taste good too.”

He pulled her into a kiss. She could taste the stray chocolate icing on his lips as her tongue delved into his mouth. She pulled away with a smile, gazing into those soft eyes as her heart fluttered.

“We should make dinner now while waiting for the brownies to bake,” he said as he caressed her cheek, sending a tickle down her spine.

“Let’s make dinner then,” she said before pulling him into another kiss.

As Audrid slurped up the last of the linguini, she felt Torias’s eyes on her. She smiled as she glanced at him. He took her face in his hands as he pulled her into a messy kiss, sucking off stray pasta before delving his tongue into her mouth. She could taste the creamy sauce and garlic butter on his lips. She pulled away with a smile.

“More wine?” he asked as he held up the bottle.

“Please,” she said.

Once her glass was full, she took a sip of the red wine. Her eyes never left his. He just stared at her as an intense lust filled his eyes. She could feel them invading her in the best of ways. It made her heart beat faster, her breaths quicken, and her cheeks feel warm.

She was glad they had changed into nice outfits. She had a surprise for him under her tight black dress. She could feel herself stirring under his gaze. She pulled him into another kiss, tasting the delicious garlic butter on his lips. She pulled away, feeling butterflies fluttering inside her.

“Should we have brownies?” he asked. “They’ll be cool now.”

“Later.”

She slid off the stool and held her hand out for him. He smiled, taking it as she led him to the bedroom.

Once there, she started to unbutton his silk black shirt. She pushed it off his shoulders before running her hands up and down his strong, chiseled chest. His skin was smooth and free of hair, letting her hands glide across it. She loved feeling those muscles under her palms.

He pulled her into a soft kiss and then began trailing kisses across her jaw to her ear. She gasped as he played with her lobe, nibbling a little before suckling. The kisses continued down her neck until he was at the crook of it. She relished the feeling of those soft kisses as he held her waist in his strong hands.

His hands skimmed up and down the sides of her torso as he continued to kiss her neck. His touch was like feathers, sending a warm tingle down her spine. He pulled away, leaving her wanting as he turned her around and slowly unzipped the back of her dress. She could hear him let out a heavy breath when it fell to the floor.

He took her by the waist and spun her around to face him as he eyed her black lace lingerie bodysuit. He ran the back of his fingers up her belly and then skimmed his hands lightly across her breasts before thumbing her nipples through the lace. She could feel herself growing wet for him.

“I like this,” he said. He leaned in, whispering in her ear, “But I want to see it on the floor.”

“Take it off me, then,” she said in a husky voice as she gazed into his eyes intensely.

He leaned in to kiss her, parting her lips as he dipped his tongue into her mouth. She deepened the kiss, keeping her palms flat on his chest, feeling those firm muscles. He cupped her breasts, thumbing her nipples again through the fabric as they went hard.

“Take it off me, Torias,” she whispered sensually into his ear as a lust stirred deep in her belly.

He kissed her on the sensitive spot just below her ear as he ran a fingertip between her legs. The feather-soft touch against the fabric only made her lust for him more as moisture seeped out of her.

“I can feel how wet you are already,” he whispered into her ear before kissing the sensitive spot below it again.

He started suckling on that sensitive spot as his hands found the thin straps of her lingerie and started pulling them down her shoulders as his fingertips skimmed her skin. He was slow and deliberate, and she could feel herself growing impatient for his touch.

“Torias...” she whispered.

He pulled her bodysuit down until her breasts were free. He let go of it in favor of massaging her breasts as she cooed. He thumbed those hard nipples as she let out a breath. Her breaths grew louder and heavier as he wrapped his moist lips around her nipple and began to suck on it. He cupped her other breast in his strong hand, continuing to thumb her nipple. They were so hard and erect, and the feeling of his tongue on it sent a thrill down her spine. He took her nipple between his teeth lightly as she gasped.

“Oh, Torias...” she whispered out.

He switched sides, lavishing kisses on her other breast as he started to slowly pull the bodysuit all the way down to the floor. He reached his hand between her legs and slid his finger into her folds as she let out a hard gasp. She could feel how wet she was as he swept his finger up from her entrance to her clit. The feeling of his touch on her sensitive spot made her hips buck involuntarily as she moaned hard. He started to stroke her as she purred. At the same time, he pulled her into a kiss, just soft and brief, before trailing kisses down to her neck.

She started unbuckling his belt. She fumbled for his button and then his zipper, making quick work of pushing his pants down to his thighs. He let go of her, leaving her starved for more of his touch as he removed his pants and socks until he was in just his boxers. She skimmed her hand across his bulge as he groaned. She smiled at him, feeling her cheeks blush as she pulled down the boxers and they fell to the floor, revealing his erection. She took it in her hand. It was hot and pulsating in her palm. He let out a heavy breath as she started to stroke him.

A moment later, he grabbed her roughly by the biceps and walked her to the bed until her knees hit the edge. He pushed her down and yanked her hips until her bottom was at the edge. He kneeled, draping her right leg over his shoulder while he held her left leg in his hands, kissing the inside of her knee. He trailed kisses up her thigh as she felt moisture seeping out of her. When he was just shy of her mound, he switched sides and did the same. Afterward, he draped both legs over his shoulders as he leaned down to kiss the hair on her mound. She was breathing heavily in anticipation.

And then his tongue slid inside her folds. She gasped as it started to flick over her clit. Her breaths turned ragged as he licked harder. She could already feel tingles washing over her and out her fingertips and toes. Her hands found his hair, fingertips tangling in his chestnut strands. She tightened her grip as he slid two fingers inside her. She moaned hard as he started to stroke her insides. Her whole body felt heavy as it melted into the mattress. She could feel heat boiling in her loins. It spread up her belly until it hit her cheeks, and she was on fire. Then he started to thrust his fingers in and out of her, and that fire became alive, burning bright.

“Oh, Torias...” she breathed out as she gripped his hair tighter. “Torias...”

She squeezed her eyes shut as she arched her back, and her whole body clenched up. It was like a spark of electricity hitting her, and it spread out her limbs, out her fingers, her toes, even her ears. She was floating as she went limp, letting go of his hair as her arms flopped at her sides.

She was panting heavily as she tugged on him to return to her lips. And he did. He took her deep and passionately, his tongue delving into her mouth. She could feel how moist his face was from lavishing her. She wrapped her arms around his back, pulling his hot body against her.

“I need you inside me,” she said breathily as she pulled away.

She moved up the bed until her head hit the soft pillow and he was lying on top of her, his body like a warm, weighted blanket over her. She found his cock, stroking it for a moment as she felt how hard it was on her palm. Then she guided him in and let out a loud gasp as he filled her. He kissed her neck softly before pulling away to look into her eyes. They were dark and intense as lust filled them.

He started to thrust as she let out a long moan. He thrust again, harder this time. She could feel his cock sliding in and out of her as it stretched her, giving her a sense of fulfillment, completion... love. He quickened his pace as she cooed.

“Harder...” she said breathily.

He thrust harder, faster, and soon he was pounding into her. She let her head sink into the pillow as her arms wrapped around him. He didn’t stop.

“Oh, Torias...” she said loudly as he hit her G-spot. “Oh...”

Her breaths quickly became ragged.

“Harder...”

He started pummeling into her like a wild stallion as she moaned loud and long, letting out guttural cries each time his cock hit her sensitive spot. She could feel a wave of warmth building up from her loins as it washed over her body. She mewled beneath him, feeling his hot body ramming into her, his cock hitting her G-spot each time. She moaned, whispered his name, and moaned some more.

“Torias...”

Soon, she was floating as she let her arms flop to her sides. She mewled beneath him, letting out soft whispers and moans as tingles spread across her body. Suddenly, he hit her hard as she cried out his name.

“Torias!”

He hit her again, going faster and harder as grunts and moans filled the room. Electricity sparked as a new orgasm washed over her. She squeezed her eyes shut, arching her back as high as it would go, and then he hit her even harder.

“Torias!”

Harder.

“Torias!”

Harder and harder. She couldn't speak anymore. She just let out guttural moans, long and throaty, until she melted into the bed with a heavy sigh. She started to pant as warmth bathed her and stars flooded her vision. Soon, she was one with the bed, just breathing as he thrust one last time. He stiffened as he let out a grunt. She could feel his hot seed spilling into her.

"Torias..." she whispered between mewls. "Oh... Torias..."

"Audrid," he whispered as he collapsed on top of her. She could feel his hot breaths panting in her ear. She held him tight as they both caught their breaths. "I love you."

"I love you too."

"You're amazing," he said as he looked deep into her eyes, tugging away at her soul. She could see the love in his eyes, the devotion. And she felt it in her heart too. He completed her. "I love you so much."

"Forever and always?" she asked between heavy breaths.

"Forever and always."

Chapter 3

Torias rolled onto his back, leaving her to feel a chill. They both got under the covers as she snuggled into his side and rested her head on his chest. Her long hair was splayed across him. She could feel the heat radiating off his body beneath her cheek. She wrapped her arm around his waist as he enveloped her in his arms, keeping her in a cocoon of warmth and safety.

It was quiet but for heavy breaths and racing hearts. She listened as his heart started to slow. Her own was still beating hard and fast, but she had finally caught her breath. Eventually, he broke the peaceful silence.

“I noticed something on the calendar this morning,” he said before kissing her head, his breath tickling her hair.

“Hmm?”

“Your contraceptive injection is due tomorrow.”

Her eyes had been half closed as bliss filled them. She quickly opened them all the way as she looked up at him, wondering where he was going with this.

“Yeah?”

“What if you don’t take it?”

“What?” she asked, furrowing her brows.

“Don’t take it.”

“Torias, what are you saying?” she asked, rolling onto her belly so her face hovered inches above his as she stared at him.

“Let’s start a family,” he said with a soft smile as he cupped her face and let his thumbs caress her cheeks.

“Torias,” she said in a hard tone as her eyes bore into him. “You can’t honestly tell me you want to start a family. We’re happy. Why change that?”

“Why change that?” he asked with a little chuckle, raising a brow. “Come on, Audrid. You can’t tell me you don’t want to have a family one day.”

“I don’t, and you knew that.”

“But we’ve been married a year. Haven’t you changed your mind?”

“No,” she said as she stared at him hard.

He brushed her hair out of her face, tucking a strand behind her ear as he gazed up at her. His warm eyes were invading her, staring deep into her soul as if they didn’t believe her. They were trying to reach inside her and find that piece of her that wanted a baby. It didn’t exist.

“Come on,” he said softly. “Have a baby with me. Have many babies with me. Let’s fill our home with them.”

She sighed as she stared down at him, softening her face. “I didn’t know you wanted that. I thought we agreed we weren’t going to have kids.”

“Things change,” he said softly as he gazed at her, sweeping his fingertips across her hairline.

“I don’t know,” she said as she looked away. She couldn’t stand the look in his eyes. He wanted this. That much she could tell.

“Audrid, we could have so much more than this. Don’t you love me enough to have a family with me? I love you so much. I just want to grow that love, expand it. We would love that baby so much. It would look just like you. Beautiful. Sweet. I want to have a baby with you, Audrid,” he said with a glowing smile as he cupped her cheek.

“Torias, I…” she started to say as she felt his eyes on her. It was as if they were searching her soul to find some magical key that he could turn to make her want what he wanted. “Torias, I don’t want to end up like my mother. And you always knew that. We’ve already discussed this.”

“Audrid, you won’t be like your mother. And I won’t be like your father. He was controlling and cruel. I won’t treat you like he treated your mom and you and your siblings. We’ll be happy. We’ll be a family.”

“We’re already a family.”

“We could be so much more than just us, though. Don’t you have enough love in your heart? I know you do, Audrid. Don’t be scared; you won’t be doing this alone. We’ll do it together, every step of the way. We’ll be good parents. We won’t be like them.”

“It’s not just that. My mother wanted so much more out of life. STEM was her life. And then she got pregnant, and my dad made her give up her career to raise the children. She resented us for it. She hated her life. She was miserable. I don’t want to end up like her. I left Earth to get as far away from my family as I could. I don’t want to replicate that here. I don’t want to be them.”

“We won’t be.”

“We will,” she said loudly. “Don’t you see, Torias? We’ll be just like them.”

“I promise we won’t. You don’t have to give up your career. Take a few months off when the baby is born, and then return to your career full time whenever you’re ready. You don’t have to give up anything. I’m not asking that of you. I’m just asking you to open your mind and heart to this.”

“Torias…”

“Is it me?” he asked as he stared up at her, his eyes unsure. She watched as they filled with hurt.

“It is, isn’t it?”

“Why would you say that?” she asked as she caressed his cheek. “I love you more than anything. I know you’d be a good father. You’re already a great husband. I just don’t want that life for us.”

“You’re afraid of what I’ll turn into, that I’ll hurt you as I did my stepfather. But I would never hurt you or our baby. I’m not that kind of person.”

“I know you’re not.”

“He beat us, Audrid. He beat my mom. Day in and day out. For years,” he said as his eyes glistened. “I would never be like that. I would never be a monster. I snapped. I became him for a moment. I hurt him as he hurt us, and I left him for dead. I walked away forever. I changed my name, joined the military, and never looked back. But I’m not a monster, I swear. I’ll be a good father.” He blinked away his tears as he stared intensely at her, holding her face as he forced her to look into his eyes.

“I know that,” she said softly. She looked intently into his eyes as she cupped his cheek, raising her voice. “I love you. You keep me safe and whole. You complete me. And I am complete. I don’t need more than that. We have a good life. Let’s not ruin it with children. Let’s just be happy. Please.” She leaned down to kiss him softly on the lips. “Please,” she murmured as she kissed him again. “Please, Torias. Be happy with me... just me.”

She kissed him again, this time parting his lips. He sighed, and she pulled away, looking down at the sadness on his face.

“So, this is a ‘no’ then?” he asked as disappointment filled his eyes.

She sighed as she looked at him, studying his eyes. They looked a little broken. She swallowed hard, blinking away her tears.

“Just think about it, Audrid. Don’t take that injection tomorrow; think hard about it first. That’s all I ask. I’m not saying we even have to do this right now. But don’t give up on the idea of starting a family.” He tucked her hair behind her ear as he smiled up at her. “You’ll be a good mom. And our baby will be beautiful. I hope she’ll be a girl, a spitting image of you. I’ve dreamed of our baby girl. My mini-Audrid. We’re happy. And there’s so much love. Our hearts are full of it. Just open your heart to this, Audrid. Don’t take that injection until you’ve given it some thought. That’s all I ask.”

“Okay, I’ll give it some thought,” she said softly as she sucked in a breath and lay back down on his chest.

He was warm, but she felt so cold. She pulled the blankets around her as she thought about his words. A child? Could they be happy? They were already happy. They had everything. They didn’t need more. A child would only complicate their lives and fill them with turmoil.

That night, Audrid tumbled into dreams about babies. They had the little girl that Torias talked about. Only she didn’t look like Audrid. She had Torias’s chestnut hair and his soft blue eyes, his smile, and his dimples. She liked having her hair braided. She liked tea parties. The three of them

would drink tea together, and they would invite her dolls to join. They were happy, and there was so much love and warmth. It filled her heart so much that when her eyes blinked awake in the morning, she felt that warmth and love. And then she blinked it all away as she went cold.

It won't be like that. It was just a silly dream. You'll be just like your mother. You won't be happy. And that unhappiness will break you and Torias apart. You'll resent each other. You'll hate your life. You'll be just like your mother.

I can't be like her. I can't.

Audrid's heart started to race as she lay there. She sucked in a deep breath as she rolled over to face the middle of the bed. Torias was still fast asleep beside her, his head flopped against the pillow, away from her, as he slept peacefully on his stomach. His breaths were soft and even. She watched him, trying to center herself. Eventually, her heartbeat slowed down, and the world was no longer spinning. She started to find peace again.

Until she thought about her proposal. Her heart sped up again. She would find out today. She felt a pit in her stomach at the thought. What would another rejection mean? Would that be it for the project? Would she have to abandon it? Maybe it would be approved. Maybe.

She sucked in a deep breath as she rolled over and looked at the clock. It was early. Only 0500 hours. She didn't need to be up this early. She closed her eyes, taking a breath as she tried to fall back asleep. She couldn't; she just tossed and turned. All she could think about was her proposal. Sleep was not going to happen as she flopped over once again with a frustrated sigh.

"Hey," a soft voice said as a hand reached out and touched her shoulder. She looked back at him and saw the concern in his eyes. She rolled over to face him.

"Sorry. I didn't mean to wake you," she said as she caressed his cheek.

"What's wrong? Is it the proposal?" She nodded. "You'll find out today, and then you can either move forward or move on. This is a good thing. You need to know. And you will." He had a soft smile on his face as he gazed at her, sweeping her hair off her face.

"Go back to sleep. I'll go for a run, so I won't disturb you any longer."

"I'll make you breakfast when you get back."

"Sounds good," she said with a smile before pecking him on the lips.

She threw on her robe and walked to the bathroom. Her reflection caught her eye immediately. She stared back at herself. She didn't see a mom in the mirror. She just saw a career woman. She saw determination. Someone who was going to make something of herself.

She was actually already making a name for herself. She had since she was in grad school and the military recruited her for the Colony6 project. But there was so much more that she wanted to do. She wanted to lead projects on Colony6. It was her time. The Hades Caves Project was just the start.

She realized that this was exactly what her parents instilled in her as she stared at that look of determination on her face. They wanted her to be the best. They threw her into STEM from a young age, pitted her against her siblings, and told them all to excel, to do better than each other, to win.

She might have left her family behind to run away to Mars, but she couldn't leave behind the person they had formed. She would excel. She would win. She would have this project and many more. She stared at herself one last time before throwing on her workout clothes and going for a run in the arboretum.

Torias was sitting at the desk in his office, staring at the clock. He wasn't really looking at the time. He was just staring at the numbers as they progressed throughout the morning. 11:47... 11:48... 11:49... His thoughts were on babies. He couldn't believe she didn't want one.

Who doesn't want to start a family? I know she's afraid to be like her mom, but it won't be like that. She'll be a good mom, a wonderful mom.

He could see it now as she rocked their little newborn in her arms, whispering, "Shh..." as she soothed it to sleep. He smiled as he thought of bedtime stories and braiding hair, playing with dolls and tea parties. He wanted all of that. He loved Audrid so much. He wanted to share that with her. He wanted to have babies with her and fill their home with that love. And he knew it would be amazing if she would just give it a chance.

He thought of his mom and all those years in the kitchen as she taught him to bake. They would create their own concoctions together. Or they would adapt recipes, and his mom would write them down in the recipe book. He remembered when she gave him that book. She said he was ready to start baking on his own, that he no longer needed her. He might have been 13 or 14 then. He sighed as he thought about it. He had burned the first batch of cookies he had ever made on his own. His stepfather was pissed and gave him a beating. He said he couldn't cook and should just be a man and find a wife to cook for him one day.

He remembered the day he beat him back—the blood, as he lay on the floor. His face was beaten to a pulp. He was begging Torias to stop. He told him he had been a good father to him, and he didn't know why he was beating him. He remembered when he went quiet, lying there unconscious as Torias hovered over him with his hands still in fists. His heart was beating wildly, the blood thumping past his ears.

He packed a few items in a rush. The recipe book was one. And he ran. He hopped on a shuttle and went halfway across North America. He lived in the streets for a few weeks until he saw a military recruitment ad. He lied about his name. He stole Torias from a story he had read as a kid. It was a fantasy book about a brave knight. And Riley was a name on the front page of the newspaper that caught his eye. He became Torias Riley, a private in the military. He was recruited onto the Colony6 project right away. They needed young soldiers to help build the new colony from the ground up. And that's what he did. He ran away to Mars and built a new life there. No one knew the truth, except for Audrid.

Here he was, 22 years later—a captain, a husband, a man who just wanted to have a family. He sat staring at the clock again. 11:59... 12:00... 12:01...

“Hey, you up for some hoops, Riley?” Jared asked, popping his head in the door.

“Always,” Torias replied.

They made their way to the basketball hoop in the back of the military complex. Torias grabbed the ball off the ground and started bouncing it.

“So, Jared, why the hell are you stringing my wife along?” he asked as he shot the basketball, getting it in the hoop on the first try.

“I’m not stringing her along,” he said with a huff as he grabbed the ball and started dribbling it. “It’s complicated. I answer to more than just her.”

“But hers is the best project, and you know it,” Torias said as he shuffled along the court, trying to get the ball from Jared.

“Riley, you don’t know anything. This isn’t just about which project is the best. It’s political. It’s about resources and department heads all at each other’s throats and at my head. I have people I answer to. I have to be very careful about whom I give resources to. I can’t just approve projects because they’re good or because they’re the projects of my friend’s wife.”

“I’m not asking you to approve it because she’s my wife,” he said in a hard tone as he swiped the ball from Jared and started dribbling it around until he dunked it in the basket. He grabbed the ball and started dribbling it again. “I’m just asking you not to string her along. Just do what’s right and fair.”

“I’m doing my job,” he said as he shuffled around Torias, trying to grab the ball.

“I hope doing your job means being fair,” he said as he dribbled the ball around the man.

“Doing my job means doing my job!” he snapped as he swiped the ball away from Torias and bounced it around, leaping up and dunking it in the basket.

They went back and forth, dribbling and dunking the ball until their stomachs rumbled and they called it a game. Torias won by two baskets. He always won. Jared was used to it. They headed to the mess hall for a sandwich before returning to work.

Torias was sitting in the den, reading his tablet, when he heard the door to his apartment open.

“Torias!” Audrid called out.

He put down his tablet and rushed into the living room, where Audrid stood with buzzing eyes. The excitement radiating off her was palpable.

“What is it? What’s wrong?” he asked as his heartbeat raced.

She ran and leaped up to him, wrapping her legs around his waist as he caught her.

“It’s a ‘yes’! It was approved!”

“What?” he asked as he gave her an incredulous look while lowering her to the floor. “He approved your project?”

“He approved my project!” she said with a giant smile before diving in for a kiss.

“That’s amazing! I’m so proud of you!” he said before pulling her back into the kiss.

She parted his lips as her tongue delved into his mouth. He could feel how excited she was. The energy was radiating off her. She grabbed him firmly by the biceps as she deepened the kiss. And then her hands fumbled for the zipper of his navy-blue jumpsuit as she furiously took it off him. She slid her hands under his black undershirt, running them up his torso until they were on his chest. Soon, his shirt was on the floor.

“You have too many clothes on,” he said with a smirk as he started slowly unzipping her uniform.

She impatiently finished unzipping it for him and then stripped it off. She tore her undershirt off herself and threw it on the floor. He started pulling pins out of her hair, and soon it was cascading around her shoulders. He cupped her face as he pulled her back into a kiss. His hands tangled in her long strands as he kissed her deeper.

He groaned as she slid her hand under the waistband of his underwear and grasped his cock. He could feel it hardening beneath her touch. She pulled his boxers down and began stroking him as he kissed her harder, tongues dancing as a fire stirred deep in his belly. He reached around and undid her bra. When it fell to the floor, he thumbed her hard nipples before massaging her big breasts. He loved how they filled his hands. She moaned as she kissed him passionately, stroking him harder.

“Audrid,” he muttered between kisses.

He pulled down her panties as he ran his fingertips through her wet folds. She let out a moan. He grabbed her firmly by the waist as he pulled her over to the couch. She stopped him. Instead, she steered him over to the armchair and pushed him down roughly.

She sat down on his lap. He could feel how wet she was as she straddled him. And she was hot. The way she looked, her body, everything about her. He could feel the heat radiating off her as he held onto her waist. She slid herself onto him, letting out a heavy gasp that only made him stir more. She began to rock as a smirk filled her face, and those eyes stared into his soul with a hungry lust.

“Torias...” she breathed into his ear. “I want you so bad...”

She rocked up and down, riding him firmly as she held onto his shoulders. He watched as her breasts bounced up and down in his face. He grabbed hold of them and squeezed, relishing the feeling of her hard nipples against his palms and the feeling of her wrapped around his cock.

“Oh, Audrid...” he muttered as she rocked harder and faster. “Oh, God...”

“Torias...” she moaned out.

She squeezed her insides around his cock as he groaned. He loved how strong she was, how she made him feel when she took control. He groaned again as she took him harder and rougher, her ass slapping against his thighs.

“Keep going,” he whispered as he massaged her breasts. “Fuck, Audrid...”

She hung her head back as she moaned, her mouth gaping open. She started mewling out his name as she whimpered.

“Oh, Torias... Torias...”

“Keep going!”

She let out a cry as she squeezed her eyes shut, still bucking him hard. He was panting as he watched his name quietly escape her lips between moans. He could feel a buildup of heat boiling inside him until even his ears were on fire.

“Fuck!” he uttered as he released into her.

“Torias...” she said breathily, collapsing into his arms as he held her tight and they just breathed together.

“That was...” he started to say between pants.

“Good,” she murmured as she looked at him, cupping his face.

She gazed into his eyes, her breaths ragged as a smile spread across her face. She caressed his cheeks with her thumbs before diving in for a breathy kiss. He pulled away, resting his forehead on hers as their heavy breathing filled the air.

“We should celebrate,” he said as he kissed her again.

She kissed him back hard. She was ravenous as her tongue danced with his.

“Let’s celebrate then,” she said as she slid off him and held her hand out for him.

He followed her into the kitchen and found an old bottle of champagne in the fridge. He cracked it open with a pop and poured the foaming liquid into two glasses.

“To Doctor Audrid Riley,” he said as he held up his glass. “And the first of many successes.”

She just smiled as she clinked her glass against his. They both sipped their champagne for a moment before pulling each other into another kiss.

That night, Audrid was finishing up in the bathroom before bed. She had brushed her teeth and changed into pajamas. She was just about to leave when her contraceptive injection caught her eye. She left it sitting on the counter so she wouldn’t forget. She picked up the airject syringe and held it between her hands before looking up in the mirror. A smile spread across her face.

She was successful, about to run up her own project. She was making a name for herself on Mars. She wasn't about to change that to have a baby, no matter how much Torias wanted one. She pulled down her pants, jabbing the airject syringe into her thigh as it hissed and released the medication. She then rubbed her thigh until the pinching feeling dissipated, and she returned to the bedroom.

Torias was sitting in bed, waiting for her as he read his tablet. He put it down as she climbed into bed, facing him. He lay down as he stared back at her with a smile. She cupped his face as she caressed his cheek with her thumb. She had to tell him the truth.

"I took my contraceptive injection," she said bluntly.

She watched as he sucked in a breath, disappointment filling those blue eyes. He put his hand over hers on his cheek, not saying anything at first.

"Lights off," he commanded.

Darkness fell over the room, and she could no longer see the hurt in his eyes, the sorrow, and the disappointment. But she could feel it. He took her hand and kissed it.

"I'm not done trying to convince you, Audrid. One day, we'll have a family. We'll have a little girl or boy. We'll be happy and complete. I'm not giving up on the dream. I'm just setting it aside for now until you're ready." She sighed, not knowing what to say. He squeezed her hand. "One day, you'll be ready," he said as he leaned over and kissed her cheek. "I love you. Goodnight."

He turned over and faced the wall as she watched him and listened to his breaths.

"Goodnight," she said barely above a whisper. "I love you too."

Chapter 4

“Head that way down the tunnel,” Audrid said, pointing Private Milton down a separate path as they parted ways.

She was alone now as she descended a slope into darkness with only her headlamp lighting the way. The high-powered beam illuminated several meters in front of her, but there was still only darkness at the end of the dusty red tunnel that burrowed deep into Mars. It was never lost on her that the Hades Caves were named after the god of death and the king of the underworld. She was careful with each step, climbing over rocky pieces jetting out of the ground. There was also rubble from possible cave-ins. They had no idea what the history of the cave system was. That was the point of exploration, though—stepping forward into the unknown. It was exhilarating.

Audrid advanced forward in her environmental suit, the 360-glass helmet keeping her safe. It was specially designed to block the exotic radiation in the cave, protect her from the intense heat, and provide oxygen. It wasn’t the most comfortable thing to be wearing to work, and if she could shed it and live, she would in an instant.

She held out her scanner, watching the readings light up on the screen as it recorded data and detected an array of things, from radiation to indicators of specific elements and isotopes. This was only the first day in the cave, but the readings were already intriguing.

“I’m reading intense theta-polaron radiation emanating from the tunnel,” she said over the intercom in her suit. Her entire team was hooked up to it, including Mars Mission Control. “Anyone getting the same readings?”

“Negative, sergeant,” came a voice over the intercom.

“Also negative, sir,” said another voice.

“Sergeant, do you want us to converge on your location?” asked a third voice.

“Negative. Keep scanning in the designated locations. We want data from all tunnels, not just this one. Even if my scanner is lighting up like a Christmas tree,” Audrid replied with a little smile.

She continued moving forward through the cave. She didn’t exactly love the darkness. It sent a shiver down her spine. But there was nothing to be afraid of. Nothing known to humans could live here. Still, the darkness was creepy. She turned a corner, and the tunnel veered downward even more. She got to a steep slope and used the walls to help herself safely descend it. The tunnel curved, growing increasingly narrow.

Something caught her eye in the beam of her headlamp two meters in front of her. She froze as her breath caught in her throat. She could feel her heart suddenly beating a mile a minute as she stood there. It appeared cloud-like and opaque. The beam of light didn’t shine through it. Instead, it lit up like a shimmering cloud of dust. She just stared at it for a moment, her mouth gaping open.

“What the hell...” she finally muttered.

“Sir?” came a voice over the comm.

And then she could hear nothing but a frazzled static. She looked at the controls on her arm. Nothing indicated that her suit was malfunctioning.

“Hello? Can anyone hear me?” she asked, her heart racing as she sucked in a breath.

She looked ahead as she held out her scanner to the cloud. The theta-polaron radiation was off the charts. The cloud started moving toward her as she backed up. She could barely breathe, and her heart was beating so fast she felt like it would race out of her chest.

Suddenly, it hit her. She went tumbling backwards, hitting the wall with a thud. She sat there stunned, just trying to catch her breath. Her suit started to beep. It turned into a steady alarm. She looked down at the controls on her arm. Her suit was compromised. She was leaking oxygen.

“I need help,” she called out. She wasn’t sure if anyone could hear her. No one responded over the intercom.

She started to feel lightheaded. She looked down at her suit. Oxygen levels were at 5%... 4%... 3%... She found herself hyperventilating. And she felt like she was on fire too. She was drenched in sweat. She looked up as the cloud descended upon her. Slowly, she crumpled to the ground as everything went black.

Torias was sitting at his desk, going over boring crew reports. He had to sign off on annual crew evaluations in his department. It was a tedious task. He put down the tablet as he pinched the bridge of his nose. He had only made it through ten evaluations that morning.

He thought about Audrid. After a month of waiting and planning, it was her first day exploring the Hades Caves. She was buzzing like a bee this morning when she left. He thought it was adorable. He smiled just a little, glancing over at their wedding picture sitting on his desk for a moment. Then he picked up his tablet with a sigh and flipped to the next evaluation.

“Captain,” an urgent voice said as the door to his office flew open. “There’s been an accident in the cave.”

“What?” Torias asked as he stood up, his heart racing.

“Sergeant Riley is being rushed to the infirmary, sir,” his lieutenant told him.

“What the hell happened?” he asked as his breaths turned ragged.

He tried to suck in a breath as he pushed past the lieutenant. He stood in the hallway, looking around as he thought of Audrid. He couldn’t breathe. He looked back at the lieutenant, who was just standing there, staring at him with concern.

“What happened?!”

“I don’t know anything, sir. I was just told to tell you to go to the infirmary. That’s all I know, sir,” he said as he stood there with a nervous glint in his eyes.

Torias turned and ran as fast as he could down the hallway and out the department doors until he hit the main corridor of the command building. It was busy. It looked like a big meeting had just been called to order. People were everywhere. He weaved through them, pushing people out of the way. He had to get to Audrid. He made it to the street as he bent over, panting. *Get to Audrid. Get to Audrid!*

The infirmary was outside the military complex. He raced past the science building where Audrid worked and around the engineering building until he reached the main gate. There was a lineup at the checkpoint. He pushed past people until he was free of the crowd. Once he was outside the military complex, he sprinted down the streets of New Horizons, his heart racing as beads of sweat trickled down his forehead. The sun was shining down through the glass dome. He shielded himself from the bright glare as he turned right onto Mississippi Street and left onto Snake River Avenue. Finally, he reached Rio Grande Street, where the infirmary was located.

Torias zoomed through the infirmary doors, forgoing reception as he raced into the emergency department. He looked around for Audrid, but he didn’t see her in any of the beds. He peeked through closed curtains, startling patients. She wasn’t anywhere. He sucked in a breath, running his hand through his moist hair.

“Audrid!” he uttered in a panicked voice. “Where are you? Where are you?”

He started looking in all the rooms that lined the corridor. Storage closets. Utility rooms. Bathrooms. They were all empty. A nurse walked by. He grabbed the man’s arm abruptly, his eye intense, panicked, as they invaded him.

“Where’s my wife? Where’s Sergeant Riley?” he asked through ragged breaths as his heart raced.

“She’s in the trauma bay, sir,” he said as he pointed to a room down the hall. Torias ran toward it. “You can’t go in there, sir.”

He stopped and looked at the man as he let out a desperate breath. He felt like his knees were going to buckle. He turned and looked through the glass trauma bay doors. Several doctors and nurses were attending to someone. When one of them moved out of the way, he could see his wife lying on a stretcher, with an oxygen mask covering her face. A nurse was pressing an airjet syringe into her bicep, while another nurse was setting up IVs. One of the doctors was running a handheld medical scanner over her torso.

He felt like he was going to collapse as he stood there watching her. She was vulnerable, broken, maybe even dying, and he stood there helpless. All he could do was watch. His eyes were burning with tears that hadn’t yet fallen. He could barely breathe as he stood there. His heart was jumping around in his chest, skipping random beats as it pounded. He swallowed hard as he tried to find breath.

He started to pace the area in front of the door, his eyes constantly looking through the glass at her. He took five steps in one direction and then five steps back, just counting them as he

drowned in his thoughts. *Don't give up, Audrid. Don't give up. You have to live. I can't lose you. Please.*

The doors slid open as they started to wheel her out. He stepped aside until the stretcher was in the hallway and then pushed his way past some nurses until he was at her side, walking down the hall with them. He looked down at her. She was still unconscious. Her hair was drenched in sweat as her forehead glistened. Her skin was bright red.

He looked for the most senior doctor and saw that it was Doctor Sharma, who was walking beside the stretcher opposite him. "Is she going to be okay? Where are you taking her?"

"She's been stabilized. We're taking her to the full-body scanner," Doctor Sharma said. She looked at the others. "I'll meet you there after I talk to Captain Riley."

She stepped back and motioned for Torias to come with her. He watched as they wheeled Audrid away, his heart breaking. He wanted to go with her. He turned to the doctor, his eyes burning as they pleaded with her.

"Tell me she's going to be okay," he said. "Tell me she'll live."

"Her environmental suit was compromised. Those suits were specially designed for the harsh environment of the Hades Caves. The radiation levels and heat are intense there. When it was compromised, she was exposed to the radiation and heat. She didn't have adequate oxygen levels. She was found unconscious in a hypoxic state. We've given her oxygen therapy and treated her for heat stroke and radiation exposure. At the moment, we don't know what kind of damage this has done to her body. We'll know more after the full-body scan," Doctor Sharma stated in a serious tone.

"She might not make it. That's what you're saying?" he asked as he swallowed hard, running his hand through his sweaty hair. He felt like he was going to pass out.

"We'll know more after the scan. Once she's done, she'll be moved to bed four. Why don't you have a seat and wait for her?" she said as she pointed to an empty bed with open curtains around it.

He just nodded silently, watching the doctor as she left. He found his way to bed four and slumped down in the chair beside the empty bed. He just stared at it for a moment, his eyes glazing over. And then his face fell to his hands as he sucked in a breath.

She might die. There might be damage. I can't lose Audrid. Please don't take her away from me. He just sat there, trying to breathe as he buried his face deeper into his hands. He could feel tears brimming in his eyes. *Just breathe, just breathe, just breathe...*

He waited. He didn't know how long. He didn't look at his watch. It wasn't a thought he had. He didn't have many thoughts. There was really just one thought occurring over and over again: *Audrid might die.*

Eventually, she was wheeled next to bed four. He stood up, moving out of the way as they lifted her onto the empty bed. They got her comfortable, tucking her under the blanket and making sure that her IVs and oxygen mask were positioned correctly.

Torias felt so weak as he watched his wife. He stepped toward her side, grabbing hold of her hand as he peered down at her. Her skin was no longer red. Instead, she was pale, with dark circles under her eyes. Her skin was moist as he held her hand. He ran his other hand across her forehead and into her hair. It was a sweaty mess. He tried to smooth it down. The nurses finished tending to her and turned to leave. He stopped them with his desperate voice.

“Wait! Will she be okay?” he asked, his eyes pleading with them for good news.

“Doctor Sharma is going over the scan results right now. She’ll come talk to you when she knows more,” one of the nurses said before they both left.

His heart ached as he stood there, desperate for answers. He took a deep breath and looked down at Audrid. She was the strongest person he knew. She had resolve like no other. She could be a firecracker. And here she was, lying in the infirmary. Was she dying? All he could do was hold her hand. He kissed it softly, letting his lips linger on her moist skin. And then his whole body sagged as his head fell, and he started to crumple. He rested his forehead on her arm, just breathing her in as he held in his tears. *Don’t die. Don’t die. Don’t die.*

He felt like his legs were going to buckle, so he quickly grabbed the chair and pulled it as close to the bed as he could. He squeezed her hand as he sat there, just watching her. He counted her breaths as he watched her chest rise and fall. All he could do now was wait. Wait and pray to some deity he didn’t believe in. *Please let her survive this. Please.*

“Be strong, my love,” he whispered as his thumb stroked her knuckles. “You have to make it through this. I can’t lose you.”

“Captain Riley,” a voice said behind him, startling him. He sucked in a breath as he looked over to see Doctor Sharma standing at the end of her bed.

“How is she?” Torias asked as he stared intently at the woman with her graying hair twisted up in a bun. She looked down at him through her wise eyes. He knew that she had seen a lot in her many years on New Horizons.

“Lucky,” she said bluntly. “Scans revealed no damage. The effects of hypoxia, heat stroke, and radiation exposure will improve with treatment as the day progresses. She’ll be fine, captain. As I said, she was very lucky.”

“Thank God!” he muttered breathily as a smile spread across his face. “Thank you, doctor.”

“I’m going to keep her here for observations, but I’m expecting to be able to discharge her tomorrow, barring any complications. It’s important that she rests for now. Her body has been through a lot,” Doctor Sharma stated.

"I'll make sure she rests," he said as he nodded to the doctor before watching her go. He turned back to Audrid, squeezing her hand. He started rubbing gentle circles across her knuckles with his thumb as he stared at her. "Did you hear that? You're going to be okay! You were lucky!"

He smiled softly as he watched his wife breathing. Time passed. It was slow and fast, all at the same time. The nurse kept checking on her. There was no change. She was still asleep. She looked so peaceful as she slept, but so vulnerable with that oxygen mask and those IVs hanging over her, dripping fluid slowly into her arm.

"Captain Riley," a firm voice said. He looked over to see Audrid's rugged commanding officer, Captain Randall Johnstone. He stood there imposingly, with his always-grim face. "How is she?"

"She'll pull through," Torias replied as he looked at Audrid, tucking a piece of hair behind her ear. "No permanent damage. She was lucky." He turned to Captain Johnstone as his voice turned hard. "What the hell happened?"

"We have no idea. There's a full investigation underway. All we know is that her environmental suit was compromised. We don't know why. But damnit, we sure as hell are going to find out!" he said firmly as he clenched his fists.

"I want to be kept informed. I want to know how the hell a specially designed suit that went through rigorous testing failed my wife," he said in a hard tone as he looked intently at Captain Johnstone.

"That's the question everyone wants answered, Riley," he replied. "I'll let you know what we find. Keep me informed about Audrid."

"I will," Torias said.

Captain Johnstone nodded curtly and turned to leave. Torias turned his attention back to his wife. He noticed that her breathing had sped up a little. She let out a soft groan as she started to turn her head from side to side just a little. He stood up and held her hand, squeezing it tightly.

"Audrid?" he said softly. "Wake up."

"Torias?" she mumbled as she reached up to feel the oxygen mask on her face.

"I'm here. I'm right here."

She squeezed her eyes shut tightly, as if she was in pain, and then slowly blinked them open. She glanced up at him before looking around, confused. Then she tried to sit up.

"Easy. You need to rest," he said as he gently pushed her shoulder until she lay back down.

She pulled the oxygen mask down to her neck as she stared intently at him, furrowing her brows. "Why am I in the infirmary?"

"There was an accident in the cave," he said as he put her oxygen mask back on her and held it there while she tried to fiddle with it. "Your environmental suit was compromised. You were

exposed to radiation and heat and deprived of oxygen. But you're going to be okay. No permanent damage."

"I need to get back to work. There's so much to do," she said quickly as she sat up, ripping the mask off until the strap snapped off. She tossed it aside as he caught it.

"Audrid, lie down," he said firmly as he took her by the shoulders and began pushing her back down. "You need to rest. Doctor's orders. And you need to keep this oxygen mask on."

She grabbed the oxygen mask out of his hand and curled her fist around it as her eyes bore into his. "I need to work, Torias."

"No, not right now. I know you're stubborn, but you haven't seen how stubborn I can be when my wife is hurt and refuses to rest. Don't make that side of me come out," he said with a lopsided smile as he caressed her cheek. "Now, put this back on." He pried the oxygen mask out of her hand and threaded the strap back in place before gently putting it on her face.

"Fine," Audrid said with a sigh. "I'm thirsty. Can you get me some water?" She gave him a near-smile as she stared up at him. She looked so tired. She was pale, with bags under her puffy, red eyes.

"Of course," he said with a soft smile. "I'll be right back." He leaned down to kiss her cheek before leaving.

He headed down the hall in search of a water station. He eventually found one around a corner. He filled up a plastic glass full of cool water. On his way back, he could hear commotion. He stopped for a moment, listening intently. And then he heard Audrid's voice and ran.

"Where are my clothes?! Give me my damn clothes right now!" she yelled.

"Sir, you need to rest. It's important," a nurse said as she stood at the end of Audrid's bed with the curtains open.

Audrid was standing there in her hospital gown, barefoot, looking cold as hell as she wrapped her arms around herself. Her eyes were like daggers as they glared at the nurse.

"I want my damn clothes!" she yelled again.

"What's going on?" Torias asked.

"She's insisting on being discharged," the nurse said with a sigh as she glanced at him.

"There will be no discharges today, Sergeant Riley," Doctor Sharma said as she appeared behind them. "Now, back in bed. That's an order!"

"I don't care about your stupid orders. I'm leaving. Get this damn thing out of me!" She looked down at her IV before yanking it out. The oxygen mask was already on the floor at her feet.

"Audrid, what's gotten into you?" Torias said as he put the glass of water down on the bedside table and walked around to the other side where she was standing. "Get back in bed."

"I'm leaving, Torias. I have work to do. Get me out of this place now!" she screamed.

Torias just stared at her, his mouth gaping open. This was not his wife. Sure, she had a fire about her sometimes, but she was generally a calm, cool, collected person. She was always able to focus that fire. Now, she was ablaze.

"Audrid, calm down," he said as he put his hand on her bicep gently. "You can't be discharged right now. You need to rest. Just get in bed."

"I'm not getting in bed, Torias," she snapped as she removed his hand and pushed past him into the hallway.

Torias saw Doctor Sharma give the nurse a nod, and then she rushed over to the nursing station and disappeared into a medication room. Meanwhile, Audrid was searching for her way out. She appeared confused, though. Lost. She couldn't seem to figure out which way to go, and it was like her mind wouldn't let her just randomly pick a direction.

"Let me out of here!" she screamed as she buried her fingers in her hair.

"Audrid, please," Torias said as he rushed over to her and took her by the arm gently, trying to lead her back to the bed. She jerked her arm out of his grasp as she turned and went in the opposite direction.

Soon, more nurses had arrived, along with Audrid's nurse, who had an airject syringe in hand. They circled around her as she started backing up, looking around in panic.

"No!" she yelled as she turned to run.

"Audrid, stop!" Torias yelled.

Four nurses ran after her, grabbing her arms as she struggled with them. Her nurse jabbed the airject syringe into her bicep and plunged the medication into her quickly. Audrid jerked them off her and then took a step back as her breath puffed out. She looked around, confused and panicked, like a wild animal desperate for escape. He approached her slowly with his hands up. Her eyes were darting around the room as terror that he hadn't seen in her before filled them.

"Hey," he said softly as he slowly wrapped his arms around her. "I've got you. You're safe."

"Torias..." she said in a tremulous voice. "I don't want to be here. Take me home. Please."

"You need to be here," he said as he squeezed her tightly. After a moment, she wrapped her arms around him and just clung desperately to him.

"Take me home," she whispered into his ear. "Please."

"I can't," he said as he pulled away just enough to look into her eyes. "You need to go back to bed and rest. I can see how tired you are. The medication is hitting you."

"No," she said as her eyes begged him. "I want to go home. I want to work. I need to get moving. I need to get out of here. Please." Her words were rushing out of her as they began to slur. She stared at him through heavy lids, which she tried to force to stay open. "Please."

“Shh... You need to rest,” he said as he pulled her against him. “You need to rest.”

He could feel her breaths slowing down as she held onto him. They just stood there embracing each other as the world slowed around them. He pulled away cautiously and looked into her eyes. She could barely keep them open now as drowsiness had taken over. He wrapped an arm around her shoulders and tried to lead her back to bed.

“Come,” he said softly.

She hesitated for a moment and then slowly followed him. She stopped at the bed and just looked at him, her eyes begging him as she tried to keep them open.

“In bed,” he said in a gentle voice as he pulled the covers back for her.

She just continued to stare at him for another moment, and it looked as if she might fall asleep standing there. Finally, she relented and climbed into bed.

“Everything’s going to be okay,” he said quietly as he covered her up and tucked the blankets in at her sides.

The nurse slowly approached and began hooking up her IVs without a word. Audrid took a deep breath as her eyelids fluttered. She tried to force them open.

“Torias,” she slurred out as she reached for his hand. He grabbed it and squeezed it hard.

“I’m here,” he replied as he stood at her side, caressing her cheek. “I’m here.”

“Don’t leave me, okay?” she slurred breathily as her eyes fluttered shut again.

“I won’t. I promise.”

And then she was fast asleep. He sighed as his whole body sagged. He held her hand as he watched her soft breaths. He turned to see Doctor Sharma watching them with grave eyes.

“This isn’t like her,” he said quietly as he walked across the hall to the nursing station with her and stood just outside it. “I’ve never seen her like this before.”

“It must be an effect of the radiation. We aren’t familiar with this type of radiation. We don’t know what kind of side effects exposure to it will cause. The medication we just gave her should keep her asleep for several hours. Hopefully, when she wakes up, her agitation will have dissipated, and she’ll be able to go home tomorrow,” Doctor Sharma said. She had a concerned look on her face, though, as if she was skeptical of her own words.

“You’re not fully convinced,” Torias said.

“As I said, we’re not familiar with this kind of radiation. Time will tell what its effects are. Let’s just wait and see. We’ll deal with her symptoms as they come up,” Doctor Sharma said. “Excuse me.”

He watched as she walked away and then let out a heavy breath as he returned to Audrid's side. He took her hand in his as he sat down in the chair and just watched her, his heart breaking for her.

Chapter 5

Audrid was running through the cave, her bare feet tromping across the rough surface. She wasn't in her environmental suit, but somehow, she was breathing. It was dark, but her head lantern lit the way. She could hear a bubbling sound behind her. She just ran faster, her heart racing and beads of sweat trickling down her forehead. She glanced back to see the cloud descending upon her.

"You must come," an ominous voice said as it resonated throughout the cave. "You must come."

"No!" she screamed as she sprinted around a corner and down a slope.

She came skidding to a dead end as her breath caught in her throat. She turned around. The cloud was behind her, inching its way closer and closer to her. Soon, she could feel cold air on her hot skin. A chill washed over her.

"We need you," the voice said. "We need you to return."

"No!" she uttered as she shook her head. "No!"

"Audrid?" said a familiar voice beside her as someone shook her shoulder.

Her eyes shot open as she sucked in a breath. It was just Torias. She let out a relieved breath as she relaxed into the bed. She looked around and realized she was still in the infirmary. There were IVs in her arm, but as she felt her face, she realized the oxygen mask was gone.

"What time is it?" she asked.

"Just after 2100 hours. You've been asleep all day," he said as he flashed a concerned smile.

He ran his fingers across her hairline and then down across her cheek. His touch was soft, gentle, warm. It was nothing like the cloud in her nightmare.

"I want to go home," she said as she captured his hand and squeezed it.

"Maybe in the morning," he replied.

"Torias," she said in a hard tone.

"Audrid, you need to be here. You could have died." He squeezed her hand back as he held it tight. "You're not well. You were freaking out before. I've never seen you so agitated."

"I just want to go home, Torias. Being here is what makes me agitated."

He shook his head. "The doctor said it was an aftereffect of the radiation you were exposed to. They need to keep you here overnight for observations. They want to be sure you're okay before they let you go."

"Please, Torias," she said as she reached up and swept her fingers across his cheek, staring intently at him with begging eyes. "Break me out of here."

He smiled as he leaned down to kiss her lips softly. He pulled away, caressing her forehead.

“Please,” she said again.

“I can’t do that,” he said as he found her hand again and caressed her knuckles with his thumb.

“You can,” she said firmly.

“I can’t. And the fact that you’re even asking tells me you aren’t well. You don’t break rules. You would never ask me to break you out of the infirmary against the doctor’s orders.”

She let out a huff. “They’re stupid orders. I’m fine.”

“You’re not fine.”

She sighed, squeezing her eyes shut. Suddenly, she saw the cloud as a chill washed over her. She opened her eyes, blinking hard.

“What is it?” he asked, concern filling his eyes.

“I don’t feel safe. I just want to go home.”

She stared deep into his eyes for a minute, just searching them. For what, she didn’t know. She needed him. She needed his safety and warmth. She reached up to stroke his cheek.

“Hold me,” she said as she turned away from him and moved over in the bed.

She could hear the bed rail being lowered and then felt the bed shift as he climbed in it. He settled in behind her, his warm body wrapping around her as his arm slung over her waist, and he just held her. They didn’t speak for the longest time. It was just a comfortable silence. In her dream, she felt so alone, so scared. But she wasn’t alone in his arms. Still, she felt like monsters were lurking around the corner. Monsters that took the shape of clouds and skulked in the dark.

“I’m scared, Torias,” she said after a while.

“Shh... It will all be alright. Shh...” he said as he tightened his arm around her.

His warmth soothed her, and soon a drowsiness settled over her. She was afraid she would find herself in the cave again as she struggled to keep her eyes open.

“Don’t let me fall asleep,” she mumbled.

“Shh...” he said. “I’ll be right here. I’ll keep you safe from nightmares. Just rest.”

And then darkness fell upon her.

The night was long and filled with nightmares about the Hades Caves, but Torias stayed by Audrid’s side the entire time, keeping her safe. Eventually, morning came, and Doctor Sharma returned for her shift. She was pleased with the progress Audrid had made overnight. After some serious begging on Audrid’s part the minute the woman arrived in the emergency department, Doctor Sharma agreed to discharge her. She had to agree to bedrest, though.

Audrid quickly got dressed in the uniform she had been wearing the day before and rushed out of the infirmary, forgoing breakfast or any other form of nutrients or fluids. She took Torias by the hand and practically dragged him through the streets of New Horizons until they made it to their apartment on Rubicon Lane.

“Slow down,” he said. “You’re supposed to take it easy.”

“I just want to get home,” she said insistently.

Soon, they made it to their apartment door. She placed her palm on the reader, and the door unlocked. Torias followed her inside.

“You don’t have to take time off work to be with me,” she said as she headed to the kitchen island.

“I do need to.”

“Torias,” she said, rolling her eyes as she slid onto the bar stool.

“What are you doing? You’re supposed to be in bed,” he said as he eyed her.

“I don’t need to be in bed, Torias. And I’m starving. You promised me breakfast,” she said as she eyed him back.

“You’re on bedrest. Doctor’s orders. And the definition of bedrest is rest in bed,” he said as he took her bicep and tugged her off the stool. “I’ll make you breakfast, and you’ll have it in bed. Now, come on. Get into your pajamas.”

“This isn’t necessary,” she said as he wrapped his arm around her and began leading her to the bedroom.

“It is. Pajamas, now.”

“Just go make me that breakfast you promised,” she said with a sigh.

He kissed her temple before leaving the bedroom. She went to the closet and pulled out a fresh uniform. She tore off her old one, feeling glad to get out of it. It smelled like old sweat. She had been wearing it under her environmental suit in the cave. She got into her fresh uniform and zipped it up, enjoying the feeling of a good, clean uniform. She headed to the kitchen with a smile.

“Those are not pajamas,” he said in a dead tone as he stared at her.

“No, they’re not. I’m going to head to my office after breakfast and check in on the status of the project.”

“Audrid, no,” he said firmly as he walked up to her and took her hand, tugging her along into the bedroom. “In your pajamas.”

“Torias, just let me be.”

“This is exactly why I have to take time off work to be with you. You are incapable of being on bedrest on your own.”

“That is because I don’t need bedrest,” she said as she glared at him.

“The doctor only agreed to discharge you today if you spent at least a couple of days on bedrest. Your physician will attend to you tomorrow evening and decide if you’re ready to return to work in two days. For now, it’s bedrest. Doctor’s orders.”

They stared each other down. He could be stubborn, but not as stubborn as her. She crossed her arms as he let out a heavy sigh. He grabbed her elbows and uncrossed her arms as they fell to her sides. He started unzipping her uniform.

“What are you doing?” she asked as she gave him an unimpressed raised brow.

“Pajamas,” was all he said.

He pushed her jumpsuit off her shoulders, and it fell to the floor. He bent down and pulled her boots off, tossing them aside before forcefully removing her uniform from her feet. He tugged off her socks, and his hand touching the sole of her foot tickled her. She tried to ignore that sensation as an annoyed heat hit her cheeks.

“Torias, you’re being ridiculous!”

“Am I?” he asked as he stood up.

He pulled her top over her head, forgoing his usual gentleness when he undressed her. She let out a heavy seething sigh as she stood there in her bra and panties. He rummaged around her drawer, pulled out a pajama top and pants, and tossed them onto the bed.

“Take off your bra,” he said as he found her fuzzy socks and tossed them onto the bed.

“Torias,” she said in a hard tone.

He just rolled his eyes with a sigh as he walked up to her and unclasped her bra, pulling it off her. She looked away, feeling that this was all completely stupid. His face softened as he gazed at her.

“What?” she asked as she looked at him, annoyed.

“I just love you. That’s all,” he said in a soft voice as he wrapped his arms around her, pulling her body against him tightly.

A moment later, she slid her arms on his back and held him as she rested her head on his shoulder with a soft breath. He was so warm, and she couldn’t seem to shake that chill from her nightmare. It was as if the cloud was still following her, its cold air blowing against her. She couldn’t escape it, even in his warm embrace. She started to shiver as she thought about her nightmares.

“Hey,” he said as he pulled away, rubbing her biceps to get her warm. “Let’s get you dressed.”

He let go of her and picked up her black long-sleeve top and pulled it over her head. She sighed as she relented and put her arms through the sleeves. He then handed her a pair of gray joggers, and she slid them on. She decided to skip the fuzzy socks and tossed them onto the floor.

“In bed,” he said as he pulled back her covers and gestured her to climb in.

She sighed again as she got in bed and sat against the headboard while he tucked the covers in up to her waist. He then leaned down to kiss her cheek.

“I’ll bring you breakfast. Just rest,” he said softly as his breath tickled her cheek.

“Fine,” she said as she gave him an annoyed look.

As soon as he was out of the bedroom, she pulled a tablet out of her bedside drawer and logged into her work server. They had been in the cave for only half a day, but there would already be a ton of data. Everything was still a little fuzzy. She couldn’t quite remember the data or the events leading up to her accident. She had no idea why her environmental suit had failed her. She searched for the data from her scanner, and her eyes widened. Theta-polaron radiation. Off the charts. She vaguely recalled something about that just before everything went dark. There was something else, but she couldn’t quite pull it out of her mind. She sat there, scanning the data for clues.

“Breakfast is served,” Torias said as he carried a tray into the bedroom.

The aroma of fresh pancakes and strawberries filled the room. She smiled as he set the tray in the middle of the bed and sat beside her.

“Dig in,” he said.

“Happily,” she said as her stomach rumbled at the sight of the hot pancakes smothered in a freshly made strawberry sauce.

She took one of the plates and started plowing through it eagerly. She could hear him chuckling. She glanced over at him, her mouth full as she raised a brow.

“You’re either ravenous or I’m just that good a cook,” he said with a lopsided smile.

“Both,” she said as she chewed. The taste of the strawberries was divine and filled her mouth with sweetness, making her eager to dive in for more.

She could sense his eyes on her as he ate at a more moderate pace. She finished swallowing as she glanced over at him. His eyes were on her lips. He gently ran his index finger across the contour of her bottom lip, scooping up a large amount of strawberry sauce. He held his finger out for her as she took it in her mouth and sucked off the sauce. Then he leaned in for a kiss, taking her lips in his. She could taste the strawberry sauce on his lips as she parted them with her tongue.

“You know, there are ways to make bedrest a little more bearable,” she said as she pulled away.

“And how’s that?” he asked, cupping her cheek as his thumb caressed it.

She picked up the tray between them and moved it to the far end of the bed. Then she climbed over until she was straddling his waist, her hands on his shoulders as she dove in for a kiss. He let her have her moment as she kissed him deeply, passionately. But the minute her hands started unzipping his uniform, he stopped her, taking hold of her hands.

“Audrid, you’re on bedrest,” he said as he looked at her firmly.

“We’re in bed,” she said with a playful smile as she leaned in for another kiss.

“Audrid, we can’t do this. You need to rest,” he said as he sighed.

She sat back and eyed him. His face softened as he cupped her cheeks again, caressing her with his thumbs.

“I love you, but you need to rest,” he said gently as he gazed at her.

“Fine,” she said in a harsh tone as she got back to her side of the bed and grabbed her tablet.

“What are you reading?” he asked.

“Just a boring novel. Nothing you’d like,” she said as she started looking over her data.

He leaned over to take a peek. Then, suddenly, he grabbed the tablet and yanked it out of her hands.

“This is work,” he said loudly.

“Torias, please. Just give me my tablet back,” she said as she gave him an unimpressed look.

“No work,” he said as he got up and disappeared with the tablet.

“Where are you going with that?” she asked in a hard tone.

He returned a minute later without the tablet and took the breakfast tray away, not saying anything.

“Torias?” she called out.

“You’re not supposed to be working. You can have your tablet back when you agree to use it only for personal, non-work purposes,” he said as he returned and leaned against the doorframe with his arms crossed.

“You’re insufferable,” she said as she sat back against the headboard with a sigh.

“Insufferable, but completely in love with and devoted to my wife. I’m not letting her overtax herself when she’s supposed to be resting.”

“Well then, what am I supposed to do for the next two days?” she asked as she crossed her arms, glaring at him.

“A movie in bed?” he suggested.

“Fine. What movie?” she asked without a trace of enthusiasm as she stared at the blank TV on the wall opposite their bed.

“You pick.”

“No. I don’t know movies as well as you do. My parents didn’t let me watch TV all day while I was growing up, like yours did.”

“It makes me sad to think of a childhood without movies. I’m sorry your parents were so strict.”

“It was STEM and only STEM in my house.”

“So you’ve told me,” he said.

The bed shifted as Torias sat beside his wife on it. He scooted over and wrapped an arm around her shoulders. She leaned onto him, finding herself melting into the comfort of his arms.

“Play the 1972 film Solaris,” he commanded. The TV suddenly turned on.

She relaxed as the movie started to play. She suddenly found herself overwhelmingly tired as her husband’s warm arm wrapped tighter around her, keeping her safe and secure. She snuggled into his side as the movie blurred and darkness took over.

Audrid woke to the sound of voices. She got out of bed as she wrapped her arms around her body to keep warm. She still felt that chill, as if the clouds were chasing her through her apartment. She found the voices coming from the den. She stood at the door, watching Torias talk to Captain Johnstone on the computer screen.

“Preliminary analysis of Sergeant Riley’s environmental suit has come up with nothing. The technicians couldn’t figure out why it was compromised. They’re taking the entire team’s environmental suits apart and examining them piece by piece until they find the answers. Project Hades is on hold. Risk Management has been involved, and they don’t want us going back out there until we have proof that everyone will be safe. It could take a couple weeks or more,” Captain Johnstone stated with a grim look on his face.

Torias nodded. “She won’t be happy, but I’ll let her know.”

“Thanks, Riley. Tell her she can contact me if she has any concerns. I’ll see her back in the office when the doctor certifies her return to duty. Johnstone out.”

The screen went blank as Torias turned around.

“Hey,” he said softly as he looked at her with concern.

She sucked in a breath and turned away quickly, feeling her eyes burning. She stormed across the living room, not sure what to do with the energy bubbling up inside her. She couldn’t believe they were doing this to her.

“It’s just a minor setback,” Torias said as he followed her.

She stopped, sucking in a seething breath before turning to him with a glare. “A minor setback?”

“Yeah,” he said as he closed the distance between them, softly caressing her biceps. “You’ll be back out there in a couple of weeks. They just want to make sure everyone is safe.”

“It’s not a minor setback, Torias,” she snapped, pushing his arms off her and turning around. She started to pace. “This is how it starts.” She let out a heavy breath as she felt a heat boiling up to her ears. “This is how it starts!”

“How what starts?” he asked as he stood there with a confused look on his face.

“Don’t you understand?” she asked as she stared at him, feeling terror wash over her. “They’re taking everything away from me. This is just the start. First, they’ll pause the project. Next, they’ll cancel it completely. Then they’ll relieve me of duty, strip me of my rank, and send me back to Earth.”

“That’s ridiculous,” he said as he walked up to her. “Why would you even think that?” He had a little smile on his face, as if he thought she was joking, or maybe he was just mocking her.

“It’s not ridiculous, Torias!”

“No one’s taking anything away from you,” he said as he put his hands on her waist and pulled her close to him. She shirked herself out of his grasp and began to pace the small space. “Audrid, stop,” he said as he watched her.

She just kept circling around the room. Her circles were getting bigger and bigger. He jumped out of her way as she zoomed past him, glaring as she seethed.

“They’re taking everything away from me. Everything,” she muttered, more to herself than to him. “First, they’ll pause the project. Then they’ll cancel it. Then they’ll relieve me of duty. Then they’ll strip me of my rank. Then they’ll ship me back to Earth. Everything. They’re taking everything away!”

“Stop,” he said as he tried to get in her way. She pushed him aside as she paced faster. Her heart was racing, and she felt like she couldn’t breathe. “Audrid, please. Just stop.”

He got in her way again. She grabbed hold of his biceps hard as she glared at him.

“Don’t you see?!”

“I don’t know what’s gotten into you. No one’s trying to take anything away from you,” he said as he put his hands over hers and tried to pull them off his biceps.

“No, Torias!” she snapped as she let go of him and started pacing again.

First, they’ll pause the project. Then they’ll cancel it. Then they’ll relieve me of duty. Then they’ll strip me of my rank. Then they’ll ship me to Earth. I don’t know why he can’t see. Why can’t he see?

“You don’t get it, Torias. They’re taking everything away from me!” she yelled as she paced, tangling her fingertips in her hair.

She stopped suddenly, feeling like her knees were going to crumple. Her eyes were burning, and she couldn't breathe. *They're taking everything away. Everything. Why are they doing this to me?!*

"Hey, it will be okay," he said as he wrapped her up in a hug.

"No, it won't be," she said as she sobbed. "It won't be okay. Nothing will be okay ever again."

He just held her. She clung to him, trying to find a way to breathe. But she couldn't find oxygen. She was suffocating. She tried to suck in a breath as she pushed Torias away from her.

"It's all going to hell," she muttered as she started circling the room again. "It's all going to hell!"

"Audrid, please. Be reasonable," he said as he stood there watching her. She just eyed him as she walked past.

"Be reasonable. Be reasonable. Be reasonable!" She stopped and turned to him. "I'm thinking clearer than I've ever thought in my whole life, Torias. I can see everything clearly. The future. I see it all. They're systematically trying to remove me from the Colony6 project. They're going to erase me from Mars. I'll be exiled. I'll lose everything. I'll be sent back home to live with my parents. I can see it now," she said as she started to pace again. She was talking to herself again more than to him. "'You're a failure, Audrid.' That's what my father will say. 'You're a failure. A failure. A failure!'" She was screaming now. "A failure!"

"Audrid, stop! You're not a failure," Torias said as he followed her around the room.

"I know I'm not. But he won't see it. He won't see that there was an entire conspiracy to remove me. No. He'll just think I failed. He won't even let me in the house. I'll be on the streets. I'll be ruined. And you'll be here on Mars because you can't return to Earth. You'll be arrested if you return. It's all part of it. Can't you see?" Her eyes were begging as she stopped and turned back to him.

"I don't know what's gotten into you, but these ideas are crazy," he said as he stared at her with concern.

"I'm not crazy, Torias," she snapped as she got into his face, pointing her finger at him as she glared. "I'm not crazy."

She started to pace again. He grabbed hold of her, pulling her into a hug, just forcing her to stay in his embrace. She struggled against him. *He doesn't understand. I'm going to lose him. We're going to be pulled apart. Why are they taking everything away from me? What's happening?*

She was panting wildly as she stared into his eyes. Terror filled her. And rage. She was going to lose him. She dove in for a kiss. She couldn't bear to lose him. She was so fired up and angry and hurt and scared, and all she could think of was how much she needed him.

He didn't kiss her back at first. She pulled back, staring into his confused eyes. He looked sad, shocked, and taken aback. She gazed at him for a moment, not understanding his hesitation. She

dove back into a kiss, her tongue delving furiously into his mouth. She put her hands on his back, pulling him closer. He was stiff in her arms. She ran her hands up and down his back until she was tangling one hand in his chestnut hair and biting his lip. He let out a groan.

She pulled away. "I need you, Torias," she said as her eyes begged him. "We have to be together." He swallowed hard as his worried eyes just gazed into hers. "Please."

She dove back into the kiss, not waiting for his reply or his reaction. She just kissed him hard, passionately, sucking on his bottom lip before biting it again. She reached for his uniform and unzipped it quickly, pushing it off his shoulders until it fell to the floor. She slid her hands under his shirt until her palms were gliding across his chiselled chest.

"I love you," she uttered between kisses.

He cupped her face, his thumbs caressing her cheeks softly as he finally kissed her back. It was tender at first. Too tender. She pulled away, stripping off her pajama shirt and tossing it across the room. She pulled off his undershirt and threw it. She ran her hands across his bare chest, purring just a little as she bit her lip and eyed him hungrily.

"I need you," she said as she pulled her pajama pants off.

She grabbed his hand and rushed him to the bedroom. Once there, she stripped off her panties and pulled down his boxers. Then she pushed him on the bed roughly and climbed on top of him, straddling his waist. She ran her fingertips across his chest, feeling his skin against her nails. She kept them slightly longer than regulations allowed, and as she dragged them across his chest, she was glad for that. She looked down at the red marks across his chest.

She dove in and bit his neck before sucking on it. She heard him let out a little gasp as his hands found her back and explored gently. She wanted him to be rough with her, though. She didn't know how to tell him. They weren't rough. They were tender. She needed rough.

She switched sides and started sucking his neck hard before biting it. It would leave a mark, but she didn't care. She scooted down as she started trailing kisses across his clavicle and further down until his nipple was in her mouth, and she was suckling it. It was hard against her tongue. She bit down as he gasped.

Suddenly, he rolled her over. She was panting heavily as she saw the hunger in his eyes. She found his cock and began to stroke it roughly. He groaned as he pushed her legs apart. She guided him in, letting out a heavy gasp as he filled her.

"Fuck me hard, Torias," she uttered breathily.

He wasted no time. He started to thrust into her as she gasped again, biting her lip. Her hands found his back as she let her nails scrape up and down him.

"Harder," she said firmly as she stared into those dilated blue eyes. "Harder."

He thrust into her harder. But it wasn't enough. She needed more.

"Harder!"

He started to pound into her.

“Harder!”

Soon, he was pummeling into her. Harder. Faster. Like a wild animal with a hunger in its primitive eyes. He drove into her as her loins burned. She dug her nails into his back as his name escaped her lips breathily.

“Torias...”

He pounded her into the bed, but she was eager for more. She burned for it.

“Keep going... harder...”

She could feel her insides aching against his cock as it rammed into her. She felt like she was on fire, and it was going to consume her. It was boiling up from her loins, over her belly, and up her breasts until her cheeks and ears were on fire.

“Harder!”

She held onto him as she bit her lip so she wouldn’t scream. She could barely breathe as she was on fire. And then his hard cock pounded onto her G-spot as she cried out his name.

“Torias!”

He continued pummeling into her as her nails dug into his skin. She wrapped her legs around him, just clinging onto him as he drove into her. Harder and faster. Harder and faster. Harder and faster.

“Keep going!”

She squeezed her eyes shut as her vision blurred and stars filled her eyes. She could feel a jolt of electricity spreading through her.

“Harder!”

She felt like the bed might break as he pounded her into it. She could feel her loins aching, but it was a pleasurable pain she couldn’t describe, and she craved more of it.

“Fuck me harder, Torias!” she yelled.

And he did. And it hurt. And it was good. No, it was amazing. She just tried to breathe. Breathe and not scream for all to hear. She bit her lip until it hurt, and even then, she couldn’t keep herself from crying out his name before letting out a guttural moan.

“Oh, Torias! Oh...”

And then she felt herself melting into the bed as her nails let go of his skin, and her arms flopped at her sides. He was still pummeling into her hard and rough, and it felt raw. She let out a heavy breath as she closed her eyes and mewled his name softly as warm tingles enveloped her body.

“Torias... Torias... Oh, Torias...”

He grunted loudly as he stiffened, and she felt his seed shooting into her. She just melted even more until she was one with the bed and him. They were all one for a moment as he collapsed into her, breathing heavily. She just lay there, listening to his breaths as his heavy body lay on top of her. She could feel the tickle of his breath against her hair. She tried to catch her breath but couldn't.

He kissed her softly on the neck before rolling off her, leaving her to feel a chill. He was panting so hard. She could feel his stare on her. She didn't want to look at him, though. All she could think about was that her life was in shambles and she was going to lose him. She rolled onto her side, facing the wall, just trying to breathe, to live, to not let everything overwhelm her to the point of tears. But as he slid his arm around her waist and snuggled into her, the tears fell, and she let out a soft sob.

"Hey," he said softly as he held her. "Did I hurt you? Was I too rough?"

"No," she said as she tried to stifle another sob. "I just feel like I'm on the verge of losing everything that matters to me." She turned to him, cupping his face with her left hand. "I don't want to lose you."

"You won't. No one's trying to take anything away from you," he said as he put his hand over hers. "I promise."

"Don't make promises you can't keep, Torias," she said in a bitter voice as she turned over and faced the wall with a huff.

"Audrid, don't be like that," he said softly as he closed the distance between them. "I love you. I won't let anything bad happen to you. And I won't ever leave you. This is forever. Forever and always."

She just lay there silently, warm in his embrace as chills washed over her. *I won't let them take it all away from me. I won't let them take my project or Torias. I won't let them!* She sucked in a breath as she turned to face him, pulling him into a kiss. She felt a new resolve. No one was going to take anything away from her.

Chapter 6

Audrid hated lying in bed, and she hated feeling sorry for herself even more. But that was her day. She tried to tell herself that no one would take anything away from her, but her mind kept dipping into a dark realm. It was like darkness was slithering around her, reaching into her mind with its tendrils, and making her think things that she wouldn't normally think.

I'm losing everything. It's all going to hell. First, they'll halt the project. Then they'll cancel it. Then they'll relieve me of duty. Then they'll strip me of my rank. Then, once I've lost almost everything, they'll take away my home and Torias and send me back to Earth. Then I'll have lost it all. Life won't be worth living. I can't let that happen. Please... life... God... spirits... whatever the hell is out there, don't take it all away from me.

What's wrong with you?!

Nothing's wrong with me.

You don't believe in deities and spirits, and now you're begging nonexistent ones instead of just keeping it together and fighting for everything. Fight, Audrid. Don't be pathetic. Don't be a wimp. Just fight.

I am fighting. Why is this so hard?

She let out a sigh as she turned around in bed. She wanted to take her pillow and throw it. No, she wanted to take it and tear it apart, throwing the fluff around until the room looked like a pillow massacre. She loathed bedrest. How could anyone be expected to rest in bed all day long when there was work to do? And she couldn't even do her work because Torias stole her tablet and hid it.

Well, I'm going to steal his. She quietly got up and went to his side of the bed, sliding open his bedside drawer. It wasn't there.

"Damnit," she muttered.

"What are you doing?" Torias said behind her.

She swung around, narrowing her eyes at him. "Did you hide your own tablet from me too?" she asked in an angry tone.

"I did, and it looks like I needed to," he said calmly, with a smug little smile. "We could watch another movie, if you want."

"Just go make me dinner," she said with a huff as she pushed past him and returned to her side of the bed. "Turn on the TV to Mars News Network."

Her voice activated the TV opposite their bed as news flooded the room. She climbed in bed, getting cozy in the covers as she lay there, watching it, while Torias disappeared to the kitchen. Soon, she was lost in her thoughts again.

Everything's going to hell. Everything's going to hell. It's all going to hell. Do you hear that? It's all going to hell!

Stop it. Just calm down. What's wrong with you? Stop filling your head with nonsense. Nothing's going to hell. Everything will be fine. Just breathe.

She lay there watching the news about the latest arrival of colonists settling in and the welcome they'd received from the citizens of New Horizons. It wasn't the most exciting news.

"Play News from United Earth News Network, Channel Four," she said as the TV turned to another channel and more news flooded the room. "I hate bedrest," she muttered. "I hate this!"

"What?" Torias asked as he appeared at the door.

"Go make dinner and leave me alone," she said in a growling tone.

She heard him sigh as he walked away. She felt so keyed up as she lay there. She tossed and turned, ignoring the news. She couldn't concentrate on it anyway. She could hear him in the kitchen being noisy. It was as if he were purposefully trying to disturb her. She got out of bed and slammed the door shut. She started to pace the small room.

"I hate bedrest. They're just doing this to me so they can get their plan underway. This is all Jared's doing. He's just going to get rid of me."

"Who are you talking to?" Torias asked as he opened the door.

"Why aren't you making dinner?" she asked in a hard tone as she turned around, narrowing her eyes at him.

"You're unusually hangry today."

"Just go away." He didn't move. He just stood there at the door, watching her pace. She turned to him, glaring. "Why are you just standing there, watching me?"

"I'm just wondering why you're pacing the bedroom and talking to yourself," he said as he leaned against the doorframe, eyeing her.

"Because I'm bored and hungry and frustrated and trying to sort out the shit going on in my head," she spat out. "Is that a good enough explanation for you?"

"You don't need to yell at me," he said with a frown before walking away.

"Clearly, I do," she shouted as she slammed the door again and went back to pacing.

It's all going to hell. I'm going to lose everything. I can no longer deal with this. I can't lose everything I've worked toward. And Torias... I can't lose Torias. I can't lose it all.

She sat down on the edge of the bed as her face fell to her hands. She tried to suck in a breath, but it felt like she was suffocating. Eventually, she crawled back into bed, burying her face in the pillow as the news filled the background.

The cave was dark, and her headlamp was dying. It barely illuminated the meter in front of her. She didn't know why the battery was dying, but slowly, it got dimmer and dimmer. Her breath caught in her throat when it finally went out, leaving her in pitch black. Terror stewed in her belly.

She couldn't see anything, but she could hear her nervous breaths puffing out of her. The cave was hot, and she could feel the sweat dripping off her skin. She took a hesitant step forward into the darkness, keeping her arms outstretched, as if she could feel her way through it. She felt something cold. She yanked her hand back with a shudder.

"Who's there?" she asked in a meek voice.

"Come back to us..."

It was distant, barely above a whisper, and yet ominous. It invaded her ears and made her skin crawl. She could feel cold wrapping around her, enveloping her.

"Who are you?"

"Come back to us, Audrid..."

She woke with a startle as she sucked in a breath. She held it and slowly let it out. She looked over to see Torias fast asleep beside her. The clock said it was 0715 hours. They normally started work at 0700 hours, but Torias must have turned the alarm off because she was on bedrest.

She quietly climbed out of bed and pulled her uniform out of the closet. She took it to the bathroom and got ready for work. When she crept out of the bathroom, Torias was still lying in bed, his breathing soft and even as he slept. She grabbed a protein drink out of the fridge and drank it on the walk to the science building in the military complex.

She could hear talking when she entered her project's office space. She picked up her pace, quickly making her way down the hall until she reached the bullpen, where everyone was gathered around.

"Sergeant Riley?" Captain Johnstone said as he looked up.

"Sorry I'm late, sir. What did I miss?" Audrid asked as she ignored all the surprised looks on her crews' faces.

"Sergeant Riley, you're on medical leave. Why are you here and not resting in bed?" Captain Johnstone asked in a stern tone.

"It's not necessary, sir. I'm fine. I'm here. I'm ready to work," she said, standing tall in front of him.

"Not only is it necessary, but it's also a doctor's order. Even I can't override the doctor's orders," he said.

"It's ridiculous. I don't need two days of bedrest, Captain—."

“Until I receive official paperwork reinstating you, I expect you to follow those doctor’s orders and resume your bedrest. I thought Captain Riley took leave to stay with you?”

“He did. He’s still asleep. I snuck out,” she said.

“You snuck out on your husband?” Corporal Asha Bains said with an amused smile.

“Asha, please. I’m talking to the captain,” she said as she shot a glare at her project’s second in command. She looked at Captain Johnstone. “We could use some privacy, sir. Let’s go to my office.”

She started to walk down the hall toward it, but his stern voice stopped her.

“That won’t be necessary. Look, I know you’re frustrated, but I expect you to follow orders. All orders, even those given by a physician. Now, go home and get in bed. I’ll see you when, and only when, I have the official paperwork ending your medical leave. Is that understood?” he asked, narrowing his eyes at her.

“This is ridiculous,” she muttered with a huff as she crossed her arms.

“Excuse me?” he asked, raising an angry brow.

“Captain, this is ridiculous,” she said, her voice growing. “I’m not going home to bed. All the doctors on Mars can just go to hell because I have work to do.”

The room went silent for a minute as Captain Johnstone just stared at her, wide-eyed, his mouth hanging open. He flustered around for words for a minute as he tried to speak. Finally, he said in a hard tone, “Private Milton, escort Sergeant Riley to her home, and don’t come back until you’ve ensured that she’s settled in bed and her husband is attending to her. Is that clear, private?”

“Yes, sir,” said Private Milton, a tall, gangling young man with greasy, ruffled hair.

“Audrid, I don’t want to see you again until I have official paperwork reinstating you. Is that understood?” Captain Johnstone said, his eyes glaring at her.

She sighed as she nodded, crossing her arms. Private Milton gestured for her to follow him down the hall. She looked around the room before taking a step. It was quiet as everyone stared at the floor. Everyone except Captain Johnstone, who was eyeing her intensely. She swallowed hard as she followed Milton, not uttering a word.

Torias woke to the sound of the door opening, followed by angry voices. He looked over to see Audrid’s spot empty. He jumped out of bed and ran into the living room to find her there in uniform, arguing with a young private.

“Go away, Milton,” she said in a haughty tone.

“My orders were to make sure you were settled in bed with your husband attending to you before leaving, sir. I’m not going to ignore those orders. I don’t want to see the captain angry,” Milton said firmly, though from the look in his eyes, he was eager to bolt.

“Well, you’re making me angry, and I’m your superior. I’m issuing you new orders. Go away,” Audrid said in a firm tone as she crossed her arms.

“What’s going on?” Torias asked as he leaned against the doorframe to the bedroom, watching them. “Why are you in your uniform?”

Audrid let out a loud huff as she threw her hands up in the air and stormed past him into the bedroom. He watched her for a minute as she started to pace back and forth in their room. He turned to Private Milton.

“Care to explain what’s going on?” he asked the young man.

“Sir, I was ordered to escort Sergeant Riley home and ensure she was settled in bed and in your care before returning to the office.”

“Who ordered you?” he asked, raising a brow.

“Captain Johnstone, sir. Sergeant Riley was refusing orders to remain on bedrest. When she wouldn’t cooperate, the captain sent me to escort her home.”

“I see. Well, she’s home. I’ll take things from here. You can tell Captain Johnstone I won’t let her slip away again,” he said, forcing a little smile.

“Yes, sir,” Milton said with a curt nod before turning to leave.

Torias sucked in a deep breath before turning to the bedroom to see his wife storming around the room, puffing angry breaths in and out like a snarling tiger.

“What the hell, Audrid? You snuck out while I was sleeping?” he asked as he stood there with an unimpressed look on his face.

“I had to,” she said as she glared at him, still pacing back and forth in the small room.

“Okay, well, now that you’ve had your fun, it’s time to get back into pajamas and in bed. I’ll make breakfast while you’re doing that,” he said as he watched her.

“Fine,” she said as she continued to pace. She started muttering to herself, not seeming to notice him still standing there. “This is how it’ll all happen. They’ll take it all away from me. This is Jared’s doing. I know it. They’re taking it all away from me!”

“Audrid?” Torias asked his wife, his eyes filled with concern. She didn’t stop. Her voice just grew as she talked faster.

“This is all Jared’s doing. He’s trying to bring me down. He’s going to ruin everything. I know this is his plan. Take it all away. Ruin Audrid. He’s going to ruin everything. You hear that? He’s ruining everything!”

“Hey,” Torias said as he stepped in front of her. She almost ran into him as she abruptly stopped an inch before hitting him. She looked up at him in surprise as her brows furrowed.

“I thought you were making breakfast?”

“I was. I’m just concerned. You seem really upset.”

“Well, I am upset. I have every reason to be upset. But it’s fine. Just go make breakfast, as if the world isn’t falling apart. We need to eat,” she said as she threw her hands up and turned around, pinching the bridge of her nose.

He walked up behind her and swiveled her around to face him gently before gathering her up in a hug.

“Everything will be okay. This is just a minor setback. Doctor Skanlon is coming by later, and he’ll most likely recertify you for active duty. But if you don’t get rest before then, he might be inclined to give you another day of bedrest. So why don’t you get into your pajamas and I’ll tuck you in bed?” he said as he held her, rubbing soft circles on her back. He felt her suck in a breath.

“Audrid?”

“Fine,” she said as she pulled away and forcefully opened a drawer, pulling out a fresh pair of pajamas. She glared at him. “I don’t need supervision. Go make breakfast.”

“You sure you don’t need supervision?” he asked with a little smile. “Because you sure have had trouble following orders lately.”

“So you’re giving me an order, captain?” she said angrily as she narrowed her eyes at him.

“Hey, calm down. I don’t give you orders. I never have. I’m just going to go. I’ll call you when breakfast is ready,” he said as he quickly turned and walked to the kitchen.

He started pulling out ingredients to make pancakes as he heard footsteps storming out of the bedroom.

“You know what, Torias?” she said in a seething tone.

“What?” he asked, feeling unnerved.

“You can just go to hell!”

She stormed into the den and slammed the door. He stood there with his mouth gaping open for a minute before rushing to the office door. He tried to open it, but it was locked. He slapped on the door as he yelled through it.

“Audrid, open the door.” She didn’t answer. “Audrid, stop this. I don’t know why you’re even mad at me. Just come out and talk.” Still no answer. “Come on. Just talk to me.”

Suddenly, loud jarring metal music flooded out of the den. He had never heard her listen to such music before. Usually, she listened to classical music, sometimes opera or musical soundtracks, but never heavy metal.

“Audrid?” he yelled through the noise.

“Go away,” she screamed through the door.

He tried the door handle again, as if it would magically no longer be locked. He could get the lock open easily enough if he tried, but the pit forming in his stomach told him not to. He decided to let her cool off and make breakfast.

After a noisy half-hour of making pancakes while heavy metal flooded their apartment, he returned to the office door to let her know breakfast was ready.

“Go away,” she said.

“Aren’t you hungry? I made pancakes,” he said through the door.

“Just go.”

“Come on, Audrid. Be reasonable.” Silence. “Can you at least turn the music off? Or maybe turn it to something less obnoxious? I’m surprised our neighbors haven’t complained.”

Suddenly, the music turned off and the door clicked unlocked. He stepped back as she opened the door without saying a word. She stormed into the kitchen and started plating breakfast in a hurry as he watched, unsure how to approach her. She grabbed her plate and fork and stormed back into the den, slamming the door. He heard the lock click again.

He just stood there, baffled and at a loss. More music flooded out of the den. This time, it was music from the Pirates of Penzance. It might not be as jarring as metal, but she amped the volume up even higher. He just sighed as he sat down and ate his breakfast alone.

The day was slow as Torias waited for Audrid to emerge from the den. He tried a few times to entice her out, but she either didn’t acknowledge him or yelled at him to go away. She had listened to several musicals, hard rock, and opera. Now, she was listening to country music, which he was pretty sure she hated. He wondered if it was meant to be a punishment for him because she knew he hated country music too.

At 1600 hours, there was a knock on the door. Torias opened the door and saw the aging Doctor Skanlon standing there with a warm smile on his face.

“Riley, how are you holding up?”

“Barely surviving, Doc,” he said as he gestured for him to come inside. “Audrid’s in the den. It’s been a bit of a day. She isn’t handling bedrest well.”

“She’s a workaholic. I imagine it’s been quite the task getting her to actually stay in bed,” he said as he looked around, raising an eyebrow at the twangy music flooding out of the den.

“I haven’t been able to keep her in bed. She snuck off to work this morning while I was still asleep. She had to be escorted home.” Doctor Skanlon let out a little chuckle at hearing that. “It isn’t funny. She came home angry and locked herself in the den. To say she is moody and

irritable is an understatement. I don't know what to do with her. I've absolutely failed at keeping her resting in bed, I'm sorry to say." He hung his head in shame as he sighed.

"Riley, you did your best. She's a stubborn one. Why don't I examine her and hopefully certify her to return to duty tomorrow?" he said with a little smile.

Torias nodded as he headed to the den, knocking on the door loudly so she could hear above the music.

"Audrid, Doctor Skanlon is here," he said through the door.

The music turned off, and he heard the door unlock. She opened it, and a big smile spread across her face.

"Doctor Skanlon," she said warmly as she walked past Torias, not acknowledging him. "Let's go to the bedroom so you can examine me."

She put her arm around his shoulders as she escorted him into the bedroom. Torias just followed silently.

"I hear you've been making trouble for your husband," Doctor Skanlon said with a little chuckle as he walked with her into the bedroom.

Torias leaned against the doorframe as he watched her lie on her back while the doctor ran his scanner up and down her body, studying the readings on the screen.

"Vitals are excellent. In fact, all readings are nominal, and there's absolutely no lingering trace of radiation. How are you feeling, Audrid?"

"Top of the world, doctor. Think you can let me go back to work?" she asked with a bright smile.

"I'd still like you to take it easy. Promise me you won't be rummaging through old caves looking for treasures right away," he replied with a charming smile.

"Unfortunately, the project is on hold. I'm not sure when I'll be back in the cave. But there is a lot of data to sort through, and it's hard getting that done here. Torias hid my tablet, so I couldn't get any work done," she said as she shot him a nasty look. Doctor Skanlon let out a laugh as he put his scanner back in his medical bag. "So, Doctor Skanlon, can I go back to work? I'll take it easy. I promise."

"I'll get the paperwork in tonight. You can return to active duty tomorrow. Until then, I want you to rest and take it easy on that husband of yours."

"He's just grumpy because he hates missing work. He's a total workaholic. I told him he didn't need to take time off work to stay with me, but he insisted. Now, he's taking his anger out on me, as if it's my fault he couldn't go to work," she said as she rolled her eyes.

"I'm the workaholic?" Torias muttered as he raised a brow. She shot him a glare.

"I'll let you rest. Come see me if you aren't feeling well. In the meantime, take it easy, Audrid," Doctor Skanlon said as he headed out of the bedroom. Torias followed him.

“Doctor, are you sure she’s ready to go back to work?” he asked quietly as he escorted him to the door.

“Physically, she’s fine,” he assured him as he opened the front door.

“And mentally?”

“She’s going stir crazy. It will probably be good for her to get back to work. Her demeanor may improve once she’s back to her old routine,” he said. “But if it hasn’t, give me a call.”

“Thanks, Doc,” Torias said as the doctor turned and headed down the hallway toward the elevator.

Torias closed the door and headed back to the bedroom. He was surprised to find Audrid still in bed. She flashed him a coy smile as she lay there with her head propped up on a pillow. She was bobbing her feet up and down, as if there was music playing.

“Want to watch a movie with me?” she asked as her smile grew.

“You’re in a better mood,” he replied as he sat in bed beside her.

“I’ve been in a great mood all day,” she said as she sat up and scooted over until she was leaning into him. He wrapped his arm around her shoulders.

“You’ve actually been pretty miserable. But if you’re happy now, I’m happy,” he said as he pulled her against him.

“I have every reason to be happy. I’m going back to work tomorrow. Everything’s going to be good again. Soon, I’ll be back in that cave, exploring,” she said as she snuggled into him. “Life’s wonderful, isn’t it, Torias?”

She had a bright smile on her face as she looked at him. She didn’t wait for him to answer and pulled him into a soft kiss. He kissed her back, parting her lips as his fingertips grazed her bicep softly. She took his other hand and played with it, drawing circles on his palm with her thumb as she deepened the kiss. He smiled as he pulled away.

“So, what are we going to watch?” he asked, relishing the feeling of her cuddled into his side.

“Play *The Wizard of Oz*,” she commanded the TV as black-and-white opening credits started playing.

“This is a classic. Good choice,” he said as he kissed her head.

“I used to watch it at my grandma’s house. We weren’t allowed to watch movies at home. TV was forbidden, except for educational videos. But Grandma always let us watch movies. Musicals were my favorite. I loved singing along with them.”

“I’ve noticed you like to listen to musical soundtracks. I always thought that was peculiar for someone who didn’t watch a lot of TV or movies growing up. You never mentioned watching movies at your grandma’s house.”

“Listening to musicals reminds me of Grandma’s house,” she said as she snuggled into his side.

“Alright, let’s watch it then,” he said as he got comfortable.

They started watching the movie. He enjoyed all movies, including the oldies that were in black and white. However, there was something magical about it when Dorothy stepped into the world of color. It was bright and happy. He kissed Audrid’s head as he relished holding her in his arms, feeling as if everything was slipping back into place, as things used to be.

He was expecting them to have a quiet evening watching the movie, as they had so many times. But tonight was filled with commentary. He wasn’t sure if it was because she had watched it so many times as a kid and it brought back good memories, but she talked non-stop the entire movie.

“I love Toto,” she said halfway through the movie. “I think we should get a dog.”

“You want a dog?”

“Don’t you?” she asked as she looked at him, raising a brow.

“I’ve never thought about it, to be honest. Not many people on Mars have dogs.”

“But you want a baby,” she pointed out.

“What does a dog have to do with a baby?” he asked, furrowing his brows.

“Let’s get a dog instead of a baby. Will that make you happy? It will make me happy. I don’t want a baby, but I’ll be okay with a dog. They’re just as good. Maybe even better. We can give it a human name if you want to make it seem more like a baby. And we could dress it up in clothes. Yeah, let’s get a dog,” she said, rushing out her words as an enthusiastic smile spread across her face.

“That’s not really the same as having a baby,” he said as he sighed.

“Suit yourself then, Torias,” she snapped. “No baby. No dog. Nothing makes you happy. Let’s just watch the movie.”

He sucked in a breath as he squirmed a little. He wasn’t expecting that reaction. After a moment, he pulled her against him, wrapping his arm tighter around her as he kissed her head. She seemed to settle down because she snuggled into him, as if all the annoyance had been swept away.

They were quiet for a few minutes until she suddenly perked up, exclaiming, “This is my favorite part!”

She jumped out of bed just as Dorothy started to sing “Somewhere Over the Rainbow.” She reached her hand out for him.

“Dance with me.” The smile on her face was electric. He just looked at her strangely, furrowing his brows. “Dance with me, Torias!”

He hesitantly got out of bed and walked over to her. She grabbed hold of him and moved him to the middle of the room, positioning him exactly how she wanted him. She put one of his hands on her shoulder and the other on her hip, and then she wrapped her arms around his neck.

“There,” she said with a smile. “Now dance.”

They started to sway to the music. It was a little awkward and forced, at least on his part. She seemed very into it, though. Then she started to sing “Somewhere Over the Rainbow” and awkward quickly turned to strange. She belted it out loudly, as if she were serenading him while they were dancing.

“The neighbors are going to wonder what’s going on. Maybe you should keep it down,” he said, forcing a smile.

Suddenly, that bright grin disappeared as her eyes became glossy. She just stared at him as she stood still.

“Hey, I love your singing. You don’t have to stop. I just meant you should sing a little quieter,” he said as he tucked a piece of hair behind her ear.

She blinked hard, turned abruptly, and plunked herself in bed without saying a word. He joined her on the bed as the movie continued to play. He tried to get her to cuddle with him, but she shirked him away as she sat there stiffly.

“Are you mad?” he asked hesitantly. She didn’t say a word. “Audrid?”

“End the movie,” she said in a commanding voice as the TV turned off.

She stood up and tore the covers back on the bed, getting in abruptly as she faced the wall.

“Lights off,” she said loudly, and darkness filled the room.

He didn’t know what to say. The tension in the room was palpable. He wanted to reach over and touch her, but he hesitated. Something told him to keep his distance. He quietly went to the bathroom and got ready for bed. When he returned, he slipped into the bed, just staring at her silhouette. Her breaths were ragged and irregular. It was clear that she was seething.

“Audrid?”

When she didn’t say anything, he slowly reached across the bed and gently laid his hand on her shoulder. She shirked it away.

“I don’t know why you’re mad,” he said softly as he shifted in the bed until he was right behind her. He stroked her bicep lightly as she lay there, huffing her breaths. “Don’t be mad. Just talk to me.”

“Go to sleep, Torias,” she said in a definitive voice, ending the conversation.

He sucked in a deep breath as he shuffled back to his side of the bed, watching her. Worry was boiling up in his stomach, and he had no idea what to do with it. He tried to sleep, but it was hours before their usual bedtime, so he just lay there, listening to her breaths. Eventually, they

slowed down, and she seemed to have fallen asleep. He, on the other hand, couldn't sleep. He quietly got out of bed and poured himself a glass of whiskey as he stood at his living room window, peering out at the stars.

Everything had felt much simpler a few days ago, and now...? He took a swig of whiskey, swallowing hard. He was at a loss about his wife's unusual behavior. *Maybe she just needs to get back to work. Maybe everything will be fine. Maybe.*

Chapter 7

“Are you sure you’re ready to go back to work?” Torias asked as he sat on the bed, watching Audrid get dressed in her uniform.

“For the hundredth time, yes,” she said firmly as she let out a big huff.

“I just don’t think it would hurt to take another day or two off,” he said, giving her a worried look.

She turned to him with a sigh as she zipped up her uniform.

“Torias, my love,” she said as she put her hands firmly on both his shoulders. Her voice was soft at first. But then she gritted her teeth as she narrowed her eyes at him. “Stop asking me to take time off work.”

He just looked at her in response. She sighed as she let go of him and crossed her arms.

“Doctor Skanlon said just yesterday that I’m good. I’m great. You were there. He knows my body is in excellent physical condition and that I’m in top shape. He’s not worried. But, more importantly, he certified my return to active duty. So I’m going back to work. End. Of. Story.”

Her eyes bore into him as she stood there, crossing her arms even tighter.

“End of story?” he asked, giving her an unimpressed look.

“End of story. Period. Dot. Done. Now, it’s time to go. I don’t want to be late. I have a lot to do.”

“Your project is on hold.”

“Torias, the project is on hold, but the data is sitting there, waiting to be combed through and analyzed. I have permission to proceed with the analysis while we’re waiting for the green light to go back into the cave. The data was unusual. I’ve already had a look at it, and I definitely want to get started on that analysis,” she explained.

“Already had a look at them?” he asked, raising a brow.

“Yes. I snuck a look at the data while you were busy.”

He gave her an annoyed look in response. She let out a huff as she threw her arms up in the air.

“What did you expect me to do? Twiddle my thumbs for two days? Bedrest was boring as hell, and there was work to be done,” she said in a haughty tone.

He just stared at her.

“Wipe that look off your face. What’s done is done. I’m going back to work. Now, let’s go before we are late,” she insisted.

“Fine.”

“Don’t look so sour, Torias. It doesn’t suit you.”

He sucked in a breath as he stood up and walked straight to the door without saying anything. She followed him out, walking beside him quickly down Rubicon Lane. She wasted no time, picking up her pace as he worked to keep up. It was quiet on the walk, and neither of them wanted to fill that annoyed silence.

When they reached Madeira Road, the central vein through New Horizons, it became crowded with fellow residents walking to work. The chatter around them filled the silence. After a 15-minute walk, they arrived at the military complex and lined up at the busy check-in point.

“Don’t overdo it today,” Torias said as they stood in line. Audrid just rolled her eyes as she let out a little huff. Torias sighed. “I just care about you. That’s all.”

She didn’t say anything and just ignored him. When they made it through the check-in point, Torias gave her a quick peck on the cheek as he took her hand and rubbed circles over her knuckles. She almost pulled her hand away, but as his soft, loving eyes gazed into hers, she melted a little.

“I love you,” he said as he squeezed her hand.

“I know,” she said as she kept up her annoyed tone. After a moment, she relented just a little and added, “I love you too. I’ll see you later.”

He flashed her a little smile, just enough for his dimples to make an appearance before he headed to the command building. She took a deep breath and headed into the science building. It felt good to be back at work. She was bright-eyed and eager as she walked into Project Hades. Her team was already busy at their desks, pouring over data. She walked past them, spying over their shoulders on the way to her office.

She sat down at her desk and pulled up the data on her computer screen, going straight for the data from her own scanner. She was curious about that theta-polaron radiation. She started going over the numbers as her heart sped up a little. There was something about those numbers and that radiation—a bigger piece of the puzzle that she couldn’t see. She had to know.

“Corporal Bains, can I see you in my office?” she said over the intercom.

A moment later, Corporal Asha Bains walked to her office. She had her usual serious look on her face, always ready to get down to work.

“Yes, sir?” she asked as she stood respectfully at the door.

“Asha, I want everyone to focus on theta-polaron radiation. Have all researchers combing the data for any trace of it. I can’t be the only one who detected it,” Audrid said as she stared at the computer screen.

“Can I be honest, sir?” she asked as she stepped all the way into the office, closing the door.

“Of course. I always want your honesty, Asha,” she replied as she sat back in her chair, looking at the slightly younger woman with her long black hair that she stubbornly kept loose despite regulations. Audrid gestured for her to have a seat.

“We haven’t been completely useless while you’ve been on bedrest. We’ve been combing the data for two days. No other scanners picked up theta-polaron radiation. Only yours did.”

“That makes no sense,” she said in a hard tone as she pinched the bridge of her nose. “We’re missing something here. The radiation levels were intense. It doesn’t make sense for them to be localized to one specific area. Unless...” She trailed off as she tried to connect the dots.

“Unless what?”

“Unless there’s something there. I’ve been assuming this entire time that the cave was the source of the radiation. But what if it wasn’t the cave itself but something in it? There must be something there. Some isotope or something that’s emitting theta-polaron radiation,” she said as she searched her mind for ideas.

“You might be right, but we won’t know until we can get back into the cave,” Asha replied.

“We need to get back out there. We can’t wait two or more weeks,” Audrid said, staring intently at Asha.

Audrid’s corporal let out a little laugh as she looked at her. “Whatever you’re suggesting, you can’t be serious. We can’t get back out there until the environmental suits are ready. At the moment, they’re in a million pieces as the technicians look for the problem.”

“Send Private Milton to the lab. I want to know what the hold-up is. Tell him I want a full report,” she said as she sat back in her chair.

She turned to her computer screen, looking at the data from her scanner. She had to figure out what it all meant. After a moment, she glanced over at Asha, who was still sitting there. She had a displeased look on her face, although Audrid was too busy worrying about the data to care about what it meant.

“That will be all. Dismissed.”

Asha nodded curtly as she left. Audrid just stared at the screen, willing it to make sense. If it wasn’t the cave, then it was something. An element. An isotope. A chemical compound. Something had to be emitting that radiation. She combed through the data again and again, frowning her brows as she stared intensely at the screen. After an hour of no progress, she let out a growl.

“I need to get back out there,” she exclaimed, pushing herself out of the chair as she stormed out of her office and into the bullpen. She noticed Private Milton standing there, talking to Asha at her desk.

“Milton, where’s my report?” she said in a loud voice as she walked crisply up to them. “I’ve been waiting all morning.” She narrowed her eyes at the young private, and he squirmed a little. He handed her a tablet. “Why am I receiving this only now?”

“He just got back. The report wasn’t ready, so he waited for them to finish it. Those were his orders. Don’t come back until you have a report to give to the sergeant. That’s why you’re receiving it just now,” Asha said as she looked squarely at Audrid, clearly unbothered by the glare she was getting.

Audrid grabbed the report and started scanning it on the spot. “This is unacceptable!” she snapped as she slammed it down on Asha’s desk.

“Sir?” Asha asked as she raised a brow.

“It says there’s no indication that something’s wrong with the environmental suits, so they’re digging deeper. They expect that it will take them two full weeks to complete the analysis of the suits. That’s not okay. It’s ridiculous,” Audrid spat out as she rushed through her words. “I need to give those technicians a piece of my mind. We can’t just sit here analyzing data when there’s something in that cave. We have to get out there and find it.” Her voice resonated off the walls of the room as it grew louder and faster. Everyone was staring at her. “We have to find out what’s in that cave!”

“Sir, we’re waiting for it to be safe,” Asha said as she gave Audrid a firm stare.

“No,” Audrid snapped as she narrowed her eyes at her corporal. “We have to get out there. We need to contact Captain Johnstone. We’ll riot if that’s what it takes, but we have to get back into that cave!”

As soon as she stopped yelling, the room fell silent. The tension was palpable. People were just staring at her, mouths hanging open. She glared at each and every one of them before storming off to her office and slamming the door shut with a thud. She sat down at her desk as her face fell to her hands and she sucked in a deep, frustrated breath.

Why is this so complicated? It should be simple. The science comes first. We get back out there and find out what’s emitting intense theta-polaron radiation. The science must come first! A knock at the door startled her from her thoughts. She looked up to see Asha sticking her head in the door.

“Do you have a minute, sir?” she asked with a sober look as she walked into the room without waiting for an answer. She sat down in front of Audrid’s desk as she stared hard at her.

“What, Asha?” she asked as she flashed her an annoyed look.

“Are you okay?” she asked hesitantly.

“Am I okay? Of course, I’m okay!” she snapped. “Why are you even asking me that?”

“You seem on edge, sir. Not like your usual self. You’re normally more cool and collected,” she said as she stared at Audrid, completely unphased by the glare she was getting in return.

“I’m fine!” she replied in a harsh tone.

She nodded as she took a deep breath. “Look, I know it’s rough having your project put on hold. It’s hard on us too. We care a lot about this project. We’re just as devoted to it as you are. We all want to move forward.”

“What’s your point?” Audrid asked as she eyed her.

“Maybe losing your cool in front of the team is just serving to stress them out more. If you need to vent, just pull me into your office in private. I don’t mind listening to you yell about how badly you need things to move forward. But don’t do it in front of the team. It’s not good for morale.”

“Fine,” she said with a huff as she sat back in her chair. “I’m just so frustrated. I feel useless sitting here, combing through data. It’s meaningless at the moment. We need to investigate the cave to be able to interpret the data. And we can’t. We’re just sitting here like useless ducks. I hate it!”

“Hmm...” Asha started to say as she furrowed her brows. A hint of a smile appeared on her face.

“What is it, Asha?”

“Just seems like you need to blow off some steam. Some of us are going to Club6 tonight to do just that. You should come along. It might do you some good. Bring that captain husband of yours,” Asha said.

“Really? But we work tomorrow. You all plan to party on a work night?”

“We work most days. If we don’t fit in time for recreation, we’ll start losing our minds. Just come to the club. You do know where it is, right?”

“It’s in the social complex.”

“I honestly wasn’t sure if you knew where that was, Audrid. Or that we even had one,” she said with a little smirk.

“I did know that,” she said as she rolled her eyes. “I don’t know. I’ll think about it. Let me get back to the data. Maybe they’ll start making sense if I stare at them long enough.”

“Come to the club tonight,” she said with a smile as she got up and left, closing the office door behind her.

Audrid sat back in her chair as she thought of it. She hadn’t been in the club in years. Not since she was dating Torias. And that was early on in their relationship. She pushed that thought out of her head as she went back to the data.

Eventually, her eyes started to feel tired as she grew weary. They wandered to her and Torias’s wedding photo on her desk. They were both in dress uniforms, with bright smiles on their faces. She picked up the frame and ran her thumb across his face. It was a happy day. And maybe they

needed more days like that. She put down the frame and headed into the bullpen to find Asha at her desk.

“Corporal Bains, what time are you going to be at the club tonight?”

“Nineteen hundred hours, sir,” she said with a smile. “I’ll see you there.”

Club6 was busy when Audrid arrived with Torias. Jarring techno music filled the large room as strobe lighting created seizure-inducing flashes of light across the black walls. She smiled as she took his hand and weaved through the crowds, looking for Asha and her crew. She found them standing around the bar, cocktails in hand.

“Order us drinks,” she said to Torias in a commanding voice.

“Sarge!” several crew members exclaimed as they held up their drinks to her.

“I didn’t think you’d come,” Asha said as she gave her an impressed look.

“Of course, I’d come. I do know how to have fun, Asha,” she replied.

She looked around as a big grin filled her face. The atmosphere was electric, making her feel like she was on fire. She just wanted to get on that dance floor and feel the rhythm of the music. Torias returned with a bottle of beer and a bellini. He handed her the bellini before sipping on his beer. She slurped on it long and hard, quickly getting brain freeze from the slushy liquid.

“Slow down,” Torias whispered in her ear.

“Let’s drink and have fun!” she exclaimed in a bright voice. She turned to Asha. “Have you been on the dance floor yet?”

“Techno is not exactly my thing. I come for the drinks and the company,” she replied as she held up her beer bottle before taking a sip.

“I want to dance,” Audrid said to Torias. “Finish your beer.”

“We just got here. We can take our time,” he replied, giving her a strange look.

She didn’t know why he was looking at her like that, although she usually knew all his looks. She gave him a perplexed look in return before slurping down the last of her drink. She walked over to the bar and slammed the empty glass down.

“Another,” she exclaimed. “Put it on his tab.” She pointed to Torias as a charming smile spread across her face. “He’s my husband.”

“Everyone knows Captain Riley, sir,” the bartender said with a smile. He started mixing up her drink. Once he handed it to her, she headed back to the group.

“You’re famous, Torias,” she said as she pinched his ass, startling him.

“I’m not famous. There are only so many captains. Almost everyone knows me in New Horizons. Or at least knows of me,” he explained as he sipped his beer.

She slurped up her bellini until it was done and slammed it on the bar as she winked at the bartender. She grabbed Torias’s beer out of his hands and swirled it around to see how much was left.

“Are you going to finish this so we can dance?” she asked as she swung the bottle in her hand.

“I’d like to,” he said as he tried to grab it from her. She took it and slugged it back until it was done, and then handed it back to him with a smile. “What did you do that for?” he asked, raising a brow.

“You were too slow, and I want to dance,” she said as she grabbed his hand and started dragging him to the dance floor. She looked back at her crew and called out to them. “Come dance!”

She weaved through the crowd, pulling him along until they were in the middle of the dance floor. She hadn’t danced in so long, but she had a fabulous red strapless dress to show off. She started dancing to the music, although she wasn’t really sure how to dance to techno. She shuffled around Torias for a few minutes, wiggling her body and gyrating as she laughed. Then she turned her ass to him and started grinding against him as she glanced back at him with a smirk. He looked very amused as his face lit up.

They danced for a while, just losing themselves to the music and the crowd. She tried out random moves she didn’t even realize she knew. He just copied her, trying to keep up. Eventually, she started to feel exhausted and overwhelmed by all the lights, the loud sounds, and the crowd pushing into them. It felt like the room was spinning, and she was drowning in adrenalin. She couldn’t stop even if she felt like her knees were going to buckle. She just danced, grabbing hold of his shoulders as she gyrated against him. He pulled her close, whispering as his hot breath tickled her ear.

“Should we have another drink?” he asked.

“No! We’re dancing!”

She draped her arms around his neck as she sucked in a dizzying breath and hung her head back, her hair cascading around her. He put his hands on her hips as they swayed. It wasn’t even to the music any longer. They were making their own music now. She slow-danced with him while staring at the ceiling. The strobe lighting was flashing against the black paint, creating an overwhelming pattern of light. She found her eyes transfixed upon it. She wrapped her arms tighter around his neck to keep herself from falling over. He wrapped his arms around her back, keeping her upright as she swayed and just stared at the flashing lights. She felt like she was in a trance.

She looked at him with a goofy smile before pulling him into a kiss. It was slow and sensual at first as they danced slowly to the music in her head. She ran her hand up into his hair as she deepened the kiss, dancing passionately with his tongue. She pulled away breathlessly, resting her forehead on his for a moment before diving back in and biting his lip as he groaned.

She smiled before trailing kisses across his jaw until she was at his ear, nibbling on it softly. She could feel his hands exploring her back. They slid down, cupping her ass and pulling her closer to him and his hot body. She kissed him harder, forgoing any attempt to be gentle or tender as she dove her tongue inside him, exploring contours. She felt herself stirring as a warmth emanated from her loins and spread across her. She could feel herself growing wet as she ached for him. She pulled away as a smirk spread across her face.

Audrid took her husband's hand and led him to a hallway in the back of the club, in search of the bathroom. She found a stockroom and slipped inside with him, shutting the door. She pushed him up against a shelf as her tongue delved into his mouth, exploring him. His hands were on her back, pulling her against his warm body. She slid her hands up his shirt until her palms were gliding across his smooth, muscular chest as she purred. His hands moved up to her hair, tangling in her strands. She kissed him deeper, harder, pushing him against the shelf even more.

She moved her hands down until she was unbuckling his pants. He stopped her, his eyes going wide as he grabbed her hands and stared back at her.

"What are you doing?" he asked quickly.

"I think you know," she said in a husky voice as she dove back into a kiss, unzipping his pants at the same time. She skimmed her hand across the front of his boxers as he bucked his hips.

"Are you sure?" he asked with a raised brow as he stared at her.

"Shh..." she said as she held her finger up to his lips.

She pushed his pants down to his thighs, boxers and all, and took his warm cock in her hands as she began to stroke it.

"You know you want this," she whispered into his ear, letting her hot breath puff out against it.

He didn't reply, but his breathing sped up as his cock started to harden in her hand. She rubbed him faster as he groaned. Suddenly, he grabbed her by the biceps, and he turned her until her back hit the shelf. He hiked her dress up and yanked her panties down until they fell to the floor. He lifted her ass as she wrapped her legs against his waist. Then he slid his hot cock inside her. She let out a gasp as he filled her.

"Oh, Torias..." she breathed out.

He wasted no time and began thrusting into her as she gasped even harder.

"Ohh..." she moaned out. "Oh, God..."

He thrust harder.

"Oh, God, Torias..."

Harder. Faster. He pounded her onto the shelf as she cried out his name.

"Torias!"

He started pummeling into her as she hit the shelf again and again. It hurt her back, but it only spurred her on more.

“Harder,” she uttered breathily. He drove into her harder, hitting her G-spot. “Fuck, Torias!”

She could feel a warmth burning in her loins. It spread out, going up her belly to her breasts until her cheeks were hot and her ears were on fire.

“Oh, Torias...”

He just kept pounding into her, letting out grunts as her moans filled the room. She bit her lip to try to be quiet, but as he hit her sensitive spot again, his name escaped her lips.

“God, Torias!”

“Shh...” he whispered with a little chuckle.

“I can’t help it,” she moaned out. “Oh, God... fuck me harder!”

Electricity jolted through her as his hard cock drove in and out of her. Harder. Faster. Harder. Faster. Warm tingles spread out her fingertips and toes as she squeezed her eyes shut, biting her lip until it hurt.

“Fuck, Torias!” she screamed as he drove into her G-spot again.

She was hot, on fire, and she couldn’t help but scream that pleasure loudly. Every piece of her was alive, wild, buzzing.

“Keep going...” she breathed out.

He just rammed into her harder and faster as she gasped and moaned. Another hit to her G-spot and a guttural moan filled the room. She could feel herself melting into the shelf as it dug into her back. Soon, she was one with him and the shelf as she climaxed and warm tingles enveloped her fiery body.

“Oh, Torias...” she mewled out.

Her whole body was relaxing now as he continued to pound into her. Soon, he stiffened as he let out a loud grunt. She could feel his hot seed shooting into her.

“Ohh...” she moaned with a delicious satisfaction. “Ohh... fuck... that was good...”

He lowered her to the floor before collapsing against her, pressing her onto the shelf. She let her head hang back as it rested against a container while she tried to catch her breath. She could feel his hot breath tickling her ear as he breathed heavily against her. He pulled away from her as he yanked his pants back up. He wouldn’t look her in the eye as his cheeks went red. She ran her thumb across his cheek as she gazed at him.

“What is it?” she asked softly.

“We just had sex in the back of Club6, Audrid.”

“And it was hot,” she said, caressing his cheek more as she stared at him with bliss-filled eyes and smiled softly.

“We shouldn’t have. It wasn’t right,” he said as he zipped up his pants. He grabbed her panties off the floor and shoved them in her hand. “Put these on. We should go home.”

“But we’re having fun,” she said as her eyes started to burn. She blinked hard as she stared at him. “I thought you liked it.” He still wouldn’t look at her. She draped her arms around his neck as her voice turned husky, and she spoke breathily into his ear. “Maybe we should do that again until you enjoy it.”

“I did enjoy it. In the moment. But the moment is over. Let’s go home now,” he said firmly.

“Torias,” she said hard, feeling both hurt and angry as she bunched her lacy thong in her hands. He grabbed it from her and slid it into his pocket before yanking her dress down.

“Let’s go home,” he said as he took her by the hand and led her out of the stockroom.

They headed back into the club as she sucked in a breath, feeling tears welling up in her eyes. She looked at the back of his head as he weaved her through the crowd. His hair was ruffled from her hands tangling in it. She just wanted to smooth it down. Instead, she followed him. They didn’t say goodbye to anyone. They just left and headed home to bed silently as she tried not to let the tears fall.

As she lay in bed in the dark that night, a few tears slid down her cheeks. She wiped them away, stifling her sobs so he wouldn’t know she was crying. She felt emotions bubbling over her, and she didn’t know how to control them. She felt like there was a fire inside her, and it hurt as it burned.

Chapter 8

Audrid sat at her desk as boredom washed over her. She had been staring at the data on her computer screen all morning. The numbers were beginning to blur, and the longer she looked at them, the less sense they made. She let out a huff, feeling intensely frustrated by the lack of progress on her project. Until they could get back out there, progress was impossible.

It was just about lunchtime, so she decided to pay Torias a surprise visit. She headed to the command building and found his assistant sitting at her desk, pulling out a sandwich. She walked past her into his office and found it empty. She turned around and looked at the assistant.

“Did Torias already go on lunch?”

“No. He’s in a meeting, sir,” she replied between bites.

“Oh, well. In that case, I’ll just wait for him. But it’s a surprise, so don’t tell him I’m here,” she said as she closed the door.

She pulled down the shade over the window in the door and then looked around his office. His desk was cluttered with papers, tablets, and pictures of the two of them. There was also one of him and his mom. She picked it up and admired it for a moment. He was just a kid in the photo, and he looked so happy. They had just won a baking contest and were getting a first-place ribbon. He was a cute kid. She put the photo down and sat down on his leather couch with a sigh.

She started to get impatient as she waited for him. She sat there, picking at her nails, cleaning the grit out from under them as she let out another sigh. She looked at the clock. Ten minutes had already gone by. She got up and started browsing his bookshelf. It was large and full of paperbacks, leather-bound books, policy manuals, and the likes. It wasn’t necessary to have books. Everything could be on tablets. But Torias said there was something about having a physical copy of everything that made him feel good.

She heard voices outside the door and quickly flopped herself down on the couch, unzipping her uniform just a little. The door opened, and Torias walked in, doing a double take as a big grin spread across his face.

“This is a nice surprise,” he said as he put his tablet down on the desk.

“Is it?” she asked with a coy little smile.

“It is,” he replied as he sat down on the couch next to her. He wrapped his arm around her shoulders before leaning over to kiss her temple. “Were you wanting to have lunch?”

“Not quite,” she said as she pulled him into a kiss.

It was soft at first, and tender. But then she parted his lips as her tongue delved into his mouth, exploring him deeply. She tangled her hand in his hair, her fingertips caressing his scalp. She bit his bottom lip as he groaned, pulling her against him as his hands pressed into her back. She pulled away breathlessly as she rested her forehead on his.

“Have you ever had sex in your office before?” she asked in a sultry voice.

He chuckled as he cupped her face, his thumbs stroking her cheeks. “Is that a rhetorical question?” he asked with a smile.

“No,” she said as she pulled him back into a kiss. “Though I already know the answer is ‘no.’” She started trailing kisses across his jaw until she was suckling on his lobe.

“What makes you think it’s a ‘no’?” he asked breathily.

“Because I know you,” she murmured between kisses. She started trailing them down until she was at his neck, sucking hard before biting down. He let out a gasp as his hands explored her back.

“Why ask, then?”

She pulled away, biting her lip for a moment as she gazed into his eyes. “I don’t know. Maybe I want to change that.” His eyes went wide as he raised a brow. “I want to feel your lips on me as you make me come in your office chair, Torias,” she whispered, letting her breath puff into his ear.

“Audrid,” he uttered as he stared at her, his eyes turning into saucers.

“Dismiss your assistant. Tell her to go have lunch somewhere else,” she said firmly. “Now.”

He just nodded as he walked to the door and told her to go away nicely. He closed the door after, leaning against it with a smile. She stood up, strutting over to him as she took his hand and led him over to the far side of the desk. She unzipped her uniform and let it fall to the floor. She hiked down her white regulation underwear until it was at her ankles next to her uniform. He just stood there watching her, his mouth gaping open as she sat with her bare ass on his office chair and spread her legs.

“I’m waiting,” she said in a husky voice as she ran her finger through her folds.

He sucked in an eager breath before getting on his knees and tugging on her legs until her ass was at the edge of his chair. He smiled up at her before kissing her mound softly. And then his tongue slid in her folds, finding her clit right away.

“Oh...” she breathed out as she felt herself growing wet. “Oh, Torias...”

He flicked his tongue up and down her clit for a moment before swirling it around and going up and down again, digging in harder. She could feel herself growing warm with tingles as they spread out from her loins until they were going out of her fingertips and toes. She moaned as he licked harder. Then he slid two fingers inside her, and her moan became guttural.

“Oh, God, Torias...” she breathed out before moaning hard. “Torias...”

She mewled and whimpered as he sucked on her clit, the warm tingles becoming electrified. She grabbed his hair, tangling her fingertips in it tighter and tighter as he thrust his fingers in and out of her and licked hard.

“Ohh...” she moaned out long and hard. “Ohh... Torias.... Torias!”

She could feel herself melting into the chair as bliss filled her up, all the way from her loins to her cheeks, making her heart feel full. She tugged on his hair as he looked up at her. His face glistened with her moisture. She stood up and pulled him up and into a kiss—long, deep, and hard as her tongue delved into his mouth.

“I need you,” she said breathily as she pulled away.

“The couch?” he asked as he gazed into her eyes.

“The desk,” she said as she eyed the mess.

She stepped out of her uniform and underwear until she was standing there in nothing but her undershirt. She walked around to the other side and swept everything aside with a clatter until there was nothing but the computer screen and console. His papers, tablets, books, and picture frames all littered the floor. She just smiled as she grabbed hold of the front of his uniform and pulled him closer. She unzipped it and pushed it off his shoulders until it fell to his ankles. She yanked his boxers down to his thighs as she stoked his cock. It was already hard and pulsating inside her palm.

“Fuck me, Torias,” she whispered, puffing out a hot breath into his ear.

He looked deep into her eyes as a hungry lust filled his. He grabbed her by the hips and pushed her back until her ass hit the desk. As he was about to lift her on, she stopped him.

“Not that way,” she said as she turned to face the desk and bent over it.

“Audrid,” he breathed out as he cupped her ass with both hands. Then he slapped it as she let out a gasp.

“Fuck me,” she said breathily.

And then he slid his cock into her as she moaned hard, feeling it fill her deeply. He settled into her quickly and began to thrust. She could feel the edge of the desk digging into her belly with each thrust, but she didn’t care. It just spurred her on more.

“Harder,” she said firmly.

He started pounding into her as he grunted, breathing heavily. He grabbed her bun and held tight as his other hand gripped her shoulder. He took her roughly, ramming her into the desk. She could feel a heat boiling over her. As he hit her G-spot, she cried out his name.

“Torias!”

“Shh...” he said as he fucked her harder, pulling on her bun.

She bit her lip so she wouldn’t scream, but it was so good, so pleasurable, that she had to bite down really hard. She felt like she was on fire.

“Harder,” she breathed out. “Harder, Torias.”

He pounded her hard, her belly jamming onto the edge of the desk. His nails dug into her shoulder and he grabbed her hair tighter.

“Harder.”

He went harder, pummeling into her like a wild stallion. Harder. Faster. Harder. Faster. So much that the desk was beginning to hurt as it hit her belly. She didn’t care. And she didn’t care that his grip on her bun hurt too. All that pain just mixed with pleasure, making her want to scream out his name as she bit her lip hard until that hurt too.

“Faster.”

He went faster, like a high-speed train as he drove into her, pounding her into the desk. She could feel how wet she was as he slid in and out of her rapidly, skimming all her sensitive spots each time. All of a sudden, he pounded her harder than ever as his cock hit her G-spot. She cried out his name.

“Torias!”

“Shh!”

“I can’t help it,” she said breathily as pleasure washed over her.

She could feel herself relaxing into the desk as she let her cheek fall flat against it. She felt like she was one with it as she sank down. Just her and the desk, and her husband pounding into her from behind. She mewled his name softly as she whimpered and moaned. Even though she had climaxed, it still felt so deliciously good.

He stiffened as he let out a loud grunt. She could feel his hot seed inside of her as she moaned out his name one last time.

“Oh, Torias...”

“Audrid,” he breathed out before collapsing on top of her, his breaths heavy against her back.

Just then, the door opened as a voice startled them. “Captain, I’ve got that report you wanted... Oh—.”

“Get out!” Torias yelled as he stood up, sliding out of her.

“Sorry,” the private yelped as the door slammed shut.

Audrid started to laugh as she lay face down on the desk. She looked up at him with a big smile.

“It’s not funny. Everyone’s going to be talking about this,” he said as his face went red and he started quickly getting dressed.

“Relax,” she said as she sat up with her bare ass on his desk.

“Just get dressed,” he snapped.

“Calm down,” she said as she stood up and wrapped her arms around his neck.

A sly smile spread across her face as she leaned in to kiss him softly on the lips. He pulled her back.

“Get dressed, Audrid,” he said as he walked around to the other side of the desk and picked up her underwear and uniform, tossing them at her.

“Fine,” she said as she put her clothes back on. He was standing there, pinching the bridge of his nose as he took deep breaths. “Torias, you’re a captain. I’m your wife. This isn’t a big deal.”

He just glared at her and then started picking everything up off the floor as he rearranged his desk silently. She zipped up her uniform and straightened her hair out. She knew her bun was probably a mess, but she didn’t have a mirror. She would find a bathroom on her way back to her office. She sighed as she looked at him. He could barely look at her as he focused on his desk.

“Torias, it will be fine.”

“It’s not fine!”

“It is,” she said as she closed the distance between them, wrapping her arms around his neck.

“Trust me. There’s nothing like a good rumor. But it will blow over quickly, and everyone will forget. Don’t worry.” She kissed him softly on the lips. He didn’t kiss her back as he stood stiff in her arms. “Fine, be like that.”

She let go of him and stormed out of his office, slamming the door on the way. His assistant was back at her desk. She quickly looked away from Audrid as her cheeks went rosy.

“Don’t be a prude,” Audrid muttered as she walked past her and out the door to the hallway.

She found the bathroom and fixed her hair before heading back to her office with a huff. *If my own husband can’t appreciate sex with me...* She stewed in anger for the rest of the day as she thought about how unhappy he looked.

Torias spent the rest of the day hiding in his office. He had more than enough work to do there that he could get away with it. No one approached him, not even his assistant. The rest of the day was quiet, but he felt himself fuming inside.

When the day was over, he headed home. He was lost in thought the entire way there. All he could think about was Audrid. It was like she was out of control. First, there was sex in the club the night before, and now, in his office. He should have said no, but it was hard to resist her. He loved her. He didn’t want to hurt her by turning down her advances. But it had to stop.

She was already at their apartment when he arrived home, sipping tea as she ate some ginger molasses cookies he had made the other day. He took a deep breath as he looked at her. He had to do it. He had to talk about it.

“We have to stop this,” he said abruptly as he stood on the other side of the kitchen island from her. “No more sex in clubs or offices. Sex is for the bedroom.”

“Torias, don’t be such a square. ‘Sex is for the bedroom.’ What, are you 60?” she asked, rolling her eyes as she took a bite of her cookie.

He sucked in a breath as he pinched the bridge of his nose, trying to contain his anger. He didn’t want to yell, but he sure as hell felt like yelling. She slammed down her cookie suddenly as she glared at him.

“I gave you a good time, and you’re pissed off at me about it. You know how that makes me feel, Torias?” she said as her eyes bore into him.

“Audrid, we got caught in my office having sex. You must know how bad that looks? What if the general finds out? I have a reputation to keep. I’m a high-ranking officer. One of the highest. I can’t go around fucking my wife in public places.”

“It wasn’t a public place. It was your personal office, and you could do as you wish there,” she said as she stood up, eyeing him.

“What’s gotten into you?” he asked as he stared at her hard. “This isn’t like you. Ever since that incident in the cave, you’ve changed.”

“I haven’t changed, Torias,” she said in a seething tone.

“You have. You’re out of control.”

“I’m not out of control. Maybe you need to grab life by the horns and have a little fun sometimes. I’m sorry if I’m not resigned to living life in a boring manner, as you seem to be,” she yelled.

“So that’s it? If I don’t want to have sex in public places, I’m boring? Well, maybe that’s how I want to be. And that’s normally how you are too. This isn’t you. I don’t know what’s wrong with you,” he shouted.

“Nothing’s wrong with me!”

“Something is. Maybe you need to talk to a doctor about this.”

“About having fun? You know what, Torias?” she asked as she sucked in an angry breath. “You can just go to hell!”

She walked out of the apartment, slamming the door. He let out a breath as his shoulders sagged. He didn’t mean to upset her like that, but things had to be said. He walked around to the other side of the island and sat on the bar stool, burying his face in his hands.

He didn’t know what was wrong with her, but this wasn’t her. This wasn’t his Audrid. She would be furious if he involved the doctor, though. And what was he supposed to tell a doctor? That his wife is suddenly sex-crazed? He couldn’t bring that to a doctor. He felt lost, unsure what to do. He just tried to breathe.

The evening progressed, and Audrid didn't return home. Worry stewed deep in his belly. By 2100 hours, he couldn't take it any longer. He headed out to look for her. He checked her office, but it was empty. His office was empty too, though he didn't know why she would go there. He was desperate, though.

He headed to the recreation complex and checked the gym, pool, simulator, and every other corner. He walked through the arboretum and headed to the social complex. He checked each restaurant, bar, and Club6, getting odd looks as he asked anyone and everyone if they had seen his wife. His voice was filled with panic.

An hour went by, and he couldn't find her anywhere. She didn't really have any friends or anyone she was close to. He was the one person she relied on. He knew no one she would have gone to. He decided to head back to the apartment, hoping she was there. She wasn't.

A horrible feeling sank into his stomach. He didn't want to involve Security, but what if something happened to her? There was little crime in New Horizons, but it wasn't unheard of. Or maybe she got hurt. Or hurt herself. He swallowed hard at the thought. She wasn't herself. He didn't know what she was capable of.

He walked into the den to call Security just as the front door opened. He rushed into the living room to see her standing at the door, dripping in sweat as she looked anywhere but at him.

"Where the hell have you been?" he asked as he ran up to her, gathering her up in his arms. "I've been worried sick."

"I went for a run," she said as she extricated herself from him.

"I went looking for you. Where did you run?" he asked, furrowing his brows as he held onto her biceps, staring hard at her.

"Everywhere. I just needed to clear my head."

"Audrid, you've been gone for hours. I've been in a panic. I almost called Security to initiate a colony-wide search for you. Do you have any idea what that means? It's serious. This is serious. You can't do this," he shouted as he shook her.

"Stop it!" she yelled as she shirked herself out of his grasp.

"I can't stop it. You're worrying me. You're not yourself. I don't know what's wrong with you, but it scares me."

She wouldn't look at him. Instead, her eyes peered deep into the floor. He stepped close to her, raising her chin with his finger until their eyes met.

"You're scaring me," he said softly, his eyes begging her to listen, to understand, to somehow be okay again.

"Don't be," she said. She took a deep breath and started to relax as a smile spread across her face. She wrapped her arms around his neck as she pulled him into a soft kiss. "I'm fine. No need to worry about me."

“It’s hard not to,” he said as he looked deep into her eyes, studying them, trying to find Audrid in there.

“I really am fine. But I’m sweaty as hell, and I need a long, hot shower. Care to join me?” she asked as a smirk spread across her face.

“I’m not really in the mood for a shower. I’ll meet you in bed after,” he said as he pecked her on the lips.

She let out a harsh sigh as she dropped her head in frustration. Then she looked up at him, and their eyes met. She had a peculiar look on her face. It was angry and lust filled at the same time.

“You really shouldn’t ignore advances from your wife,” she said in a husky tone. She closed the distance between them and whispered in his ear. “They won’t last forever.”

“Audrid, please. Just have a shower, and we’ll go to bed. I’m exhausted.”

“Too exhausted for this?” she asked as she skimmed her hand across his groin, making him buck his hips a little.

He sighed, not wanting to get into another argument. But he really wasn’t in the mood. He normally loved sex with her, but she wasn’t herself, and this was all too much. He hadn’t recovered from the embarrassment of earlier. Or the mortification of having sex in a nightclub stockroom the night before. The last thing he needed right now was more sex, even if her eyes were begging him with their seductive allure.

She let out a huff as she glared at him.

“Suit yourself,” she said in a harsh voice.

She walked into the bedroom, stripping her clothes off as he stood there, watching her through the door, tempted to follow. But he stopped himself. She needed help. Worry fluttered in his stomach as he went to his drink cart and poured a glass of whiskey, chugging it down.

Chapter 9

Audrid could feel cold tendrils slipping around her as she pressed her back into the cave wall. She was trapped, with nowhere to go. Her heart raced, beating chaotically in her chest. She tried to suck in a breath, but she couldn't. She squeezed her eyes shut as terror filled her.

And then the cloud trapping her started to speak, its voice ominous and reverberating off the cave walls. "Come back to us, Audrid..."

"What?" she choked out with a little squeak.

"Come back to us..."

"Leave me alone. Let me go. Please."

"Come back to us..."

The tendrils were getting longer as they wrapped around every inch of her body. She opened her eyes to see the cloud consuming her, smothering her until she was freezing cold, and she couldn't breathe any longer.

"Come back to us..."

She woke with a startle, gasping hard as she sat up. She put her hand to her chest, feeling her heart beating wildly. She tried to breathe. *Deep breath in. Slow breath out. It was just a dream.* She felt so cold as a chill washed over her.

She looked down at Torias. He was fast asleep, sprawled out on his back. All she could think about was the freezing cold tendrils as she shivered. She lay down next to him, snuggling into his warm body as she moved his arm around her and rested her head on his chest. She could feel him stirring, muttering something incoherent.

"Shh... Go back to sleep," she said softly.

Soon, she was drifting off in the safety of his arms, in a cocoon of warmth. It seemed to protect her from nightmares for the rest of the night as darkness filled her sleep.

Audrid could no longer take it. She was tired of sitting at her desk, staring at numbers. They were meaningless without more data. She sent Captain Johnstone a long message. It was practically an essay outlining exactly why they needed to return to the cave. He responded just now, and she read his words.

"Until the environmental suits have been analyzed and risk management gives us the green light, we cannot send anyone into the cave. This is not up for negotiation. Resume work analyzing the data."

She let out a growl, wishing it were a paper note so she could tear it into little pieces. But it was on a computer screen, and as angry as she was, she had enough restraint not to smash the computer. Just enough. She was fuming as she stormed out of her office, not saying a word to her crew as they watched her go. Asha looked like she was about to get up and say something when a glare from Audrid made her stay put.

Audrid headed into the corridor, stomping down the hallways and out of the science building. She went straight into the engineering building, and she found the environmental suit lab. She pushed her way through the double doors, letting them slam against the wall with a bang as they opened hard.

“Sergeant Riley,” said one of the technicians, Mister Langley, as he looked up from a pile of hardware.

“I want to know what the meaning of this is,” Audrid said in a harsh tone.

“What ‘the meaning of what’ is?” he asked as he looked up, confused, furrowing his brow.

“Why is this taking so long? You’re ruining everything,” she spat out as she crossed her arms.

“Sir?” he asked in a squeaky tone.

“Sergeant Riley, is there a problem?” Chief Hannigan asked as she looked up from her workstation.

“Yes. I want to know where my environmental suit is,” she said as she glared at the short woman. She wore the same uniform, but with engineering patches on the sleeves.

“It’s currently dismantled at my workstation. I’ve been analyzing it for days now. So far, it’s a mystery. Haven’t you read my reports?” Chief Hannigan asked.

“I have, and they’re not good enough. I want answers. I want my environmental suit reassembled. I want to get back into that cave. Now!” she yelled as her eyes bore into the woman.

“Sir, we can’t just reassemble your suit,” Mister Langley said.

She shot him an intense glare. He quickly took a few steps back until he was standing behind his station, a million pieces of hardware between them. She turned back to Chief Hannigan.

“Why are you doing this to me?” she asked in a seething voice.

“I’m just doing my job, sir,” she said as she sucked in a breath.

“No. You’re sabotaging my project. I want to know why,” Audrid yelled as she took a step closer to the woman. Hannigan crossed her arms as she stood her ground. “Why are you sabotaging me?!”

“Sir, you’re mistaken. No one here is trying to sabotage you,” Hannigan said, swallowing hard.

“You are, and I want to know why,” she yelled, getting even closer.

Hannigan took a deep breath as she began stepping back. Audrid kept walking forward until Hannigan hit a workstation and had nowhere to go. She looked around with nervous eyes. Audrid looked up. A room full of engineers was staring at her, mouths gaping open and eyes wide. No one was working on the environmental suits any longer.

“Why aren’t you working?” Audrid asked. She turned back to Hannigan. “Tell them to get back to work.”

“Sir, I think you should leave,” she uttered as she swallowed hard, just standing there, pressed against a workstation.

“I’m not leaving until I get answers!”

“I’ve given you your answers. Please go, sir,” she said loudly.

“Who is systematically trying to remove me from my project? Who do you answer to?” she yelled, her eyes invading the woman.

“We all answer to Captain Johnstone, just like you,” she said. She glanced over at one of the other technicians. “Call the captain. Now.”

“I already have, sir,” another technician said.

“Yes, call Captain Johnstone,” Audrid said as she took a step back, crossing her arms and eyeing each and every one of them. “He needs to come here and sort this out. He’ll put you back to work. All of you. You’re all failures.”

“Sir, please leave,” Hannigan said firmly.

“We’re doing our best,” Langley said in a squeaky voice.

Audrid marched up to him and grabbed hold of his uniform as she pulled him close to her face.

“Your best is not good enough,” she said through gritted teeth as she let go of him. He scrambled away. “None of you is doing your best work. You’re sabotaging my project, and I want to know why!”

“Sergeant Riley, what’s the meaning of this?” Captain Johnstone asked in a firm tone as he stepped through the doors.

“Sir, they’re sabotaging my project. You need to arrest them for conspiracy,” she said as she tried to keep an even voice.

“Audrid, that’s ridiculous. I don’t understand why you would even think that,” he said as he furrowed his brows. “Why don’t we take a walk?”

“I’m not walking out of here until I have answers,” she snapped, failing to keep her voice even. “Is it you?” She took a step closer to him as she studied his eyes. “Is it you?”

“Is what me?” he asked.

“Are you doing this? Are you ordering them to sabotage my project?”

She continued to step closer to him as he stood there like a stone, staring hard at her. He looked confused, though. Caught off guard.

“What’s gotten into you?” he asked.

“What’s gotten into you?!” she yelled as she fisted her hands. “Why are you systematically trying to remove me from Project Hades?”

“I’m doing no such thing. I don’t know why you would even think that.”

“You’re ordering them to sabotage the project. It wasn’t necessary to disassemble the suits. There was nothing wrong with them. It was a fluke. An accident.”

“One that could have killed you.”

“That’s the risk we take as scientists. The science should always come first. Not bureaucracy. Not politics. Not whatever this is. The science comes first!” she shouted until she was mere inches away from the captain’s face, forcing him to take a step back, grab her biceps hard, and pull her back. “Why are you doing this to me?!”

“Take a walk, sergeant,” he said in a firm voice.

She looked around, her eyes burning. “Why are you all doing this to me?!”

“Take a walk!”

“I can’t. Not until I get answers.”

“You’re relieved of duty, Sergeant Riley. I want you to go to your apartment and stay there. You can come to my office in the morning, before you go to your office. In the meantime, I don’t want to hear about you approaching any other crew member. Stay away from the work buildings,” he said as his eyes bore into her.

She didn’t understand why he was doing this to her. *Why is he sabotaging me? Why is he trying to systematically remove me from the project? I was right. This is how it starts. First, they’ll halt the project. Then they’ll relieve me of duty. Next, they’ll strip me of my rank and send me back to Earth.*

“That’s an order, sergeant,” he said. She stared at him, her mouth gaping open and her eyes wide as they burned. “I expect you to follow that order. Now.”

She stormed past him, the tears brimming in her eyes. She swung the doors open hard as she walked through them. Once she was in the corridor, she felt like her knees were going to buckle. She stumbled onto the wall, bracing it for support. She tried to breathe but couldn’t. *Take in air. Take in air.*

They’re taking everything away from me!

She couldn’t understand why. She pushed herself off the wall and stormed out of the engineering building. She was standing in the street a moment later, looking up at the dome. It was a sunny day on Mars. A good day for a walk. If only she wouldn’t freeze and suffocate while trying to go

for a walk outside the safety of the domes. She needed that freedom, that space to think. She had to do something. Someone was doing this to her. If it wasn't Captain Johnstone, it was someone else.

She started to walk down M Street, her breath puffing out of her as her feet stomped on the ground. She walked past numerous crew members. No one was looking at her. *Why are they avoiding eye contact with me? What do they know?*

She found herself standing at the command building. She stepped inside, taking a deep breath. *I have to get to the bottom of this. I have to stop it. I can't go back to Earth. If they send me back, I'll go home in disgrace. I'll have lost everything. I'll lose Torias. He won't be able to come with me. He'll be arrested if he returns home. No. I can't go back. I can't!*

She was going to run to Torias, find safety in his arms, and have him help her figure this all out. But she stopped herself. There was one person who would gain from her being shipped back to Earth. She knew exactly who was responsible for this.

She stood at Special Projects, sucking in a breath before storming into Jared's office. He looked up at her, a confused expression on his face.

"Audrid, what did I do to deserve this visit?" he asked in an annoyed tone.

"I think you know," she said in a seething voice.

"What?" he asked, furrowing his brows as he put down the tablet he was working on. "What's going on? Why are you angry?"

"You know exactly why I'm angry. You think you can get away with this? I know exactly what you're doing and why," she spat out.

"I have no idea what you're talking about, and I think you should leave," he said as he eyed her.

"I'm not leaving. Not now. Not ever. I know you're trying to remove me from Mars, and I know why. You're in love with Torias. You've always been jealous of me. If you get me shipped back to Earth, you can have him for yourself. But guess what, Jared? He loves me, not you. Me! He loves me!"

She leaned forward on his desk, her eyes boring into him. He just sat there wide-eyed as his mouth hung open.

"You're crazy," he uttered.

"I'm not crazy. You're sick. What kind of person does this? You can't have him, so you get rid of me. You're a sicko," she said through gritted teeth as she glared at him, leaning closer.

"You need to leave," he said in a firm voice as he stood up.

"I'm not leaving here," she said as she walked around the desk, getting up close and pointing her finger in his face. "I'm not leaving here until you call Captain Johnstone and tell him what you've done. Call him. Now!"

“Get out of my office!” he yelled as he pushed his way past her. “You’re crazy! You need to leave now or I’ll call Security.”

“I’m not leaving,” she said as she followed him, grabbing hold of his uniform. “Call Captain Johnstone. Put an end to this. Do the right thing.”

“Stop it,” he said as he pried her hands off him. “There’s something wrong with you. I never liked you, but I didn’t think you were crazy. This is a whole new level, Audrid. If you weren’t Torias’s wife, I would have called Security already. I’m giving you one last chance to leave before I have you arrested.”

She just glared at him before pushing him and storming out of his office. She ran down the corridor, pushing her way past the other crew members in the command building. When she hit the street, she fell to her knees, trying to breathe.

I can't believe he's doing this to me. Why does he hate me this much? He's trying to ruin everything.

“Are you okay, sergeant?” a private asked as he stood beside her.

She looked at him, wiping away tears she hadn’t even realized fell. She couldn’t speak. She looked around as she stood up. People were staring. She ran. She didn’t know where to go. She just had to run. She left the military complex and ran down Madeira Road. She made it to the arboretum and leaned against a tree, trying to breathe. She felt like everyone was staring at her.

Why are there so many people in the arboretum? It's alpha shift. They should be working. Are they following me? Did Jared send them? Or Captain Johnstone? Chief Hannigan? Asha? Who's after me? Are they going to arrest me? What's happening?

She had to get away from those eyes, but they were everywhere. She ran again and made it to the simulator. It was empty. She typed the Ares Mountain hiking program into the control panel before entering the room. She started to hike, but it wasn’t enough. She couldn’t just hike. She needed to run. She started sprinting up the side of the mountain. All she could do was run. She was lost. She had no other recourse. Just run.

Torias was searching everywhere for Audrid as panic filled him. After receiving calls from both Jared and Captain Johnstone about what had happened, he knew he had to find her. She wasn’t in their apartment or at work. He tried the social complex, thinking maybe she had gone for a drink at the bar. She usually didn’t go out drinking by herself, but this was a new version of Audrid. He didn’t know her as he used to. She was a stranger.

He couldn’t find her there, so he headed to the recreation complex. The simulator was in use. He typed the controls to see who had logged in. *Sergeant Audrid Riley*. He sucked in a deep breath and entered. It was the Ares Mountain hiking simulation. She was running up the ridge. He turned to the control panel and ended the program. Mars disappeared, and the plain black room appeared.

“Why the hell did you do that?” she yelled before turning around. When she saw him, her eyes went wide, and she ran to him, throwing her arms around him. “Torias!”

“What the hell, Audrid?” he said as he pulled away from her hot body. Sweat was dripping down her forehead.

“What do you mean ‘What the hell?’” she asked, looking baffled.

“I got calls today from Jared and Captain Johnstone. You’ve been relieved of duty. You were supposed to be confined to our apartment, but here you are in the simulator. I’ve been looking everywhere for you,” he said as he held onto her biceps, staring hard at her. “What’s gotten into you?”

“They’re trying to sabotage the project, Torias. They’re trying to systematically remove me from Mars. I confronted them. They were angry. It goes deeper than I thought,” she said as she dropped her head for a moment. She took a deep breath as she looked up at him with glistening eyes. “I’m scared. You have to help me.”

He stared back at her, seeing the fear in her eyes. “You’re safe,” he said as he pulled her into a hug. “No one’s trying to hurt you. You’re not well. You haven’t been yourself since the incident in the cave.” He pulled away as he looked into her eyes. “I want you to see a doctor.”

“No!” she snapped as she extricated herself from his arms, storming halfway across the room. She turned to him, her eyes bulging. “Don’t you see, Torias? Don’t you see what they’re trying to do to us? They’re trying to break us apart. It’s all Jared’s doing. He’s in love with you.”

“That’s crazy,” he said as he quickly closed the distance between them.

“It isn’t crazy. I confronted him. It was all over his face, in his eyes. He loves you,” she said as she stared at him hard. She took him by the arms, shaking him. “He loves you.”

“No,” he said as he shook his head.

“You love me, don’t you?” she asked in a meek voice, looking terrified.

“Of course,” he said as he caressed her cheek. “I love you more than anything. I would never hurt you, never leave you. You don’t have to worry about that.”

“If they send me back to Earth, you won’t be able to come with me. It will be the end of us, Torias. I’ll lose you forever. I’ll lose everything. But you’re what matters most to me. I can’t lose you,” she said as tears streamed down her face.

“Nothing like that’s going to happen,” he said as he pulled her into a hug, holding her tight.

“Nothing bad will happen, I promise.”

“Don’t make promises you can’t keep!”

He pulled away as he looked at her. “Don’t yell. Just try to stay calm. I’m going to take you home.”

“No!” she snapped as she pushed him away. “Don’t you see, Torias?” She just stared at him with hurt eyes.

“You’re not well,” he said softly as he closed the distance between them.

“Please,” she begged him. “You need to believe me. We’re going to lose everything. We’re going to lose each other. I can’t lose you.”

“You’re not going to lose me,” he said softly as he tried to hug her again. She pushed him away.

“I can’t believe you don’t believe me!”

“I’m on your side, Audrid.”

“It doesn’t feel like it. But I don’t understand why,” she said in a harsh tone. “Why are you siding with Jared? Are you in love with him too?” She sucked in a breath as she narrowed her eyes at him. “No. I won’t believe it. You love me. I know it. You love me.” She screamed the words out until her voice was shrill. “You love me!”

“Of course, I love you,” he said as he forcefully wrapped her up in his arms. “I love you more than anything.”

“Then show me,” she screamed. “Show me you love me!”

“How?” he asked as he stared at her, his brows furrowed with concern.

He felt so lost. His heart was breaking as he watched the tears streaming down her face. She pulled away, taking his face in her hands as she gazed into his eyes. She looked more lost than he felt. And then she dove in for a kiss. It was angry and sad and hurt. She kissed him harder, deeper, delving her tongue into his mouth as she wrapped her arms around him tight. He pulled away breathlessly.

“Show me you love me,” she uttered before diving back into the kiss.

She started to unzip his uniform. He didn’t stop her. He needed to show her. He unzipped her uniform too, pushing it down until it fell to the floor.

“I need you,” she said between kisses as she caressed the front of his boxers.

He gently held her by the waist and moved her until she was pressed up against the wall. He bent down and pulled off her boots and then her jumpsuit. He pulled down her panties until she was standing there, pressed against the wall in her undershirt and socks.

“Take me right here, Torias,” she whispered as she pulled him up and wrapped her arms around his neck. “I need to feel you. I need to know you love me.”

He kissed her hard for a moment, their tongues dancing, and then he pulled down his boxers and lifted her ass. She wrapped her legs around his waist as he pushed his cock into her entrance. She let out a gasp. He settled into her, staring into her sad, tear-filled eyes, and then he started to thrust.

“I love you,” he whispered before thrusting again. “I love you.”

“Show me.”

He started pounding her into the wall as her heat enveloped his cock. He drove into her as she moaned long and hard, his name escaping her lips.

“Torias...”

“I love you,” he said again, barely above a whisper, as he fucked her.

“Torias,” she said loudly. “Torias!”

He pummeled into her harder and faster. He had to show her he loved her. *Show her you love her. Make her see. You love her. You love her. Show her!* He picked up the pace as she moaned and mewled. She was staring into his eyes as tears dried up. He pounded her harder as she cried out his name.

“Torias!”

“I love you.”

“Ohh...” she moaned long and hard. “Ohhh... Torias...”

She closed her eyes tightly as he rammed her against the wall again and again. He could hear the sound of her ass slapping against it. Heavy breaths and moans filled the simulator. He could feel himself boiling inside, as much with fear as with pleasure. He was scared for her. Terrified.

“Audrid!” he yelled as he stiffened and his seed shot into her. He instantly collapsed against her with a heavy breath. “I love you,” he whispered into her ear breathily. “I love you more than anything.”

“I love you too,” she said through pants.

He looked at her, taking her face in his hands as he caressed her cheeks. She was crying again. He kissed away her tears, first on her right cheek, then on her left cheek.

“I’ll never leave you,” he whispered into her ear. “Never.”

He gazed into her eyes after, willing her to believe him. She just nodded as she sniffled. He wiped away her tears with his thumbs as he held her face.

“Let’s go home.”

Chapter 10

At home, Audrid turned to Torias and pulled him into a hug. She just needed to feel his embrace. She needed to be wrapped up in his safe, warm arms. She felt him sigh as he pulled away.

“Go have a shower, okay?” he said softly as he stroked her cheek with his thumb.

She nodded and headed into the bathroom, stripping off her sweaty uniform. She turned the water on hot in the shower and stepped inside. It burned her skin at first, and she let out a hiss, but soon she felt so numb that the pain no longer mattered. She slid to the ground and just sat under the shower stream as she cried.

Why is everyone against me? It's just me and Torias against the world. Against Mars. Against Earth. It's just us. We're alone. We aren't safe. They're trying to take everything away from us. I've never felt so afraid in my life. Not even when Dad was at his angriest, when those horrible eyes invaded me as he yelled, as he grabbed me and shook me and told me to do better or else... Even the beast didn't make me this afraid.

She sat there, shivering under the hot stream of water as steam filled the room. She rocked back and forth as she held her knees, frozen, unable to move or breathe or speak. She needed someone to help her. Torias didn't believe her. He didn't understand that they were in trouble. All she knew was she had to get back into the cave. Something was there. It was calling to her. It spoke to her in dreams. She had to get back there, Jared be damned. She had to get back to the cave.

She eventually sucked in a breath and stood up, finishing her shower. The water no longer felt so hot, and as she rubbed the suds onto her body, she started to feel calmer. When she was done bathing, she turned off the shower, dried off, and got dressed. She heard voices as her breath caught in her throat. She couldn't hear what they were saying through the door. She swallowed hard as she stepped out.

“Audrid?” Torias called out as he walked into the bedroom. “Good you're done. That was a very long shower.”

“Who's here?” she asked as her heart raced.

“Come,” he said as he took her hand and led her into the living room. Doctor Skanlon was standing there, with a concerned look on his face.

“Hi, Audrid. I've heard it's been a bit of a day for you,” he said with a warm smile.

“Why is he here?” she asked as she sucked in an angry breath and looked at Torias.

“I called him. I'm worried about you,” Torias said softly as he took her hand, his thumb rubbing circles over her knuckles. She pulled her hand away.

“I'm not sick, Torias,” she snapped. She turned to Doctor Skanlon. “I'm not sick.”

“Why don't we sit down and talk, Audrid?” he said as he gestured toward the couch.

“You don’t need to be here. Just go,” she said through gritted teeth. “Leave now!”

“I don’t think yelling is going to sort any of this out, Audrid. Have a seat, and we can talk,” the doctor said in a calm voice.

She let out a huff as she sat down in one of the armchairs.

“Fine! Let’s talk! Let’s talk about how they’re systematically trying to remove me from Mars! Let’s talk about that! Or how the cave beings are calling me back there! They talk to me in my dreams! They’re calling out to me! Let’s talk about that! Or how Jared Weston is in love with Torias and he’s trying to get rid of me so he can have Torias for himself! Let’s talk about that!” she yelled as she rushed out her words.

She heard Torias suck in a breath as she shot him a glare. He was looking at Doctor Skanlon with concern as he sat on the couch. The doctor was sitting in the armchair opposite her, just staring. He nodded softly as he leaned forward in the chair.

“Why don’t you tell me more about these things, Audrid? Let’s start with the cave beings. Tell me about them,” Doctor Skanlon said as he studied her.

“You won’t believe me,” she said as she crossed her arms.

“Try me.”

She hesitated at first, but she really needed to get it out. She couldn’t keep it inside her any longer. “They call to me,” she said. “They come to me in my sleep. Every night. Sometimes multiple times a night. I need to get back into that cave. There was intense theta-polaron radiation. It didn’t show up on anyone else’s scanner. None of it makes sense. I think it belongs to beings in the cave. Cloud people. I saw a cloud just before I lost consciousness. I remember that now. I didn’t remember it at first. But I keep seeing it in my dreams.” She spoke quickly as she stared intently at the doctor. She narrowed her eyes at him. “You don’t believe me, do you?”

“It’s a little far-fetched, Audrid.”

She sat back in her chair as she sucked in a deep breath. She tried to relax, but she felt so keyed up. She shouldn’t have told him about the cave, and she knew it.

“Never mind. It is far-fetched. I shouldn’t believe my dreams. I’m not delusional. They’re just really vivid dreams. I’m not delusional, okay?” she said as she stared at the doctor. “I’m not!”

“Okay,” he said as he nodded. “Tell me about how they’re systematically removing you from Mars.”

“It’s a conspiracy against me. Jared Weston is behind it. He’s in love with Torias. He wants to get me removed from Mars so he can be with Torias. I don’t know how he convinced Captain Johnstone, but he did. I don’t know what he said. Maybe it goes even deeper than the captain. Maybe it goes all the way to General Vasylyk. I don’t know. I no longer know anything!” She turned to Torias, her eyes filled with fear. “Do you think it goes all the way to General Vasylyk? How big of a conspiracy is this?” Her voice was meek as her eyes burned. She just stared at

Torias, searching his eyes for an answer. He didn't say anything as he took a breath, his eyes on the floor. "Torias, talk to me."

"You're sick," he said quietly, not looking up.

"I'm not sick," she snapped as she stood up and started pacing the room. "I'm not sick. I'm not sick. I'm not sick." She turned to Doctor Skanlon, who was just sitting there, watching her. "You have to believe me. You can't let them send me back to Earth. Please, you've been my doctor since I arrived here. You know me. I don't lie. I'm rational. I'm sane. Please, Doctor Skanlon. You need to believe me."

Doctor Skanlon stood up, looking at her with warm eyes. They were skeptical, though. He cared, but he didn't believe her.

"Audrid, I have to agree with your husband. I don't think you're well right now," he said.

"No!" She started pacing the room again, muttering to herself loudly, her words rushing out of her. "No one believes me. No one believes me. This is how it happens. I predicted it. First, they halt the project. Then they cancel it completely. Then they relieve me of duty, strip me of my rank, and send me back to Earth." She turned to the doctor, screaming at him. "I won't go back!"

"Please calm down, Audrid," he said as he held his hands up. "Stop pacing, and have a seat."

"You don't understand," she said as she continued to pace, her breaths puffing out of her. "You don't understand. No one understands. My own husband doesn't understand. Someone needs to believe me before it's too late. You have to believe me!"

She was too consumed to notice him reaching into his medical bag and pulling out supplies. But she saw him approaching her out of the corner of her eye. She backed up slowly, her breaths ragged.

"What are you doing?" she asked as her eyes went wide.

"I'm just going to give you something to relax," he said as he slowly approached her.

She turned and ran for the door. Torias was on her, pulling her back before she could open it. She shirked herself out of his grasp and ran into the bedroom. She realized that she was trapped. She had nowhere to run. She turned back to the doctor, just trying to breathe.

"Don't do this," she said as she backed onto the wall. "Don't do this."

"Audrid, please," Torias said as the two of them approached her.

They looked at each other and then darted toward her, grabbing her arms. She felt a pinch in her bicep as the airject syringe went in. She just stared at Torias, speechless as her eyes burned.

"I'm sorry," Torias whispered as he rubbed her shoulder. She was pressed onto the wall, too frozen and shocked to move. "Come on. Let's get you in bed."

"Torias, no," she said barely above a whisper as tears streamed down her face. "Don't do this. You have to believe me. Please."

“Let me get you in bed,” he said softly as he guided her over to the bed.

She watched as the doctor pulled down the covers and waited for her to climb in. She shook her head as she tried to resist, but Torias had his arm wrapped firmly around her shoulder as he led her over.

“Get in bed now,” he said softly but firmly.

“Torias,” she whispered as she stared at him.

“Please, Audrid. You need to rest,” he said as he gestured toward the bed. “I’ll be right here with you. I won’t go anywhere, I promise.”

“Torias,” she whispered again as she began to cry.

She suddenly felt so tired. She climbed in bed and buried her face in the pillow, sobbing. She could hear them talking still.

“I’ll check in first thing tomorrow morning,” Doctor Skanlon said. “But if you have any problems before then, call me. Day or night.”

“No,” Audrid muttered into the pillow. “I need to go to work tomorrow. I need to see Captain Johnstone. I need too...” She trailed off as she took in a breath.

“I’m putting you on medical leave effective immediately, Audrid. You need to get some rest. When you’re feeling better, we can talk about resuming work,” Doctor Skanlon said.

“No...” she muttered. Speaking was hard. Words were garbled.

“Just rest, love,” Torias said softly as a hand stroked her back.

“No...” she mumbled before darkness fell upon her.

Audrid was running through the cave. She could feel beads of sweat on her forehead as a heat consumed her. She just ran faster, her heart beating like crazy. She rounded a corner and went down a slope. She could hear a windy sound behind her. A swishing and a swooping. Her breath caught in her throat as something cold touched her. She glanced back. It was the cloud, and it was approaching fast, its tendrils reaching out to her.

“Audrid, we need you,” it said in a reverberating voice.

“No!”

“You must stop. We need you. The offspring must be released.”

“What offspring?” she asked as she came to a skidding halt, turning around to face the cloud.

“It’s inside you now. You must be in the cave for it to be released. Come back to us.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Our offsprings need corporeal brains to develop. You must come back to the cave.”

“That’s ludicrous. There’s no evidence of something growing in my brain. I’ve been in a full-body scanner,” she said, her heart pounding in her chest.

“The offspring is there. You must come back. Come back to us, Audrid.” There were numerous voices now, all bouncing off the cave walls.

She looked behind her. More clouds. They were descending upon her. She could feel their freezing cold tendrils of air slithering across her skin.

“No!”

Audrid woke with a gasp. She took a deep breath as she blinked several times. *It was just a dream. It felt so real. Was it just a dream?* She looked beside her. Torias was fast asleep. She didn’t want to wake him. She looked at the clock on her bedside table. It was already after midnight. She felt her arm where the airject syringe had gone in. *How long have I been sleeping?*

She sucked in a deep breath as she looked around the dark room. *I have to get back to the cave.* She got up slowly so she wouldn’t wake Torias and quietly exited their apartment.

Torias rolled over and reached his arm out for Audrid. He was still half asleep, but when he felt her spot empty, he blinked his eyes open and sat up.

“Audrid?” he called out.

He got up and checked the bathroom. She wasn’t there. He went to the living room and the kitchen. He checked the den. His heart started to beat hard. She wasn’t in the apartment. He looked at the clock on the stove. It was 0010 hours. He couldn’t breathe as a horrible feeling brewed in his stomach. *Where would she go at this hour? Everything’s closed.*

He took a deep breath as his face fell to his hands. He had to think. *Think, Torias!* She thought everyone was out to get her. Would she go after them in the middle of the night? Or would she go to the cave? *The cave. She went to the cave. It’s been calling to her. That’s where she went. But there’s no specialized environmental suit to wear. She wouldn’t go anyway, would she?*

His mouth went dry. Somehow, he knew that was exactly where she went. He ran out the door as fast as he could and made his way to the airlock. It was all the way across the colony from the residential sector on the far side of the military complex.

He sprinted as beads of sweat trickled down his forehead and as he sucked in air, trying to go even faster. He had to make it there before she did something stupid. *She’s out of her mind. She’s not logical, not rational, not thinking clearly. She could do anything right now, no matter how dangerous. She’s desperate. I should have gotten her help sooner. I shouldn’t have left things at this. What have I done? God, Audrid! Don’t do anything stupid!*

He could feel tears brimming in his eyes. He blinked them away, running faster. It took him at least ten minutes, but he made it to the farthest building out. It contained the airlock and had environmental suits ready for use, as well as all-terrain vehicles. He went inside the building to find her in a generic environmental suit, just about to put her helmet on.

“Stop!” he yelled.

“Torias, don’t stop me,” she said with an intense look in her eyes. “I need to do this.”

“You can’t go out there in this suit. It won’t protect you from the intense radiation and heat in the cave. You know that. Audrid, please, listen to reason,” he said as his eyes begged her.

“I have to go, Torias. I’ll die if I don’t. There’s a telepathic being in my brain. The clouds came to me in a dream and told me. They put their babies in physical bodies to develop. But you have to be in the cave to release the baby. If I don’t go back to the cave, I’ll die, and so will the telepathic being. You have to listen to me,” she said as she closed the distance between them, taking his face firmly in her hands. “Listen to me, Torias. This is life or death.”

“You’re sick, Audrid. Going in that cave like this could kill you,” he said as he stared hard into her eyes. “Please take off the environmental suit and come home with me.”

“You have to listen to me!”

“Please, Audrid,” he said as he blinked away his tears and swallowed hard. “Please.” It came out barely above a whisper.

He watched as her eyes changed, going from pleading to hurt and fearful and angry. And then a darkness settled in them as she eyed him.

“I have to. If I don’t, I’ll die,” she said in a hard tone. And then suddenly, something hit him in the head as everything went dark.

His head was pounding when he woke up. He had no idea how long he was unconscious, but he saw a wrench lying on the floor beside him. He picked it up and stared at it for a moment while he felt his head with his other hand. *Audrid, what have you done?*

He scrambled up and ran to look out the airlock window. One of the vehicles was gone. He ran to the nearest computer terminal and dialed Security.

“Captain Riley, what can I help you with?” a security officer asked.

“You need to get a team to the main airlock immediately. My wife, she’s...” he said, trailing off. He couldn’t bring himself to say the words. “She isn’t in her right mind. She’s going to the Hades Caves. She’s going to get hurt if she goes in without a proper environmental suit. I’m going after her. You need to meet me at the Hades Caves immediately. No one is to enter. It’s too dangerous without a proper suit. Come now. Hurry!”

“Yes, sir,” the private said.

He ended the video stream and grabbed an environmental suit. He knew it wouldn't protect him from the cave, but he would need it to get there. And if he didn't make it there before her... he thought about what to do. *I have to stop her at all costs. I have to save her. Even if it means going into the cave after her and exposing myself to the radiation. I'll die for her if I have to, but I have to save her. I have to save Audrid.*

He was just about to leave when the armory caught his eye. He put his palm on the reader and unlocked it. He stepped inside and grabbed a stun gun. He set it to the lowest setting and walked out, initializing the airlock procedure. Once the green light went on, he exited the colony and got in one of the vehicles. He put it in drive and went as fast as he could, zooming over the rocky terrain.

He could see dust up ahead. She couldn't have had that much of a lead on him because he could see her vehicle. He stepped on the accelerator until it hit the floor. He was gaining on her. But she was still going to make it to the cave entrance before him. He glanced at the stun gun on the seat beside him. He really didn't want to use it.

He approached the cave. Audrid was just ahead of him. He watched her climbing out of her vehicle in her environmental suit. He parked as close as he could, grabbed his stun gun, and ran after her.

"Audrid, stop!"

"I can't do that, Torias," she yelled back as she walked toward the cave.

"I'm not going to let you do this, even if it means shooting you," he called out as he approached her.

She glanced back at him and started to run toward the cave entrance. And then he shot her. His heart stopped as she fell to the ground. He ran to her side, turning her over as he peered inside the glass helmet. He crumpled over her as he wept. He had just shot his wife. It was only on stun, but he actually did it. He shot her.

Chapter 11

Audrid woke up in a cool room. It was white and bright. She was on a soft surface, with a heavy blanket covering her. She sat up immediately, eyeing her surroundings. She was in a thin infirmary gown. She threw the blanket off her and scrambled to her feet. The room was empty but for a mattress on the floor and a metal toilet in the corner. There was a door but no doorknob. She ran to it and started pounding on the door as she screamed.

“Torias!”

There was no answer.

“Torias! Please... Torias!”

She screamed until her voice was shrill. He didn’t come.

“Torias,” she cried as she dropped to her knees. She just pounded as she sobbed, screaming his name over and over until it hurt. “Torias... Torias!”

She could hear a slight sound. She looked up. There was a little window in the door with a cover that someone had just slid open. She stood up, peering through it at the face on the other side.

“Where’s Torias?”

“Please sit on the mattress, Audrid,” the face said.

“Where’s Torias?” she screamed. “I need to see Torias!”

“Please back away from the door, Audrid.”

She stepped back slowly until she hit the opposite wall of the small room. Her heart was pounding in her chest as the door opened and a crowd of people appeared. She counted them. There were five people, all in light-blue medical scrubs.

“I need Torias,” she whimpered, barely above a whisper. “Torias... Where’s Torias?”

“Audrid, you’re in the infirmary. You’re safe. I’m just going to give you something to calm you down,” one of the five people said as she approached her slowly.

They were in a v-formation, flocking toward her. She had nowhere to run. The only escape was through them, to the door. She sprung off the wall as she tried to storm her way through their formation. Arms were on her, wrangling her to the floor.

“No!” she screamed as she kicked and punched out.

They quickly had her pinned face down to the floor as they held her arms and legs. She tried to fight, but she wasn’t strong enough to resist their tight hold.

“Let go of me!” she yelled. “Stop this! You don’t understand! I’m going to die if I don’t go to the cave! There’s an entity living in my brain!”

She felt the pinch of an airject syringe go into her butt. She didn't move. She felt frozen with shock and fear. She let her forehead hit the cold floor as she sucked in a breath. Hands slowly moved off her as they scrambled to the door. Then it shut with a bang. She looked around the empty room before letting out a sob as her head fell back to the hard floor. She wailed as she lay there, until drowsiness consumed her and darkness fell.

Audrid awoke to the sound of the door opening. She quickly sat up and crawled into the corner, hugging her knees. Her heart was racing chaotically in her chest, and her head pounded like hell. A man walked into the room, followed by five medical staff. She looked up at him. He was in a navy-blue jumpsuit with a white lab coat on. He stood there, studying her for a moment as she cowered.

"Audrid, I'm Doctor Medina. I'm a psychiatrist here at the infirmary. You're currently on the psychiatric unit, in the observation room," he said in a calm voice. He waited for her to speak, but she didn't utter a word and just stared at him, trying to hide the fear in her eyes. "Do you understand why you're here?"

She just buried her face in her knees as she took a deep breath. Finally, she mumbled the word "no" into her knees.

"I've been talking to your husband as well as to Doctor Skanlon, Captain Johnstone, Lieutenant Weston, and Corporal Bains. They've been giving me some collateral information on how you've been doing over the past seven days."

She looked up at him. *Has it really been a week since the cave incident?*

"I want to go home," she said quietly. It was hard to speak. She was so tired. She forced the words out of her mouth. "I want my husband."

"Right now, we need to keep you safe. Your actions last night proved you are a danger to yourself and others. You attacked your husband, knocking him unconscious, and then you tried to enter a cave without proper protection. I'm told it could have been lethal," he said as he stared at her.

"You don't understand," she said, raising her voice as she glared at him. "You don't understand anything."

She stood up abruptly and took a step toward him. He held a hand out to stop her.

"Please have a seat, Audrid. I'd like to talk to you some more, but I need you to sit down first," he said firmly.

"You have to believe me!" she yelled. "The cave entities put something in my brain! It's living inside me! We're both going to die if I don't return to the cave! This is a matter of life or death! I have to return to the cave!"

"Have a seat, Audrid."

“No!” she snapped as she took another step toward him. He took a step back. “Please believe me. Please.” She ran forward, grabbing his lab coat as she pleaded with him. “I’m going to die if you don’t believe me. Please... Please.”

The others swarmed her, grabbing hold of her arms as they pulled her away from the doctor. She let go of him as she went limp, dropping her weight and falling to the floor. She buried her face in her hands as she wept.

“No one believes me,” she cried into her hands. She could feel them all standing around her, staring at her. Slowly, she looked up, eyeing the doctor. “If you don’t believe me, I’ll die. The entity in my brain will die. You’re condemning us to death.” She screamed until her voice was shrill, “You have to believe me!”

“Give her sedation,” he said to one of the nurses.

“No,” she cried as tears streamed down her face. “Please, just listen to me. Everything is falling apart. Jared Weston is trying to send me back to Earth. If I go back to Earth instead of the cave, I’ll die. I can’t go back to Earth. I have to go back to the cave. I have to. I have to!” Her voice was raw now as her screams reverberated off the walls. “I have to!”

A nurse rushed back into the room, and hands were all over her again. She didn’t resist. She just cried as an airjet syringe jabbed into her bicep. She looked up at the doctor through her tears.

“You’re condemning me to death,” she said in a seething tone.

“Get some rest, Audrid. I’ll come talk to you again when you’re calmer,” the doctor said as they all turned to leave.

She watched as the door closed and she was alone again. She stood up and started pacing the room. She had to get out of there. She had to get back to the cave. She banged on the door loudly as she screamed.

“I need Torias!”

She suddenly felt so tired as her knees buckled. She fell to them as she continued to bang on the door.

“Torias... Torias!”

She felt like her head was swimming as dizziness overwhelmed her. She flopped to the floor as her eyes closed. She tried to blink them open, but her eyelids were so heavy. She couldn’t move. And then everything went dark.

Torias sat in the meeting room, taking deep breaths as he waited for the psychiatrist, Doctor Medina. He ran his hand through his hair, disturbing the beads of sweat lining his forehead. He felt like he was going to jump out of his skin.

He already talked to the psychiatrist once after the incident, when he shot Audrid with the stun gun. When Security arrived, she was taken to the psychiatric unit. He went over everything that had happened in the last week, since the initial incident in the cave. He was open and honest. He felt that was important. He told the doctor about the sex in the club, the office, the simulator. All of it. He was so ashamed of himself. She was sick, he wasn't. But he couldn't hold anything back. The doctor needed to know how sick she was. He spent an hour with the man, going over everything that had happened that morning.

Doctor Medina said that he would contact him after he was able to assess Audrid. She was currently confined to an observation room. It sent chills down his spine to think of her locked up like that. He knew what "observation room" meant. It was just a locked room with a camera and nothing else. He didn't want that for her. It broke his heart.

The nurse called an hour ago, saying that the doctor wanted to speak to him. As he sat in the meeting room, he felt his eyes burning. He blinked away his tears, taking another deep breath. The door opened, and he stood up.

"How is she?" he asked before the man had a chance to walk in the door.

"Captain Riley, have a seat," Doctor Medina said as he gestured toward the chair.

He sat down and immediately felt restless. He wrung his hands in his lap as he looked at the doctor, his eyes begging the man for good news. *Please let her be okay. Please.*

"How's Audrid?" he asked again.

"I was able to assess her briefly in the observation room before she had to be sedated again. She's very sick, I'm afraid," he said with a grim look on his face.

"What did she say? Did she talk about the conspiracy? The cave aliens? That thing in her brain?" he asked as he sucked in a breath. His hands felt clammy in his lap.

"She did. She's very thought disordered. She has persecutory and bizarre delusions. She thinks that there is a conspiracy to send her back to Earth and it originated with Lieutenant Weston, who she claims is in love with you and is trying to get rid of her. She went on to talk about the cave aliens and the offspring they implanted in her brain. She believes she's going to die if she isn't sent back to the cave so this offspring can be released. She told me I'm sentencing her and this offspring to death," Doctor Medina explained.

Torias felt like his entire body was sagging. He tried to hold himself up so he wouldn't look like a slouch, but he was ready to crumple. He had no strength left. He had to find strength, though. He had to, for Audrid.

"Why do you think she's like this? Is it from the incident in the cave? The radiation she was exposed to?" Torias asked as he stared intently at the doctor.

"I believe her exposure to radiation was a coincidence. She's experiencing a manic episode with psychosis. Although the timing might seem suspicious, I don't believe it's related. It's tempting

to attribute mental illness to a physical cause so that we don't have to believe people just randomly fall ill, but mental illness often comes without a known cause," he explained.

Torias sat back in his chair. He felt like he was going to combust. The words rang through his mind. Manic episode, psychosis. He had heard those words before, though they weren't too familiar to him. He kind of knew what they meant, though. Tears were burning in his eyes as he tried to breathe. He looked up at the doctor.

"Can you treat her?"

"I'm going to start her on a regime of medications, including antipsychotics and mood stabilizers, in addition to the medication she's receiving to keep her calm. But I have to be very honest with you, Captain Riley," he started to say.

"You think she's not going to get better?" he asked as his heart stopped. His hands trembled in his lap as he squeezed them together.

"I didn't say that. But we need to think about how to move forward. We don't typically deal with manic episodes or psychosis on New Horizons. We mostly see depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, and anxiety. Sometimes it's severe, but we don't see psychosis or mania. It's not something we're set up for."

"What are you saying?" Torias asked as he leaned forward in his chair.

"I've talked to the team about Audrid. We discussed sending her back to Earth for more comprehensive treatment," he stated.

"It's a month-long trip back to Earth," he said as his heart raced. So many thoughts were looming in his head now. The month-long trip was the least of his worries. But it was the first to come to mind. He looked at the doctor.

"We would sedate her for the trip. She wouldn't be conscious. We would keep her very comfortable. I'm sure you could take leave to go with her, Captain Riley, if that's another concern you have," he said.

"I have many concerns. You can't send her back. That isn't what she would want. You can't do this to her," he said as he raised his voice. "Don't send her back. Treat her here."

"We have to consider what's best for her and New Horizons. This is a complicated situation."

"You can't send her back," he snapped. "You can't. That isn't what's best for her. Her whole life is here. Our life. We can't just pack up and leave. If they send her away, they might not let her come back. It would be the end of the world for her. I can't let you send her back. I can't."

"It isn't your decision, captain."

Torias looked up at the man. He studied his eyes as he swallowed hard. His mouth ran dry as he tried to think of something to say. Anything. But words were caught in his throat. Sending her to Earth would ruin everything. Audrid would never want to go back there. And he couldn't. If he

went back, he would risk arrest. Everything would be ruined if they went back to Earth. Their life was here.

“I realize this is a hard truth to hear, Captain Riley. Why don’t you take some time to absorb what I’ve told you today, and we can touch base again tomorrow? If you have any questions in the meantime, you can bring them up with the nurses. I’ll get in touch with you about how Audrid is doing tomorrow afternoon.”

“You have to treat her here.”

“Captain—.”

“You have to. You have to try. Please. Don’t just ship her off to Earth. If you want to do what’s best for her, treat her here. Give her a chance,” Torias said as his words spewed out of him. He looked at the man, his eyes pleading with him. “Please.”

He nodded. “I’ll see how she does with the medication regime over the next few days, but I can’t make any promises. We have to keep an open mind. I’ll keep an open mind about treating her here, but you need to keep an open mind too. She might have to go back to Earth. That might be the only option if she doesn’t respond to treatment or she isn’t manageable on the unit. I’m sorry. This is the situation.”

Torias just nodded, unable to find words. It was hard enough just trying to find breath. He left the infirmary with a new sense of doom. He tried to take each step without crumbling to the floor, but it felt like he was in quicksand. He was sinking. He was about to drown. And the one person he usually relied on when things were bad was the one person he couldn’t see. He needed Audrid. He was lost without her.

He started walking through New Horizons aimlessly, his mind a blur. He vaguely recalled people greeting him, but he didn’t respond. He just walked past them, as if he was in a daze. And he was. He was in a complete daze, a fog. He was lost, incomplete. He was nothing without Audrid. He was nothing.

He found himself in the simulator, turning on the Ares Mountain hiking program she liked so much. He remembered their first anniversary there. It felt so long ago, and yet it was only five weeks ago. They were happy. Another lifetime. Everything was broken now.

He started walking up the ridge as the hot sun beat down on him. After a while, he could feel sweat beading his forehead. He eventually sat down at the top of the ridge. It was where they had their picnic on their anniversary. Egg salad sandwiches and brownies. Chocolate lips. Kisses. Sensual. Loving. Tender. He could feel her hands on him, pushing him to the ground, her lips on his, her tongue exploring him, breath absent, sucking in air.

He just peered out into the dusty horizon as he thought of it. He tried to think back farther, to the first time they met. She was a recruit, fresh off the shuttle. He was a newly appointed lieutenant, and he decided to be the welcome committee. She didn’t know that wasn’t his job. He smiled as he thought about that first day. She was so eager. She wanted to be on Mars more than anything. It was her life goal. She was happy.

They became friends fast. They spent their evenings together. They weren't even in the same department. She was in the science department, and he was in command. It didn't matter. They found time to be together. They hiked, they worked out, they shared drinks and stories. They bonded over rough family lives, over dreams shared of a new life on Mars. She always intrigued him. She was the smartest person, the most driven, the most logical and rational.

And now, she was none of those things. He could feel tears in his eyes as he thought about her in that observation room, sleeping on a mattress on the floor. If she was even sleeping. He could hear her crying and screaming for help. *No, she probably isn't sleeping. She's probably crying. Breaking down and all alone.*

He blinked hard as tears trickled down his face. He needed to be with her so bad. He needed his Audrid, his love, his soulmate. *What if she gets shipped back to Earth? Do I go with her? Do I risk everything? Not going with her seems worse. No longer having her in my life would be the end of me.* A chill ran down his spine at the thought.

He sucked in a breath as he looked at the rusty landscape. She loved this program. She wanted nothing more than to run across the Mars landscape for real, without environmental suits. She wanted to be one with Mars. It was her home. She loved it.

He thought of that first night they were together. They spent the day in the simulator in this very program. They were all sweaty after. He forgot to bring a towel with him to the simulator, so after she toweled off her sweat, he borrowed hers. They headed back to his apartment for drinks. She had a rum and coke with three limes and loads of ice, while he drank whiskey. He imagined her sipping on her cola, the way she bit her lip as she glanced over at him, the pink on her cheeks, her coy smile.

They were supposed to go to dinner. They didn't end up going. Instead, they were tearing clothes off each other in a hurry. He remembered her hands running across his chest for the first time, tingles washing over him. His heart was beating so hard that it left him embarrassed. He thought she would hear it and know how nervous he was. And he was... He was so nervous. She wasn't just anyone. She was the love of his life, and he knew it the day she stepped off that shuttle and walked into his life.

His mind wandered back to that first time. Sweaty clothes trailing his apartment on the way to the bed. Her smooth ivory skin. Bare breasts. Hard nipples. Trailing kisses from her lips to her ear, then to her neck and down, until he was suckling on those hard nipples as she gasped and ran her hands up and down his back, nails that were longer than regulations allowed scraping his skin.

He could hear her breathy voice as she mewled and moaned, crying out his name as he sucked on her clit, making her come for the first time. He could still taste her and smell her arousal. He longed for it. He longed for the sound of his name escaping her lips, her pink afterglow, her sweaty sheen, her bliss-filled eyes, and her drunk smile.

He could feel her palm on his cock for the first time. He thought he wasn't going to make it inside her, that her touch alone would send him over the edge. He had longed for that touch for

so long, fantasized about her for months. Ever since he met her. He held it together, though, and being inside her was more glorious than he could have imagined.

He remembered the way she gasped as he thrust inside her, nails digging into his back, the sultry sound of his name on her lips, her breathy voice, her moans. She still made those same sounds. She still sounded just as aroused as in the beginning, when things were new and exciting. He remembered them coming at the same time before falling into each other's arms. They breathed together as they became one. And they were one. They were one heart, one soul. He couldn't lose her.

And he was going to lose her.

His heart stopped as he thought about her. He could see her lying on a mattress on the floor in an observation room, locked up, confined, secluded. She was alone. She was probably scared. And maybe she thought he had abandoned her. He did shoot her.

God, what must she think of me? What have I done?

"I'm sorry, Audrid. Please forgive me," he uttered as he wept into his hands. "I love you." He looked up at the Mars landscape, his face a mess of tears. "I love you."

Chapter 12

Audrid woke up on the cold ground, shivering. She reached out for the blanket. It was strewn across the floor, haphazardly tossed there in a fit in the night. She was able to just reach the corner as she pulled it over herself and bundled up in it. She lay there, cheek pressed onto the cold floor, resigned to give up.

She didn't know how long she had been in that room or what time it was. They eventually brought her food. They called it dinner, but it was just sandwiches and digestive cookies on a paper plate. Then they brought snacks. More sandwiches and digestive cookies. She picked away at it, barely eating.

They also came in with medications. Sometimes they were injections. They would tell her it would calm her down. They didn't seem to understand that she had every reason to scream. Other times they would bring tablets that melted under her tongue. She tried to spit them out after they left, but they dissolved too quickly. She rinsed her mouth out in the sink above the toilet, hoping some lingering remnants would be washed away.

Everything made her so drowsy. But sleep came with nightmares. The cloud people were following her through the cave, calling out to her. She didn't know if they were even nightmares or if the cloud people had a telepathic connection to her. All she knew was that her dreams reflected reality. Something was living in her brain, and she needed to get it out.

She heard the lock click. She threw the blanket over her head and lay there in the fetal position as she quivered. She could hear numerous footsteps stomping into the room and then stopping. She swallowed hard, unsure what they wanted from her this time. Her heart was beating like mad, the blood thrumming past her ears.

"Audrid?" a man's voice said. It was familiar. She couldn't remember who it belonged to. "Audrid, can you remove the blanket from your head? We know you're awake. We've been watching you on the camera."

She didn't say anything. She just listened to her heart as it raced. It thumped so loudly that it reverberated throughout her whole body. She wouldn't be surprised if the whole room could hear.

"Audrid, it's Doctor Medina. I'd really like to talk to you, maybe get you out of this room. But I need you to cooperate."

She did need to go out of that room. Her life depended on getting back to the cave somehow. Slowly, she lifted the blanket off her face. She didn't move her head off the floor as she stared forward at his shoes.

"Thank you. How did you sleep last night?" he asked.

She just blinked, not looking up as she struggled to take in a breath. She really did want to breathe normally again, but it felt like the room was sucking out all her oxygen. And when everyone was in the room with her, breathing was even harder.

“The nurses said it looked like you slept the entire night. That means the medications are having some effect. I’ve started you on four medications: Loxapride to help with your psychosis, Divalith to stabilize your mood, Somnivance to help you sleep, and Lorazeproxate to help you remain calm. We can give you extra Lorazeproxate when you’re getting agitated. I want to make you as comfortable as possible, Audrid,” he explained in a calm voice.

“I want to go home,” she said. It was barely above a whisper. Speaking was hard. She felt like she was digging through fog just to get her words out.

“You can’t go home right now. You pose too much of a risk to yourself and others at this moment. You’re experiencing a manic episode with psychosis, and it’s affecting your judgment and insight. Right now, you can’t keep yourself safe, so we need to step in and keep you safe until you’re doing better.”

“I want to go home,” she said louder.

She pushed herself into a sitting position as she glared at him, her mouth hanging open as she huffed out breath after breath. Her head was so foggy, and sitting made her dizzy. She wanted to scream, but she didn’t have the energy.

“I’m sorry, Audrid. That won’t be possible right now. But if you remain calm and cooperative, we can get you out of this room. You’ll be more comfortable on the rest of the unit. Does that sound like something you’re interested in?”

“I want to see Torias,” she said as she hugged her knees, resting her chin on them. She felt so numb and tired and cold. She could feel herself shivering to the bones as she sat there.

“You can see him once you’re out of this room. Let’s finish the interview first, shall we?” he said softly.

Audrid looked up at him. His eyes were warm, and he spoke in a pleasant voice. But he didn’t understand.

“Tell me about the entities in the cave,” he said as he stood there watching her, studying her every move.

She glanced at him, studying him back. She didn’t know how much to tell him. Maybe she shouldn’t tell him anything at all.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” she replied with a sigh as she looked into the distance, letting the room blur.

“You don’t think there were beings living in the cave?”

“I don’t know anything.”

“Do you think there’s a being living inside your brain?”

“I don’t know.”

“Audrid, I can understand why you would feel frustrated by everything that’s happened, but it’s important to be forthcoming. I want to help you, but I need you to be honest with me. Now, tell me about the entities in the cave.”

“You don’t believe me, so why should I tell you about them?” she asked in a harsh tone as she shot him a glare.

“Because it’s my job to listen to you, no matter what you have to say. I’m here to listen and be non-judgmental, so just tell me what’s on your mind. Let me help you.”

She sighed as she stared past him. “They come to me in my dreams. They’re telepathic.”

“Tell me what happens in your dreams.”

“I get chased by the clouds living in the cave. They call out to me. They tell me I have to return. They put their offspring in my brain to develop. If I don’t return to the cave so it can be released, we’ll both die.” She looked up at him, her voice barely above a whisper. “I don’t want to die.”

“I can imagine that would be frightening.”

“It is,” she said softly as she rested her chin on her knees again, hugging them tight.

“Tell me about Jared Weston.”

“He’s a scumbag,” she said, raising her voice. She sucked in a seething breath and buried her face in her knees. “He’s trying to ruin everything. He’s going to ruin me.” Her voice was mumbled as she spoke into her knees. “He’s going to ruin me.”

“Tell me why you think he’s going to ruin you,” the doctor said.

She looked up at him, staring hard. “Because he’s in love with Torias. If he gets rid of me, he thinks he can have Torias all to himself.” She sucked in a breath before raising her voice. “Torias loves me, not him. He will never leave me for him!”

The doctor nodded for a moment as he watched her. “And how do you think he’s going to get rid of you?”

“You don’t get it!” she snapped.

“Help me understand.”

She looked up at him intently. “First, they’ll halt the project. Then they’ll cancel it completely. Next, they’ll relieve me of duty. Then they’ll strip me of my rank. Finally, they’ll ship me back to Earth. It has already started. Look at my life,” she said, her voice rising. “It has already started!”

“So, you believe that halting the project was all part of an elaborate conspiracy by Jared Weston to have you shipped back to Earth so he can be with Torias? Don’t you think Torias would go with you if you had to return to Earth?”

“No,” she said as she buried her face in her knees.

She just tried to breathe. Suck in air. Slow and deep. It was quiet for a moment. All she could hear was her racing heart and her ragged breaths as she tried to control them.

“Are you hungry, Audrid?” Doctor Medina asked. “It’s just after breakfast time. The nurse can show you around the unit and take you to your room. Then you can have some breakfast in the dining room.”

She looked up at him. “I want to see Torias.”

“The nurse will let him know you can have visitors. But Audrid, part of being out of this room means keeping calm and settled. If you can’t manage safe behaviour on the rest of the unit, you’ll have to come back to this room. Do you think you can manage on the unit?”

“Yes.”

“Alright. I’ll come talk to you again tomorrow,” he said as he turned to leave. She watched his shoes as he walked away, listening to them shuffle against the floor.

“Come on, Audrid. I’ll show you the unit,” one of the nurses said as the rest of them left.

Audrid stood up slowly, using the wall to brace herself. She felt a little woozy, and her legs were like jelly. She took a deep breath and then followed the nurse out of the room and into a hallway. There was another room like hers. Empty. Clean. Ready to use. There were other doors. Closed. No labels on them. She looked down the hall, opposite where they were heading. It opened into what looked like a control room. She just stood there, staring at the staff sitting there in their light-blue scrubs.

“Audrid, come along,” the nurse said. She turned and followed her. “I’m Nurse Chong. I’ll be here until 1900 hours, and then another nurse will take over for me. If you need anything until that time, just come find me. I can answer any questions you have. I know it can feel overwhelming.”

Audrid was only half listening as she studied her surroundings. The hallway continued on, but they stopped at a door halfway down, and Nurse Chong put her palm on the reader beside it to unlock it. They walked through, stepping onto what she assumed was the rest of the unit. She looked behind her through the glass door to where they were. A secure back area.

She turned and looked around the hallway she was in. To her left, down the hall a bit, was a set of glass doors exiting the unit. There were a few other closed doors in the hallway. She didn’t know where they lead. They headed right until they reached a nursing station. It was the control room she had seen from the secure area. It was glassed in and looked out at the entire unit. The hallway continued past it, making a T shape around the nursing station as another hallway joined it.

She started pointing out rooms in the hallway they were in. There was a dining room with several round tables and chairs and a kitchenette area behind a locked gate. Next door to it was a room with couches and armchairs and a bookshelf. Nurse Chong called it the quiet lounge. Across the hall from it was a big day area with couches on one end in front of a big TV and tables on the other end. There were two patients playing a board game. Monopoly, it looked like. There were a few people sitting around, watching TV. It was a movie she didn't recognize.

They continued down the hall. There was an arts and crafts room, with music playing loudly as someone sat there cutting out magazine pictures and pasting them onto a piece of paper. Another person was sitting there, colouring. Down the hall were two meeting rooms. One was large, and the other was small and comfortable, with two couches and a coffee table. Nurse Chong called the smaller one the interview room.

They walked back to the nursing station and turned to the adjacent hallway. It was all bedrooms and shower rooms. She walked her into a room at the very end of the hallway.

"This will be your room while you're here, Audrid," she said as she walked inside the small room.

There was a single bed in the middle, with crisp, white hospital linens on it and a thicker blue blanket folded up at the end of the bed. There was a nightstand with nothing on it, a dresser, and a chair in the corner. A window looked out into the main dome. Just inside the door was another door leading to a bathroom. It was plain, with a sink, a mirror, and a toilet.

"I'll bring you to the dining room now, and you can have breakfast," Nurse Chong said.

"I'm not hungry. Tell Torias to come now. I need to see him," she said in an authoritative voice as she crossed her arms and gave her a hard look.

"I really think you should have breakfast first. The chart notes indicate that you didn't eat most of the food brought to you in the observation room. You must be hungry."

"Don't tell me if I'm hungry. I know my own body. I want Torias. Right now," she said as she glared at the nurse.

She sighed. "Fine, but if you change your mind, I can always get you something to eat."

"Just get Torias."

Nurse Chong quickly left. Audrid walked over to the window and peered out. She could see the arboretum in the distance. They used to go on picnics there when they were dating. Torias would watch the children playing. She never realized he wanted one for himself. All of that felt like a lifetime ago, though. She pushed those thoughts out of her head as she looked at her room.

She felt so tired. She sat on the bed as emotions bubbled over her. She tried to hold in the tears. She just needed Torias. He could save her from all of this. She needed to be wrapped in the safety of his warm arms.

“Audrid, I’ve got your morning medications,” Nurse Chong said as she returned with a little paper cup.

“What about Torias?” she asked in a hard tone, not taking the cup.

“I left him a message letting him know you can have visitors,” she replied.

Audrid took the little cup and stared into it. There was a small yellow round pill, a little blue pill, and an oblong pink pill inside. She handed it back to the nurse.

“I don’t want these. I don’t take medications.”

“You’ll have to while you’re here. It’s important that you take them,” she said as she handed her back the cup.

She took it and dumped them in her mouth, letting them dissolve under her tongue. They had a sweet yet medicinal taste. She waited for the nurse to leave then ran to the bathroom and tried to spit them out. They had already dissolved, though. She ran the tap and rinsed out her mouth, swishing and spitting. There were remnants of dye left. She rinsed the sink after until all traces of the dye were gone.

She sat down on her bed and buried her face in her hands, just trying to breathe. She had no idea what kind of effects these medications would have on the entity growing in her brain. She didn’t know if they were harmful. Even if the entity wasn’t welcome, it was still alive. She didn’t want to hurt it. She just wanted to return to the cave so they could both get on with their lives.

She sighed as she lay down on the bed, waiting for Torias. Her head felt so clogged and heavy. She quickly started to fall asleep. As she drifted into darkness, a voice called out to her.

“Audrid...”

“Go away!”

“Audrid, come back to us. Come back to the cave.”

She could feel the voices reverberating against her. It sent a chill down her spine. She looked around at the blackness surrounding her. She didn’t know where she was, but it wasn’t the cave. It was just a pit of darkness.

“I can’t. They won’t let me,” she called out.

“You must come back or you’ll die.”

“I’m trying.”

“Come back!”

She felt a cold sensation wrapping around her, and then something touched her shoulder.

She startled awake to find Torias sitting on the edge of the bed, with his hand on her shoulder, just gently shaking her.

“Hey,” he said softly with a little smile. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to wake you.”

She sat up and threw her arms around him, just holding him tight. She never wanted to let go. He wrapped her up in his arms, enveloping her in his warmth. All of a sudden, she felt safe again.

“Take me home,” she murmured into his shoulder as she buried her face in it.

“I can’t,” he said as he pulled away, cupping her face as his thumbs caressed her cheeks. “You have to stay here.”

“I can’t, Torias. This is life or death. I have to get back to the cave. You have to believe me,” she said as her eyes pleaded with him.

“Come here,” he said as he wrapped her back up in a hug. “Everything will be okay. You just need to try to get better.”

“I’m not sick, Torias,” she said, pulling away and staring hard into his eyes. She took his face in her hands firmly so he was looking deep in her eyes. “I’m not sick.”

“You are,” he said softly as he took her hands off his face and held them. “You need to try to get better. It’s important. If you don’t...” he started to say as he trailed off, his eyes wandering away from her.

“If I don’t, then what?” she asked in a hard tone. She lifted his chin until he was looking at her, but he still couldn’t meet her eyes. “Look at me. Talk to me.”

“You just need to get better. That’s all. It’s important,” he replied.

“You’re not telling me something. I want to know what,” she said loudly as she stared at him.

“Tell me, Torias.”

“It’s nothing. Just work on getting better.”

“Torias.”

He sighed as he broke eye contact with her. He took her hand and squeezed it before giving it a kiss. He dropped it after a moment and ran his hand across her cheek as he smiled at her. He was sad though. He wasn’t saying something and she knew it. She grabbed his hand, squeezing hard.

“Tell me,” she said firmly.

“Try not to get upset, okay?” he said as he extricated his hand from hers and caressed her cheek.

“I won’t get upset. But you need to tell me. Now,” she said.

“They’re talking about sending you back to Earth for treatment.”

Her mouth hung open as she stared back at him. She jumped off the bed and started to pace as her heart raced. She turned back to him, just trying to find words. *I can’t go back to Earth. I can’t. But this is how it starts. This is the conspiracy. Jared is going to succeed.* When she couldn’t think of what to say, she went back to pacing.

“Audrid, stop,” Torias said as he stood up and watched her.

She was practically burning tread marks into the ground as she was so rapid. Three strides one way. Three strides the other way. Back and forth. Over and over again, as thoughts filled her head. *I can't go back. I can't go back. I can't go back!*

“Audrid, please,” he said as he stood in her path, catching her and wrapping her up in his arms. “Shh... I'm trying to fight it, but it isn't my decision. You have to try to get better. Don't give them a reason to send you back.”

“Torias, no,” she said as her voice broke and she buried her face in his neck. “No...”

“Shh...” he murmured as he rubbed her back.

She pulled away so she could look in his eyes. They were sad, lost, and a little bit broken as they stared back at her.

“They can't send me back. They can't. Everything will be lost. You won't be able to come with me. We'll lose each other. Everything will be lost... It will be lost...” she said as tears streamed down her face.

“Shh...” he whispered as she buried her face in his shoulder. “Maybe I can come with you. I've been thinking about it. Maybe it's worth the risk.”

“No,” she said as she pulled away, staring at him hard. “You'll go to prison, Torias. You can't risk it. Not for me. Not for anyone. You can't go back to Earth.”

“I don't want to be separated from you,” he said as he moved a stray piece of hair out of her eyes, tucking it behind her ear.

“Then you have to stop them from sending me. You can't go to Earth. If you go to prison...” she started to say as she began sobbing. Her voice was broken as she tried to speak. “All will be lost. I'll lose you. I can't lose you, Torias.”

She let her head fall to his shoulder as she cried. He just held her, whispering ‘shh...’ into her ear as he rubbed her back gently.

“All will be lost...” she muttered. “All will be lost... He's ruining everything...”

“Shh...”

“I can't lose you...”

“Shh...”

“I can't lose you!” she yelled as she pounded her fists on his chest. “I can't lose you!”

“I know,” he said softly as he held her.

She pulled away from him and sat on the bed as her face fell to her hands and she sobbed. He sat down next to her, wrapping his arm around her shoulders. So warm, so safe, and yet, could he keep her safe? She pushed him down until he was lying on his back on the bed. She lay down

next to him, snuggling into his side as she rested her head on his chest. He wrapped both his arms around her and just held her while she cried.

Everything's falling apart. It's just as I've predicted. First, they'll halt the project. Then they'll cancel it. Then they'll relieve me of duty, strip me of my rank, and send me to Earth. It's all happening. And if I go to Earth, the offspring in my brain will die. I'll die too. I'll lose Torias. Everything will be lost.

"I can hear you thinking," he said softly as he kissed her head, his breath tickling her hair.

She rolled onto her belly as she looked down on him, diving in for a kiss. He hesitated at first, just kissing her lightly on the lips.

She pulled away just enough to murmur, "I need you," before diving back into the kiss, parting his lips as her tongue delved into his mouth.

She could feel his hands on her back, pulling her body closer to his. He was so warm. She loved that feeling. His cocoon of safety and warmth. She kissed him deeper until their tongues danced together. He pulled away breathlessly, resting his forehead on hers.

"I love you so much," she murmured before kissing him again.

"I love you too," he uttered between kisses.

She started trailing kisses across his jaw until she was at his ear, suckling on his lobe. She nibbled for a moment as he ran his hands up and down her back. Then she continued on trailing kisses down his neck until she was sucking on the crook of it and biting down lightly.

"Audrid," he said breathily. "We shouldn't."

"Don't stop this," she said as she looked deep into his eyes, pleading with him. "I need you."

His face softened a little, but his eyes were still saying "no." She could feel the tears welling up in her own eyes, and soon they were spilling down her cheeks.

"Hey," he said softly as he wiped away her tears with his thumbs. "Don't cry."

"I need you, Torias. I need to feel you... be with you... be in your arms," she said as she started kissing his jaw.

"I can hold you, but that's all," he said as he rubbed circles gently on her back. "Why don't you roll onto your side, and I'll hold you? I'll keep you in my arms until they kick me out at the end of visiting hours."

"No," she said as she looked down at him. "You don't understand. I need you. I need you so badly. Please."

Tears were streaming down her cheeks as they dripped on his neck. He just stared at her, his eyes sad and a little broken. He caressed her cheek for a moment, then tucked her hair behind both her ears. They just peered at each other.

“Please,” she said in a broken voice as tears dripped down her lips, leaving a salty taste in her mouth.

“Audrid,” he said softly.

“Please,” she said, barely above a whisper. “Please, Torias.”

She watched his face as it changed, going from a hard “no” to pensive. He glanced around the room. The door was shut. He looked up at the ceiling, presumably for cameras. She had already taken note that there were none.

“Please,” she whispered.

“I love you,” he said as he cupped her face, his thumbs caressing her cheeks.

“Show me that love,” she whispered. “I need you to comfort me.”

She didn’t wait for his reply as she dove in for a kiss, parting his lips eagerly as she danced forcefully with his tongue. She deepened the kiss, not waiting for him to catch up. She was passionate, desperate, and needy as she kissed him hard.

“Please, Torias,” she said as she pulled away.

She kissed him again, softly on the lips before pulling away and gazing into his eyes. They were hesitant, lost, filled with an uncertainty that went even deeper than the moment. She could see the worry in them. She kissed his cheek and then his other cheek. She looked at him again. His eyes were glistening. She watched them change as an unspoken permission was granted.

He pulled her into a kiss as she started to unzip his uniform as far as it would go. She pulled up his undershirt and slid her hands up it until she was feeling his chiselled chest. She ran her palms across it, feeling those strong muscles.

He pulled her gown up. There wasn’t much to it. It was just white T-shirt material that slipped over her head and fell to her knees. He tossed it aside as he took her breasts in his hands. He thumbed her nipples as she gasped, diving in for a deeper kiss.

He rolled her over, kissing her harder for a moment until he was trailing kisses down her neck and across her clavicle. He took her breast in his mouth, suckling on that hard nipple. She ran her hands through his hair, tangling her fingertips in his chestnut strands. He bit down lightly on her nipple as she moaned softly.

He started removing his jumpsuit. It was a bit awkward as he tried to slide it off himself while lying on top of her, but eventually, he managed to kick his boots off, and then his jumpsuit. She pulled his shirt over his head and tossed it aside as she ran her hands up and down his back. Then they just stared at one another for a moment, tugging on each other’s souls.

“I love you,” she said barely above a whisper as new tears brimmed in her eyes and the thought of losing him took over. “I need you.”

“You have me. All of me,” he said as he dove in for a kiss.

She pulled down his boxers, and he kicked them aside. She found his cock, gripping it in her palm. It was already so hard. She could feel the heat radiating out of it. She stroked it for a moment and then guided it in, letting out a hard gasp as it filled her up. He peered down at her as he settled in. Her eyes begged him to take her, to soothe her, to become one with her for a moment. She knew he could take away all her pain, even temporarily.

And then he started to thrust. She gasped again as her hands found his back, pulling him closer to her. He thrust again. She let out a long moan.

“Oh... Torias...” she said breathily.

He went a little faster, but he was still being tender and gentle as he gazed into her eyes. She didn't need him to be fast or hard just yet. As long as she could feel him. And she could. He was hot inside her, filling her up as his body lay over hers like a warm weighted blanket.

“I love you,” he uttered as he stared into her eyes, thrusting again.

“I need you so badly,” she said as she blinked back the tears, just staring back at him.

“You have me. Always,” he said.

And then he started to pick up the pace. She let out a long moan as his cock drove into her harder. She could feel a heat in her loins. It bubbled up, spreading down her thighs and up her belly. She relished that heat. He started to thrust hard, their grunts and moans filling the room.

“Oh, Torias...” she whispered.

He pounded into her as she let out a cry. Not even words. Just a long guttural moan that bounced off walls.

“Shh...” he said as he drove into her. “We have to be quiet.”

“I need you to fuck me, Torias,” she said as she stared intensely into his eyes, wordlessly telling him to go harder and faster.

He closed his eyes and started to ram into her. His cock hit all her sensitive spots as she groaned and cried out, biting her lip so she would not be able to scream out his name. The warmth was boiling over her now, spreading up her belly to her breasts, her cheeks, her ears. Her whole face was on fire. She was panting heavily, her teeth digging into her bottom lip.

He went even harder, pummeling into her like a wild animal as his eyes squeezed shut. She dug her nails into his back as she held onto him, her legs wrapped around his waist. She could feel tingles spreading throughout her body. He picked up the pace, fucking her harder as his cock hit all the right spots. His name escaped her lips loudly.

“Torias... Oh, God... Torias...”

He just continued driving into her. Suddenly, she felt her whole body seizing up as electricity hit her, surging out her fingertips and toes. She let out a long groan.

“Ohh... Torias... Oh...”

She felt herself melting into the bed and, at the same time, floating, as if the bed were a cloud. Everything was bliss. She mewled, letting his name softly escape her lips.

“Torias... Torias...”

“Audrid!”

He let out a loud grunt as he stiffened with one last thrust and his hot seed shot inside her. She let out a satisfied moan as she sighed. He collapsed on top of her, and they just lay there, holding each other, two hot bodies becoming one for a moment.

Eventually, he looked down at her, taking her face in his hands as he gazed into her eyes. He was searching her soul to see if she was still in there. And it hurt. Tears streamed down her face.

“Hey...” he said softly before kissing the tears on her cheek. “It will all be okay.” He kissed her other cheek. “I won’t let them send you away. I won’t let them take you away from me. It will all be okay.”

As she stared into his eyes, deep into his soul, she realized even he didn’t believe that. He let his head fall to her shoulder as he breathed heavily into her and she held him, unwilling to ever let go.

Chapter 13

Audrid lay secure in Torias's arms under the blanket as they cuddled for a few minutes, the afterglow only starting to dissipate. They hadn't quite caught their breaths yet as their heavy breathing filled the room. She pulled the blanket up around them tightly as she listened to his heart beating hard. His fingers were softly strumming on her bicep under the blanket. She could feel him kissing her head as she snuggled into him more.

"We should get dressed," he said after a few more minutes of this peaceful state.

"No, I want to stay just like this," she replied as she clung to him.

"Audrid, someone could walk in on us," he said.

"No, let's stay like this," she said as she wrapped her arm tighter around his waist.

"Audrid, no. We have to get up. We can cuddle once we're dressed," he said as he pulled the blanket off.

She let out a groan as she reluctantly got off him and found her gown on the floor. She threw it on over her head as she watched him stand up. She admired his strong, muscular body, all the way down to the V chiselled into his abdomen where his hips met his lower belly. As she eyed him, she just wanted to touch him more.

"Wait," she said as he picked up his clothes.

She walked around the bed to him and ran her hands across his chest, feeling those muscles as she sighed, biting her lip.

"Audrid, what are you doing?" he asked as he raised a brow.

"I just want to feel you. I've been lonely without you," she replied.

"I'm sorry, but I need to get dressed before someone finds me naked in your room. I could get kicked out. It would be horrible if I was banned from visiting you."

She nodded, leaning down to kiss his clavicle, before taking his shirt and slipping it over his head. He finished putting his arms in it as she pulled it down around him, smoothing it out. She handed him his boxers, watching as he slid them on. He took his uniform and put it on. She slowly zipped it up for him, letting her hands wander to his jaw after as she swept her fingertips across both sides. He captured her hands and kissed them before putting on his boots. Then he wrapped her up in his arms. She sighed into his embrace, and they stayed like that for a few minutes. When she pulled away, she looked at his hair. She ran her fingertips through it, straightening it up.

"There," she said as she smiled at him, leaning in to kiss his cheek softly.

"Do I look decent now?" he asked.

“More than decent,” she said as she leaned in to kiss him.

She could feel his hands on her back, pulling her body against him as her tongue delved into his mouth. She wrapped her arms around his neck as she deepened the kiss, still leaving it tender. A moment later, he pulled away, their heavy breaths filling the room as he leaned his forehead on hers.

“I love you,” he said softly.

“Then break me out of here,” she replied.

“Audrid, you know I can’t.”

“Fine,” she said as she extricated herself from his embrace and lay down on the bed on her side.

He lay down behind her and wrapped his arm around her, his warm body pressing into her from behind. She felt safe in his arms, like everything would be okay. But she knew that nothing would ever be okay again.

If they send me back to Earth, I’ll lose everything. I’ve already lost my project. I’ve lost my freedom. I’ve been relieved of duty. Next, they’ll strip me of my rank. But more importantly, I’ll lose Torias. I can’t lose him. He matters more to me than any project. He matters more than life itself. Life isn’t worth living without him. I can’t lose him. I have to find a way.

And then there’s my life to think about. If I go back to Earth, I’ll die. The thing in my brain will die. We’ve just been sentenced to death.

I don’t want to die.

“I can tell you’re lost in thought. Want to talk about it?” he asked quietly as he snuggled into her body.

“Just thinking about Earth and how everything will be lost when I get back there,” she replied.

“I’m going to do everything I can to block it, Audrid.”

“What if that’s not enough?”

“If they send you back to Earth, I’ll fight to have you reinstated on Mars when you’re well enough. Don’t give up hope. It won’t be forever.”

“It will be. This is all part of Jared’s plan. Once I’m gone, that’s it. They’ll never let me back. And I don’t know how much time I’ll have before I die.”

“Why would you die?” he asked as he took her hand and squeezed it.

“If I don’t get back to the cave so the entity can be released from my brain, we’ll both die. I don’t want to die, Torias,” she said, blinking away tears.

“You’re not going to die. That’s all delusion. That’s your illness talking. You can’t believe it.”

“It isn’t!” she snapped as she glanced back at him.

“Audrid,” he said softly into her ear. “It’s not real.”

“It is. You have to believe me,” she said loudly.

“It isn’t real. And you can’t talk like this. The sicker you are, the more likely they’ll send you back to Earth. You have to get well. Take your medications, and stay calm.”

“Then I’ll stop talking about it. But it’s real. I have to get back to the cave or I’ll die.”

She felt him sucking in a breath and slowly letting it out. He didn’t say anything. He just held her tighter.

“I’m not delusional,” she said after a few minutes.

“I don’t want to argue.”

“Torias.”

“I don’t know what to say, Audrid. I don’t want to lie to you and tell you it’s true. I would never lie to you. I’m not going to start now just because…” he said, trailing off.

“Because what?”

“Because you’re sick.”

“I’m not sick, Torias. You need to believe me.”

“Please, let’s not argue.”

“Fine.”

They went quiet as they lay there. She felt a chill wash over her as that safe feeling slipped away. *Everything’s going to be lost, and the one person who should have faith in me thinks I’m crazy. Everything will be lost. It will all be lost!* She blinked away her tears as she lay there. They didn’t move or say anything. An hour went by, and she felt herself starting to drift off when he started to move.

“Where are you going?” she asked.

“I need to get back to work,” he said as he kissed her temple before sitting up.

“You can’t leave,” she said sharply as she sat up and looked at him.

“I’ll visit tonight, after work. Maybe I can make you dinner and bring it here. I’ll ask them if that’s allowed,” he said as he gave her a little smile and stood up.

“Don’t go,” she said as she got up and watched him walk around the bed. “Please.”

“I have to,” he said as he wrapped her up in his arms.

“You don’t have to do anything, Torias. You can stay,” she said as she clung to him.

“I have duties to attend to. I’ve already been gone almost two hours. I left my lieutenant in charge, so the whole place will probably be a mess when I get back.”

“Torias, be serious. You can stay,” she said as she pulled away and looked firmly in his eyes.

He didn’t say anything. He just kissed her. Soft and tender. He pulled away as he gazed into her eyes, caressing her cheek. Those eyes were filled with sorrow.

“Don’t go,” she said as tears welled up in her eyes.

“I have to,” he said as he kissed her cheek.

Then he let go of her, leaving her to feel chilled to the bones. He took her hand and caressed her knuckles with his thumb as he started to walk away. She just stared at him as he let go of her hand and it dropped to her side.

“Please,” she said as her eyes begged him.

“I’ll visit tonight.”

She watched him walk through the door as her heart pounded in her chest. She felt frozen for a moment. She couldn’t breathe. Hot tears began to stream down her cheeks. Suddenly, she felt a panic growing inside her as she ran out the door after him.

“Torias!”

He turned to her with a soft smile. “I’ll see you tonight.”

“No!”

She ran down the hall and grabbed him by the arm, swinging him around. She clung to him, refusing to let go. He pulled her off him as he stared into her eyes.

“I can’t stay.”

“Please.”

“I can’t.”

“You can’t leave me here. Please, Torias. It’s scary here. I don’t want to be alone. You can’t leave. You can’t leave. Don’t leave!” Her words were rushing out of her as she cried.

“I love you,” he said as he wrapped her up in his arms. “I’ll visit tonight. I promise.”

“No,” she cried into his shoulder.

“I’ll see you later,” he said as he let go of her and quickly turned away, not looking back. He walked briskly down the hall.

“No!” she snapped as she ran and grabbed his arm again. “You can’t leave!”

There were eyes on them as patients in the same gowns as hers appeared in the hallway. She didn’t care. She held onto his arm and refused to let go as his eyes begged her.

“You can’t go. You can’t leave me here.”

“Please, Audrid. I’ll visit later. I promise.”

“You can’t leave me here,” she screamed as she gripped his arm.

“Please.”

“No,” she said as the tears washed down her face.

“Please,” he said as his eyes glistened.

“What’s going on?” Nurse Chong asked as she appeared out of the nursing station and quickly walked down the hall toward them.

“I have to go back to work,” Torias said.

“Audrid, why don’t you come have some snack in the dining room? I can heat up your breakfast. It was eggs and pancakes this morning,” she said with a smile.

“No!” Audrid snapped as she gripped Torias’s arm even harder. She could tell he was trying not to wince.

“Audrid, let’s go have breakfast,” Nurse Chong said softly.

“No!” she screamed.

“Audrid, please,” Torias said as he put his free hand on top of hers.

He gently tried to pry her hand off him. She gripped tighter, making him use more force. Finally, he got his arm free. He held her hand after, just gazing at her as tears welled up in his eyes.

“I’m sorry. I’ll see you later,” he said as he dropped her hand and walked away quickly.

She sank to the floor as her face fell to her hands and she sobbed. *What if he doesn’t come back? What if they ship me back to Earth before he can? What if Jared gets to him? What if...*

“Torias!” she screamed into her hands. She looked up at him as he stopped at the nursing station, talking to a nurse. “Don’t leave!”

And then he disappeared around the corner. She scrambled to her feet and ran down the hallway and around the corner. He gave her a sad look as the nurse let him through the unit exit.

“Torias, don’t leave me!”

She ran toward it just as the door shut. She pounded on the door, staring at him through the glass.

“Torias!” she screamed as she banged on the glass. He just walked away, disappearing into an elevator. “Torias!”

She fell to her knees as she continued to pound on the glass, screaming out his name.

“Audrid, I’ve got some medication for you,” Nurse Chong said a moment later as she kneeled beside her.

“No!”

She took the cup out of the nurse's hand and threw it down the hall. The little pill rolled on the floor. Nurse Chong looked at the other nurse and gave her a little nod, an unspoken understanding between them.

"Leave me alone!" Audrid growled as she turned to the door, placing her palms on the glass as she pressed her forehead against it. *He's gone. He left. He actually left.*

"He'll visit later, Audrid. In the meantime, you can have something to eat, watch some TV, do some arts and crafts, and rest in your room. But you need to remain calm," Nurse Chong said.

"Leave me alone!"

"Audrid, I want to help you manage on the unit so you don't have to go back to the observation room. You need to remain settled, though."

"Go away!"

The other nurse returned a few minutes later, along with three more staff. She saw the airject syringe in the nurse's hand. She scrambled off the floor and ran down the hall as her heart raced. The hallway felt like it was narrowing in on her, yet it went on forever as she tried to reach her room. She ran faster and faster, but it felt like she would never make it there.

"Audrid, stop please!" Nurse Chong called out.

She could hear the footsteps behind her. She looked back. They weren't running after her. Instead, they were walking quickly down the hall like a crowd of locusts about to descend upon her. She finally made it to her room and slammed the door shut. She sat against it as she huffed out her breaths. They tried to open the door, but her body was against it as she refused to move.

"Audrid, please move away from the door," Nurse Chong said in a firm but calm voice.

"Go away!" she screamed until her face felt hot.

"I just want to help you."

"I'm going to lose everything," she said as her face fell to her hands. "I'm going to lose it all." She started to cry again as fresh, hot tears spilled down her cheeks.

"Audrid, let me in and we can talk."

She lay down on the floor in front of the door as her sobs filled the room. *Everything will be lost. It will all be lost. It will all be lost. All lost. All gone. Nothing left. Life not worth living. I'm going to die. It will all be lost. I'll lose Torias. I'll lose my life. I'll lose everything. All will be lost. Lost... lost... lost... Everything's gone... gone... gone... gone...*

"Audrid, if you don't move away from the door, I will get Security. They'll force it open, and we'll have to move you to the observation room. Your husband won't be able to visit later if you're in the observation room," Nurse Chong stated.

"Torias," she whispered through her sobs. "I need him."

Slowly, she pushed herself off the floor and walked to the corner of the room, sinking to the ground as she hugged her knees.

“Don’t take him away from me,” she whispered into her knees. “Don’t take him away. Don’t take him away. Don’t take it all away...”

She closed her eyes as she heard the door open and footsteps stampede into the room. A moment later, she felt the pinch of the airjet syringe in her bicep as she cried harder.

“I’ll come check on you in a little while, okay?” Nurse Chong said softly as she put her hand on Audrid’s shoulder.

She just cried into her knees.

Torias felt like his heart had been shattered as he walked through the door of the psychiatric unit into the freedom of the hallway. The minute the door shut, he could no longer hear Audrid. But he could see her in his peripheral vision banging on the door. He couldn’t bear to look, so he simply got on the elevator and left her there.

When he returned to his office, Captain Johnstone was standing there, talking to his assistant. He looked up when he saw Torias approaching.

“Captain, can I have a minute?” he asked.

Torias nodded, and Captain Johnstone followed him into his office, shutting the door. Torias sat at his desk, trying not to slump over as Captain Johnstone sat across from him.

“How’s Audrid?” he asked.

“Not well,” he said as his eyes burned. He blinked back his tears.

Captain Johnstone sucked in a deep breath as he watched Torias. They were quiet for a moment, a tension filling the room.

“Is there anything I can do for her?” Johnstone asked.

“I don’t know,” Torias muttered as he sat back in his chair. “They want to send her back to Earth.”

“Why?”

“They say she’s too sick. They aren’t used to treating this kind of illness. I told the doctor I wouldn’t allow it, but apparently, it isn’t my decision. I’ll fight it, though. I can’t let them send her back,” he said as he rubbed his face hard. He looked up at Johnstone. “Is there something you need, captain?”

“I wanted to know how she was,” he said. “And I wanted you to hear this from me.” Torias looked up at him. “We’re restarting Project Hades. The environmental suits are being reassembled as we speak.”

“I thought it wasn’t safe.”

“The technicians have been unable to find anything wrong with the suits. I’ve been arguing with Risk Management, trying to persuade them that the project should move forward in the absence of any obvious safety flaw. They’ve finally agreed. Special Projects has also convinced them that too many resources are going into the project to just have it be halted for an indefinite period. So we’re resuming work immediately. I just got word this morning,” Johnstone explained.

“What about Audrid?”

“When she’s well enough, she can resume lead. Until then, Corporal Bains is taking charge.”

“She’s going to be devastated to hear they’re moving forward without her,” he said as he took a deep breath.

“She doesn’t have to know,” Johnstone said in a hard tone.

Torias looked up at him. “I can’t just not tell her.”

“It would do more harm than good for her to know. You don’t have to lie. Simply omit the truth. Don’t talk about the project.”

“I don’t know,” he said with a sigh as he looked away from the captain. His eyes wandered to his and Audrid’s photo on their wedding day. He just stared at it for a moment. “When are they going back into the cave?”

“The suits should be ready to go tomorrow. Corporal Bains will be leading a team as soon as they’re ready,” Captain Johnstone said.

Torias just nodded. “Thank you for the update. I have work to do, so if you’ll excuse me.”

“Of course. Keep me informed about Audrid.”

As soon as he left, he took the frame of him and Audrid on their wedding day and clutched it in his hands, just staring at it. He couldn’t let her go back to Earth, but he didn’t know if he had the power to stop them. He had to convince her to get better. It might be the only way.

Audrid woke up on the cold, hard floor of her bedroom, only to crawl back in bed and fall asleep. She tumbled into dreams that left chills over her. She woke and fell back into those dreams. She couldn’t seem to just wake up. She found herself back in the caves as she ran through them.

“Audrid,” an ominous voice called out to her. “Come back to us.”

“I’m trying. I can’t find you,” she said while running down the tunnel, looking for the cloud shapes. There were none.

“We’re here. We’re everywhere.”

“Then why can’t I see you?”

"We're waiting for you. If you don't come now, you'll die. The offspring will die. All will be lost," the voice said again as it reverberated off the walls of the cave.

"Please, help me. Show yourself. Why can't I see you?!" she yelled as she turned a corner.

Suddenly, she hit a wall with a thud. It came out of nowhere. She turned around as her headlamp flickered off. She felt a chill over her.

"Are you there?" she asked. There was just silence. "Hello?" More silence. "Come back! Don't leave me!"

Her head started to throb. It felt like it was expanding, like blood was rushing into it. It became unbearable in seconds as she screamed out, holding her head.

"Help me!"

Audrid woke to the sound of her door opening. She huddled under the blanket as she pulled it over her head. She couldn't breathe. She didn't know who was coming, but terror filled her.

"Audrid, are you awake?" Torias asked softly as he sat on the edge of the bed.

She let out a relieved breath and lifted the cover off her head as she looked up at him. He caressed her cheek ever so softly, those warm blue eyes gazing into hers.

"See, I promised I'd be back," he said, his hand still on her cheek. "I heard you've been sleeping most of the day."

"They gave me a shot," she replied as she relished the feeling of his fingertips on her cheek.

"The nurse told me. I brought some dinner," he said as he held up a bag. "The nurse said you can eat it in the dining room."

"I want to eat it at home," she said as she gave him a hard look.

He sucked in a breath, leaning down to kiss her cheek.

"Come, let's go to the dining room."

He stood up and held his hand out to her. She was absolutely starving. Her stomach rumbled. She was prepared to go hungry and never eat again in protest of being there, but the thought of his food made her mouth water. She followed him to the dining room. It was empty. They sat at a round table, beside each other. He scooted his chair over until his arm was brushing up against her.

He pulled out a large container of food and opened it, handing her a fork and a napkin. He took out a small canteen and unscrewed the lid. She realized she was very thirsty as she took a sip. It was a strawberry smoothie. She smiled as she glanced at him, taking a big swig until the back of her throat was painfully cold.

"Dig in," he said.

She took a bite of the linguini, savouring the taste. It was one of her favourite meals. They were quiet as she eagerly consumed the food, wasting no time finishing it. She could feel his hand on her back the entire time as he watched her eat.

“You should also eat the food they give you, so you won’t get hungry,” he said as she took the last bite. She didn’t reply. She dug through the bag and found another container. There were two brownies inside. “I thought we could each have one. I mean, unless you’re so hungry you need to eat both.”

She turned to him with a smile as she held up a brownie to his mouth. He took a bite before taking it out of her hand. She took hers and ate it all in three big bites, chewing heavily until it was gone. He looked at her as a smile spread across his face. He leaned in to kiss her, licking off stray icing before pulling her into a soft kiss. She could taste the chocolate on him. She pulled away and leaned onto him after. He wrapped his arm around her shoulders, leaving her to finally feel warm again.

“I want to come home with you tonight. I promise I’ll stay calm,” she said as she rested her head on his shoulder.

“Audrid, I can’t take you home. It isn’t my decision,” he said as he pulled her close.

“Please. Just tell them that you can take care of me. You’re a captain. People respect you. If you tell them that, they’ll listen,” she said as she sat up straight, looking into his eyes.

“Audrid, I don’t think I can keep you safe at home. You need to be here,” he said as he stroked her cheek with his thumb.

“I promise I’ll be good. Please, just take me home, Torias,” she said as her eyes begged him.

“I can’t. But I’ll visit after work tomorrow. And I’ll stay a little longer now. But I can’t take you home,” he said as his eyes glistened. “I’m sorry.”

“I don’t want to be here,” she said as tears streamed down her face. She buried her face in his shoulder. “Don’t make me stay here.”

“I’m sorry,” he said as he held her.

“Please,” she murmured into his shoulder.

“Shh...”

She cried like that for awhile, unable to find the strength to wipe away her tears. He eventually pulled away and wiped her cheeks dry with his thumbs before kissing her softly. They headed to her room and cuddled in bed in silence. She couldn’t find the words to speak. Her life was falling apart. He seemed to know this because he just held her tight as if the end of the world had come upon them and they had to spend what little time they had left together.

When it was time for Torias to leave, she let him go. She hugged and kissed him before silently lying in bed and burying her face in her pillow as she wept. The nurse came with meds. Four pills under the tongue. She told her it was bedtime. Whatever she gave her quickly knocked her

out. She cried quietly into the pillow until sleep carried her away and she tumbled into a realm of nightmares about the cave.

Chapter 14

Torias was sitting at his desk, lost in thought about Audrid, when the door opened abruptly. He looked up and saw a young private sticking her head in the door. Sometimes he regretted having an open-door, relaxed policy with his staff, especially when he just wanted to be left alone with his thoughts.

“Did you hear, captain?” she asked, her eyes buzzing.

“Hear what?” he asked, raising a brow.

The private walked into his office, standing before him respectfully as she spoke. “There’s been an incident in the cave, sir. Sergeant Riley’s project. Two crew found down.”

“What?” he asked as his eyes went wide. “Tell me everything you know.”

“I don’t know much, sir. I was walking down the corridor when I overheard people talking about it. I thought you ought to know so I rushed here.”

“I appreciate that, private. Thank you. You’re dismissed.”

As soon as she was out of his office, he called Corporal Bains. There was no answer. He sucked in a breath, trying Captain Johnstone next. There was also no answer. He tried Johnstone’s assistant, who said he was dealing with a situation and wouldn’t be available. Torias got up and poked his head out of his office, looking around for the private who informed him about the incident. He found her sitting at a desk.

“Private, you said two crew were found down. Do you know if they were okay?” he asked.

“I heard they went to the infirmary, sir. I can find out more if you want,” she replied.

“No. I’m going to head there myself,” he said as he turned and rushed out of the building.

As soon as he arrived at the infirmary, he headed to the emergency department where Audrid had been taken that horrible day when she was found down in the cave. He heard yelling the minute he walked through the doors.

“You don’t understand!” a man’s voice yelled. “There’s something in my brain! You have to get it out!”

“Sir, please calm down,” another voice said.

He rushed down the hall to see several nurses and doctors standing around Private Brad Henley as he stood there in a gown with IVs hanging out of his arm. His face was red, and his eyes panicked.

“You have to listen to me! I’ll die if you don’t get this thing out of my brain!” he shouted as he took a step toward them.

“Sir, please, lie down in bed,” Doctor Sharma said.

Torias walked closer to the situation, hovering just behind them as he watched the private. One of the nurses had an airject syringe in her hand as they circled him closer. Suddenly, there was a struggle as he started shouting.

“No! You can’t do this!”

“This will help calm you down,” Doctor Sharma said.

“Private, you should listen to them,” Torias said as he approached the private. “They’re trying to help you.”

“Captain Riley, you have to make them believe me,” he said as tears welled up in his terrified eyes. “I’m going to die. The clouds were there. They put something in my brain. It’s going to kill me if I don’t get it out.”

“Private, just lie down,” Torias said in a calm voice.

“Captain, we really need our privacy,” Doctor Sharma said as she gave him a firm look.

“Just let me help,” he replied. He turned to the private, holding his hands up as he slowly approached him. “Why don’t you lie down and you can tell me all about it?”

“Will you listen?” Henley asked as he looked pleadingly at Torias.

“I will.”

The man nodded as he climbed in bed. One of the nurses started attending to him, pulling the blanket up and smoothing it out as another checked his IVs. Doctor Sharma gave Torias an annoyed look as she stood by watching.

“Tell me what happened, private,” Torias said as he stood by his side.

“I was in the cave. There was intense theta-polaron radiation. That was exactly what the sergeant detected before she went down,” he said as he stared intently at Torias. He was starting to calm down, though.

“What did you see before you lost consciousness?”

“A cloud, sir.”

“Tell me more.”

“It spoke to me. Not in words. In my thoughts. It was calling out in my head, saying it needed me. It needed my brain. The voice said it wouldn’t hurt me. I remember lying there on the ground as the cloud surrounded me. Then it reached into my brain,” he explained.

“It reached into your brain? How?”

“With its cloud tendril. It said it needed my brain for its offspring to develop. There’s something in my brain, sir,” he said as his face crumpled up and tears spilled down his cheeks. He sucked in a deep breath. “You have to get it out. It’s going to kill me.”

“Just rest, private. That’s an order,” Torias said as he squeezed his arm. He could tell the man was getting drowsy from the sedative.

“Tell the sergeant,” he said, slurring his words out as his eyes fluttered shut.

“Just rest,” he said softly as Henley fell asleep.

“That was quite a show, captain,” a voice said behind him.

He looked to see Captain Johnstone staring at him as Doctor Sharma and Corporal Bains stood beside him. None of them looked impressed.

“I was just trying to calm him down,” Torias said as he walked into the hallway with them.

“What about the other crew member?”

“Captain, why are you here?” Johnstone asked, giving him a hard stare.

“I heard what happened. I wanted to see if they were okay,” Torias replied. “What the hell did happen?”

“If you could take your conversation elsewhere? This is an infirmary, and people are trying to rest and heal,” Doctor Sharma said, the anger seeping into her voice as she glared at Torias.

“Let’s go to the corridor,” Johnstone said as Torias and Bains followed him out of the emergency department. Once they were just outside the doors, he started to speak. “Privates Henley and Milton were both found down in the cave. They were rushed to the infirmary and treated for exposure and hypoxia. Milton hasn’t regained consciousness yet. Henley’s condition was not as severe. He regained consciousness almost immediately.”

“Is Milton going to be okay?” Torias asked.

“They think so. They want him to rest, though. It would be best if you don’t disturb them further, Riley. Let this be,” Johnstone said.

“This is my wife’s project, and what happened to her just happened to two other people on her crew. I have a vested interest in this,” Torias said.

“I understand that, but both privates need their rest,” Johnstone said.

“What happens now?” Torias asked as he looked at Johnstone and then Bains.

“I don’t know. I need to go back to my office to sort out this mess and determine the next course of action. There will be a full investigation, though,” Johnstone said. He turned to Bains. “Lead up the investigation, corporal. Let me know the minute you find anything, no matter how small.”

“Yes, sir.”

As soon as Captain Johnstone left, Bains turned to Torias with a look of concern on her face.

“How’s Sergeant Riley, sir?”

“Not good. Look, when she was still working, did she talk about her delusions to anyone in the office?” Torias asked as he looked intently at Bains.

“She just said that she had to get back into the cave to figure out the source of the theta-polaron radiation. She was obsessed with it,” she replied.

“She didn’t talk about things being alive in the cave or being inserted in her brain?” he asked, raising a brow.

“No, sir. Is that what she’s saying now?” she asked, furrowing her brows.

He let out a breath as he glanced back at the doors to the emergency department for a moment before looking back at Bains.

“Best if we keep things between us, corporal. Don’t need rumors circulating that my wife, Milton, and Henley have lost their minds.”

“I don’t spread rumors, sir. I’m just concerned.”

“I am too. I’ll let you get back to your investigation. Keep me updated,” Torias said.

“I will, sir.”

As soon as she left, he turned and headed back into the emergency department. He was hoping to avoid Doctor Sharma, but he really needed to check in on Private Milton. He subtly glanced up at the board on the nursing station and saw his name up there. He was in bed six. He headed down the hall and quickly found bed six. The curtains were drawn around it. He peaked inside. Milton was alone. He slipped inside the curtains and walked up to the man. His eyes fluttered open.

“Captain Riley?” Milton said in a groggy voice.

“How are you, private?” Torias asked as he stood beside him.

“Tired, sir. I’ve been through the ringer today. Did you hear what happened in the cave?” he asked.

Torias nodded as he looked him over. His skin was red with a sweaty sheen. He wore an oxygen mask and had two IV bags hooked up to his arm.

“What happened in the cave? Did you see anything before you lost consciousness?”

“Shh…” he said as he grabbed Torias’s uniform and pulled him close.

“What is it, private?” Torias whispered as he leaned down so his ear was hovering over the man’s mouth.

“We were attacked. We can’t tell anyone, though. No one can know about the beings in the cave,” he whispered into Torias’s ear.

“Why can’t anyone know?” he asked quietly.

“The beings need us to reproduce. They use our brains for their babies, sir. They’ll die without us. We have to protect them.”

“But you said you were attacked. Why protect beings that attacked you?” he asked.

“They only attacked us because they had to. They mean us no harm. We have to protect them. Shh... Don’t tell anyone about the cave beings.”

Torias stood up and looked into the man’s eyes. They were intense. He believed every word he was saying.

“Did my wife tell you something about the cave before?”

“Tell me what, sir?” he asked, furrowing his brows. “Did she see the cave beings too?”

“Why don’t you get some rest, Private Milton?” Torias said as he sucked in a breath.

“You don’t believe me, do you?” he asked, raising his voice.

“Just rest, Milton,” he said as he squeezed his shoulder.

“You have to protect the cave beings!” he shouted.

“Shh... Milton. You need to rest,” Torias said. “I’m going to go now. Just rest.”

“Don’t tell them!” he shouted as he glared at Torias. “Don’t tell anyone!”

“Milton, stop. You need to calm down. Just be quiet,” Torias said as he held his finger up to his lips.

“Sir, you have to help me,” he said as he stared intently at Torias. “You have to keep this a secret. You have to help me protect them.”

“What’s going on here?” a voice said before the curtains were ripped open. Doctor Sharma stood there, glaring at him. “You need to leave, Captain Riley. My patients need their rest.”

“I was just leaving,” Torias said as he walked past her.

“Don’t tell anyone!” Milton shouted. “We have to protect the cave beings!”

Torias just walked quickly, not looking back. He could hear Milton shouting about cave beings all the way down the hall until he was out the doors of the emergency department. He almost crumpled to his knees. He found the wall and leaned against it, trying to catch his breath.

They all believe the same delusion. How is that possible? He ran his hand through his hair as he tried to breathe. *What if it’s true? No. That’s insane. It can’t be true. Somehow, they share the same delusion. I don’t know how it’s possible.*

He took a deep breath and walked back into the emergency department. He found Doctor Sharma at the nursing station. She glared at him as she looked up. He held his hands up in surrender.

"I'm not going to disturb anyone. I just want to talk to you for a minute," he said calmly, forcing a smile. She nodded as she gave him an unimpressed look. "Doctor, three people lost consciousness in the same cave at two different times, and now all of them are experiencing the same delusion. How can that be?"

"Does Sergeant Riley also believe in the cave beings?" she asked, raising a brow as she suddenly looked very interested.

"Yes. She's currently in the psychiatric unit being treated for a manic episode with psychosis. They said it was unrelated to the incident in the cave. Just a coincidence. But it can't be, can it?"

"I'm not a psychiatrist. I can't explain their illness. It's possible that exposure to exotic radiation is making them psychotic," she explained.

"How do they share the same delusion, though?" he asked as he looked intently at her.

"Maybe they all read the same kind of stories as children. Stories about cave monsters. Or maybe they talked about cave monsters before going into the cave. People tell scary stories and share myths with each other all the time. Shared delusions do happen," she explained.

"So you think it's a coincidence that they all think the same thing?"

"I don't know how they came to believe the same delusion, but there's no such thing as cave monsters, Captain Riley. That much I'm sure of," she said with a little smile.

"Of course, there aren't," he said, forcing a smile. "Thank you for your time, doctor."

She nodded, and he left the infirmary, heading to his office as his thoughts drowned in Audrid, Milton, and Henley.

"You're preoccupied," Audrid said as she lay in Torias's arms in her infirmary bed. He hadn't spoken for several minutes, just uttering "hmm" and "uh huh" as she tried to make small talk.

"What?" he muttered.

She sat up and looked at him. "You're preoccupied. What aren't you telling me?" she asked as she stared hard at him.

"It's nothing," he said as he sat up, barely looking at her.

"They're sending me back to Earth, aren't they? That's what you won't say," she said as a quiver filled her voice. She stood up and started pacing the room. "I can't go back. I can't!"

He stood up and followed her, catching her as she turned around to pace the other side of the room. He wrapped his arms around her.

"Nothing like that is happening," he said. "I'm sorry I scared you."

"You sure they aren't sending me back?" she asked as she pulled away and looked deep into his eyes.

“It hasn’t been decided yet. You have to try to get better though. Stay calm. Don’t give them a reason to send you to Earth,” he said as he cupped her face, stroking her cheeks with his thumbs before pulling her into a soft kiss.

“I’m trying,” she said as he pulled away. “I’ve stayed calm. I’ve taken my meds. I haven’t talked about the cave entities. I’m trying really hard, Torias.”

“I can see that,” he said softly with a little smile before kissing her again.

She pulled him into a hug after, sighing into his warm embrace. They were quiet for a few minutes before she pulled away and looked into his eyes.

“That doesn’t explain why you’re so preoccupied,” she said as she stroked his cheek. “Talk to me. I’m so isolated in here. I need to know what’s going on.”

“Come sit,” he said as he sat on the bed and patted it.

She sat down beside him, and he wrapped his arm around her. She leaned onto him, resting her head on his shoulder.

“Talk to me, Torias,” she said without lifting her head. She felt him take a deep breath.

“I don’t want you to get upset, so try to remain calm, okay?” he finally said.

She sat up straight and turned to him as her heart sped up. He was staring at his lap. She turned his head so he would face her as her eyes turned intense.

“Tell me.”

“Stay calm.”

“Tell me, Torias.”

“They restarted your project without you. They sent a team into the cave today, headed by Corporal Bains,” he said as he looked down.

“What?” she uttered as she sucked in a breath.

They’re taking my project away from me. They’re taking it all away. It’s happening. I’m losing everything. It’s all going to hell!

“There was an incident in the cave today. Milton and Henley were found down. They’re in the infirmary, being treated for exposure and hypoxia. They’re going to be okay, I think. Physically, that is,” he said, still looking at his lap.

She sat there with her mouth gaping open as she stared at him. “I can’t believe this,” she finally uttered.

“Don’t freak out about it,” he said as he pulled her against him. “You have to focus on yourself. You have to get better so they won’t send you to Earth. Don’t let this bring you down.”

“Torias,” she said as she pulled away.

She just looked at him. He didn't understand anything, and she felt too lost for words. She stood up and started pacing the room as he sat there, watching her. *It's all going to hell. I'm going to lose everything. I'm going to lose Torias. I'm going to die. It's all going to hell.*

"Audrid, please stop and come sit down. I want to spend time with you. I miss you," he said as his eyes begged her to stop. She glanced at him. He looked so tired.

"You have to believe me, Torias," she said as she stormed in circles around the room.

"Everything's going to hell. They're trying to take everything away from me. They've taken my project from me. They're going to send me back to Earth. I'm going to die." She stopped abruptly and glared at him as she screamed, "I'm going to die!"

"Shh..." he said as he stood up and tried to wrap her up in his arms. She pushed him away and started to pace again.

"There are entities in that cave. If I don't return to release this thing growing in my brain, I'll die. The entity will die. You have to believe me!"

"Audrid, please, just stop."

"What happened to Milton and Henley? Did the cave entities get to them too?" she asked as she stopped and looked at him. He was staring at the door, avoiding her gaze. "What happened to Milton and Henley?!"

"Audrid, try to be calm," he said as he wrapped her up in his arms. She tried to fight her way out of them, but he held her tight, bear-hugging her as she struggled. "Just be calm."

"I can't!" she yelled. "You have to believe me. Milton and Henley must have cave entities in their brains too. We're all going to die if we don't go back to the cave. Ask them, Torias. You have to ask them. They'll tell you. Ask them, Torias!"

"Just calm down, Audrid," he said into her ear as he held her so tight that she couldn't move. "Shh... Just be calm."

"Torias, you have to believe me," she said as her eyes burned. "This is bigger than just you and me now. This is bigger than Jared. This is bigger than the project. Everything is too much. It's all too much. I can no longer think clearly. My thoughts race all the time. Too many things are happening. It hurts. I can't..."

"Shh..."

"Torias, please," she said as tears streamed down her face. "Please..."

"Shh... It will all be okay. You just have to stay calm and get better. Don't worry about Milton or Henley or Jared or the project. Just worry about yourself. You need to get better."

"You don't understand," she cried as she buried her head in his shoulder and melted into his arms. "No one understands."

"Shh..." he said as he rubbed her back. "Shh..."

“Torias...”

“Shh...”

She sobbed into his shoulder as thoughts filled her head. *It's all going to hell. The cave aliens... Jared... Earth... It's all too much. I can no longer think. It's all a tangled web. Who's weaving the threads? Who's the spider causing all of this? Who's responsible? I can't think. It's all too much.*

“Shh... Just be calm. It will all be okay if you stay calm.”

How can I stay calm when it's all falling apart?

I'm going to die. I don't want to die.

“Shh... I love you. Shh...”

Chapter 15

That night, Audrid fell into a fitful sleep full of dreams and nightmares, some about the cave, others about Torias. She missed him so much. She missed his warm embrace, his touch, and the way he completed her. In the middle of the night, she tumbled into a sensual dream about him.

"I love you," she uttered as she kissed him deeply, her hands on his bare chest, palms feeling those strong muscles.

"I love you too. More than anything," he murmured between kisses.

She ran her hands down his abdomen until she was at his pants, unbuckling them and pushing them down his thighs. She could see his erection starting through his boxers as she skimmed her hand across the front. He pulled her back into the kiss as she continued to stroke the front of his underwear. He took his pants, shoes, and socks off and was standing there in just his boxers. She was in her lacy bra and panties.

"Take it off me, Torias," she whispered into his ear.

He reached out to her and unclasped her bra. She let it fall to the floor as his hands found her breasts and kneaded them. She cooed as he thumbed her hard nipples. She could feel herself growing wet. Then he slowly slid her panties down her hips until they fell to the floor. He trailed his one hand down from her breast, across her belly, until it reached between her legs, his finger sweeping across her folds.

"Oh, Torias..." she said breathily.

"I want to make you come. I want you to scream out my name," he whispered into her ear.

She pulled down his boxers as his erection sprung up. She grabbed his cock, not bothering with gentleness, and started to stroke it as he groaned. He suddenly grabbed her by the waist and moved her to the bed, pushing her down. She climbed back until her head hit the pillow and he was lying on top of her with his warm body.

"I need you," she murmured as he took her into a deep kiss.

She could feel his erection poking into her. He parted her legs and she guided him in. She gasped as he filled her.

"Ohhh... Torias..."

He took a moment to settle into her as he gazed into her eyes. It was like he was tugging on her soul. It left her with warm tingles. And then he thrust into her as she gasped again. He wasted no time. He started pounding into her as her moans filled the room.

"Oh... God..." she murmured as she stared into his eyes. "Oh... Torias..."

She mewled his name over and over as a warmth spread out from her loins. She could feel how wet she was as his cock slid in and out of her with ease. He picked up the pace, going faster and harder.

“Torias...” she mewled out. “Torias...”

He took her hard as his cock skimmed her G-spot and she cried out his name.

“Torias!”

“I love you...” he said with heavy breaths as he pounded into her.

“I love you too...” she said breathily.

He pummeled into her harder, faster, driving into her like a wild stallion who had let loose and lost control. And it felt good. It felt delicious and warm as heat boiled over her, spreading up her belly until even her ears were hot. She was on fire. He hit her again, even harder.

“Torias!”

His cock kept hitting her sensitive spot again and again as she let out long moans, deep and throaty and guttural. The pleasure was too much. She bit her lip to keep from screaming as she arched her back and spread her hips open wider. He pounded into her as she let go of her lip and cried out his name.

“Torias!”

She was so hot now, and his body felt like it was on fire against hers. She squeezed her eyes shut as she dug her nails into his back, a bolt of electricity spreading through her and out her fingertips and toes.

“Torias... Oh, God... Fuck... Torias...” she muttered between moans.

He kept hitting her as she reached her climax, her arms flopping at her sides as she melted into the bed. She was panting beneath him as he rammed into her, his grunts and groans filling the room. She mewled out his name softly as she whimpered and moaned.

“Torias... Torias...”

“Fuck!” he exclaimed as he went stiff and she felt his hot seed shooting into her.

“Oh, Torias...”

“I love you...”

“I love you. I love what you do to me.”

He collapsed on top of her, and soon their two warm bodies become one as they lay there, breathing heavily. She tried to catch her breath as he held her. Her whole body was limp as she relaxed into the bed and he relaxed into her.

“This is forever and always,” he muttered into her ear, his breath tickling her hair.

“Forever and always...”

Audrid woke up feeling wet and warm. She pulled up her gown and reached her hand between her legs, dipping her fingertips beneath the waistband of her underwear. She slid her finger into her folds, feeling how moist she was. She found her entrance and slid the moisture up until her folds were soaked with it. She started to rub her clit as her other hand found her breast and squeezed it. Soon, tingles were spreading out her body as she remembered her vivid dream and imagined his cock inside her.

“Torias...” she mewled. “Oh, Torias...”

She rubbed harder and faster until the tingles were spreading out, getting stronger as they sizzled out her fingertips. She curled her toes as she felt the surge going through her.

“Oh... Torias...” she mumbled as she circled her clit faster.

And soon she was melting into the bed as she thought of him, his warmth, imagining him collapsing on top of her. She pulled her hand away as she rolled onto her side and snuggled into the bed, falling back asleep.

Audrid was picking at her lunch when one of the nurses started showing around a new patient. She ignored them at first until she heard the name “Brad” being uttered. She looked up, her eyes going wide. Private Brad Henley was standing there in a white infirmary gown, staring back at her with his mouth gaping open.

“Sergeant?” he said after a moment.

“Brad, let me finish showing you around,” the nurse said as she escorted him out of the dining room.

“Wait!” Audrid exclaimed as she jumped out of her chair and ran after them. “What are you doing here, Henley?”

“Audrid, you can talk to Brad after I’ve shown him around. Go finish your lunch, please,” she stated firmly.

“Henley, talk to me. What happened? Why are you here?” she badgered as she got closer, staring wide-eyed at him.

“Audrid, I’m not going to ask you again. Give us some space,” the nurse said in a hard tone.

“Fine!” Audrid snapped as she stepped back into the dining room, peering around the door at them.

She watched as the nurse escorted him down the hallway, showing him all the various rooms before disappearing down the adjacent hallway. She quickly followed and stood at the corner, peering around at them. The nurse took him into a bedroom across the hall and two doors down from hers. They disappeared into the room.

She jogged down the hall and into her bedroom, standing at the door, waiting for them to emerge. Finally, the nurse left. She walked into Henley's room and found him sitting on the bed, looking like he was in a daze. He looked up at her.

"Audrid, you aren't allowed in other people's rooms," the nurse said as she appeared at the door.

"I need to talk to him," Audrid replied.

"Then talk in the common areas. Other bedrooms are off limits. Are you finished with your lunch?" she asked.

"I don't know," she muttered as she walked past the nurse into the hallway. She hovered there as she watched the nurse talking to Henley.

"Are you sure I can't get you some lunch, Brad?" she asked.

"Henley, come have lunch with me," Audrid said from outside the door.

"Yes, sergeant," he replied as he stood up.

"I'll get you a tray," the nurse said as they walked down the hall and around the corner to the dining room.

Audrid sat back down at her lunch tray, staring at it. She wasn't a fan of their egg salad sandwiches. It just made her think of Torias and their anniversary. She wanted his egg salad sandwiches, and she didn't want to be here. She wanted to be in that simulator again, hiking with her husband. She sighed and took a bite as Henley sat down across from her and the nurse slid a tray in front of him.

"I didn't know you were here, sarge," Henley said quietly. "Did the cave aliens get to you too?"

"Not here," she whispered as she looked at one of the staff lingering in the dining room while everyone had lunch.

He nodded.

"Eat up. You need your strength," she said as she took another bite.

They didn't say another word until their food was done. She then gestured for him to follow her. They went into the lounge. The TV was blasting loudly as some of the other patients watched a movie. She grabbed a deck of cards and held it up to him.

"Know King's Corner?" Audrid asked.

"Yes, sir," he replied as they sat down at a round table across from each other.

She started shuffling the deck as she eyed the room. There weren't any staff around.

"Why are you here, Henley?" she asked quietly as she started dealing seven cards to each of them.

“The cave, sir,” he said as he sucked in a breath, squeezing his eyes shut briefly. Then he looked at her intensely. “We were attacked by the beings in the cave. But they don’t believe me. They think I’m crazy. And now I’m going to die. The aliens implanted something into my brain. If it isn’t released into the cave, that’s it. I’m a goner. I don’t want to die, sarge.” He closed his eyes again, taking another breath.

“Same thing happened to me. Do they come to you in your dreams?” she asked, drawing four cards and placing them in cardinal directions, with the deck in the middle.

“I’ve had dreams. The cloud people... It gives me chills. I just want this to be over.”

“So do I.”

“They’re bringing Milton up too. I overheard them talking about it. He’s saying the same thing about the cave. No one believes us, though. They weren’t there. The aliens... the cloud people... I can still feel them reaching into my brain. I can remember it all,” he said as his eyes went glossy.

“You remember them attacking you? I don’t. I only started to realize it later, after the dreams.”

“I remember. I can still feel the cold chill... those tendrils... We’re going to die. Milton, you, me. We’ll die if we don’t get back into the cave.”

“No one’s dying today, private,” she said firmly.

When they finished their game, they played another round and another, talking about the cave, retelling every detail they remembered. Audrid went over every dream, every clue that they left her. They had to find a way back to the cave.

Henley was right. Milton was escorted into the unit an hour later. Nurse Chong also showed him around. His eyes went wide as he saw Audrid and Henley sitting in the lounge.

“Milton!” Henley called out as he waved the young man over.

“Private Milton, play a game of cards with us when the nurse is done showing you around,” Audrid said.

“Jessie, you don’t answer to her. She’s not your superior officer while you’re here,” Nurse Chong said as she led him away. Audrid let out a huff as she sat back in her chair.

“As far as I’m concerned, you’re still my sarge,” Henley said as he shuffled the deck.

“I appreciate that. I’m not asking you to follow my orders, but we all need to work together. That’s the only way we’ll survive this,” she said as she watched the hallway for Milton.

She kept glancing at the clock. Finally, he returned ten minutes later. He sat down at the table with them. Henley scooped up all the cards and started shuffling so Milton could join them.

“Tell me everything, private,” Audrid said quietly.

“There’s something in my brain, Sergeant Riley,” he said in a shaky voice.

“There’s something in all our brains, Milton,” Henley said.

“He’s right. We’re going to die if we don’t find a way out of here. No one’s dying on my watch, though. We need to figure out an escape, and we need to do it tonight. We’ll wait till the middle of the night, when there are only two nurses. That’s our best chance of escaping. We just have to figure out how. Any ideas?” Audrid asked.

Milton and Henley looked at each other pensively before shrugging.

“We’ll find a way, sarge,” Henley said.

“We won’t let you down, sir,” Milton added.

“Keep your eyes peeled. Watch the staff. Watch their routine. We need to know everything we can about this place if we’re going to formulate an escape plan,” Audrid said. “No sitting in your rooms, feeling sorry for yourselves. We’re all on duty right now. Our mission is to escape from here. Is that understood?”

“Yes, sir,” they both said.

“Good. Now start thinking.”

Audrid spent the afternoon slowly pacing the long hallway that ran from the entrance to all the common areas. She wanted to watch everything. Henley stationed himself in the lounge, while Milton took the hallway with the bedrooms and shower rooms in it. She got odd looks from the staff, and more than once, Nurse Chong came and asked her if she was okay.

“I’m fine,” she muttered again as she went back to pacing.

“You seem restless. You’ve been pacing the hallway all afternoon. Why don’t you go have a rest in your room before dinner?” Nurse Chong said.

“I said I’m fine,” she said as she walked past the nurse.

“Audrid, I’m concerned. What’s going on in your mind right now? Are you worried about something?”

Audrid let out a huge huff as she turned around to face the nurse. “I’m always worried about something. I’m locked up in a psychiatric unit. Everything has been taken away from me. I’ve lost my job. I’ve lost my project. I can’t be with my husband. How do you think that makes me feel?” she asked in a harsh tone.

“I get that you’re frustrated, but Audrid, no one has taken anything away from you. You haven’t lost your job or your project. You’re simply on medical leave. And your husband visits you in the evenings. Things might seem bad right now, but this isn’t forever,” she said softly.

“It is forever,” she snapped. “I’ve lost everything. They want to ship me back to Earth. Well, if they do, that’s it. Game over. I’m done.”

“What do you mean by that?” she asked, furrowing her brows with concern.

“That’s none of your business. Now leave me alone,” she said as she went back to pacing.

Nurse Chong finally left her alone, only to return a few minutes later with a tiny little cup.

“Nope. I’m not taking it!” Audrid said as she stormed past her. “I’ll stop pacing and go to my room.”

Nurse Chong followed her there. “Audrid, you need this medication to help you calm down. Take it, please. I don’t want to have to get additional staff and give you an injection.”

Audrid yanked the cup out of her hand and dumped the pill in her mouth. “There, now go away.”

“Thank you,” she said. “Get some rest.”

“I don’t need rest. I need my freedom.”

As soon as Nurse Chong was gone, she ran to the bathroom and spat out what was left of the med. She cupped some water in her hands and drank it up, swishing it around before spitting it out. There wasn’t much left of the pill. Just some remnants of pink dye.

She sighed as she sat on her bed after. She really didn’t want to sit in her room, but she did feel like she needed to relax. Knowing two of her crew were now locked up with her only made her feel more on edge. She lay down on her bed and tried to get some rest. She was just starting to drift off when she heard a knock at the door.

“Sarge,” someone whispered loudly through the door.

She sat up quickly and made her way to the door. Henley and Milton were on the other side, looking eager.

“What is it?” she asked as she looked up and down the hallway. There was another patient wandering around the unit, but no staff.

“Let’s play some cards,” Henley said with a wink.

“Cards it is,” Audrid replied as the three of them walked down the hall and around the corner to the lounge.

“Sergeant Major this time. I’ll deal,” Henley said as he grabbed a deck and started shuffling.

“We’ve been talking,” Milton whispered as he leaned forward.

“Go on,” Audrid replied, looking intrigued.

“I don’t know if you know this about me,” Milton said, “but I ran into a bit of trouble a few years back. Almost got kicked out of the military. It was your husband that set me on the straight path. He gave me a chance.”

“Torias told me you were a troublemaker. He used to joke about it. Said he sent you on purpose to my division to keep me on my toes,” Audrid said with a little smirk. “Something about breaking into places you weren’t authorized to be in.”

“Exactly,” Milton said.

“What’s your plan, private?” she asked, raising a brow as she took her hand of cards.

“I was an engineer before I went into the sciences. I learned all about door locks. On Mars, almost all doors use the standard M51 Pinlock Palm Reader panel. I’ve been looking at the exit doors here. They use the same thing. Not the most secure lock for a psychiatric unit, if you ask me,” he said as a little smile crept on his face.

“You know how to disable it?” she whispered.

“Hell, yeah,” he said as that little smile turned into a big smirk.

She sat back in her chair as she let out a satisfied breath. “Alright. Now we’re talking.”

“We just have to come up with a plan for tonight. How do we get to the door and break through it without the nurses noticing?” Henley asked as he played a card. He looked to his left at Audrid.

“Playmaker, your turn.”

She studied her cards for a minute as she tried to think. “They drug us extra heavy at night. It’s hard to stay awake. Once you get your meds, don’t let yourself fall asleep. Once you’re asleep, you might not wake up until the morning, and our plan will be a bust.” She played a card and then looked at Milton. “Your turn.”

“When it’s time, come get us, sarge. We’ll sneak down the hall to the exit, and I’ll disable the lock. Then it’s freedom time,” Milton said as he played his card.

“How long will it take you to get the lock disabled?” she asked.

“My record for breaking in was three minutes. I stole a bottle of rum from the General’s office. That’s the one that almost got me kicked out,” Milton replied. “Let’s see if I can beat my record tonight.”

“Alright. I’ll come get you tonight. In the meantime, lie low. Don’t cause any problems. We shouldn’t associate too much. Don’t want them to get suspicious of us,” Audrid replied as she grabbed all the cards and put them in the box.

“I was going to win that game,” Henley said, giving her an unimpressed look.

“No games, Henley. This is life or death now,” she said as she got up and walked away.

Her heart was racing as she walked down the hall to her bedroom. She had no idea if their plan would work, but they had to get out of here. She didn’t know what the timeframe was, how long they had, but if they didn’t get back to the cave, the three of them were doomed.

Chapter 16

That afternoon, Audrid felt keyed up about her plans. She didn't want to pace the hallway and attract attention, but she couldn't just sit in her room. She felt like she was going to jump out of her own skin. She walked into the hallway and found a staff.

"I want to have a shower. Unlock the door for me," she said.

"Sure thing, Audrid," the nurse said as she walked to the shower room a few doors down and across from Audrid's room and unlocked it.

"My husband will be visiting at some point. Come get me if he arrives," Audrid said before going into the clean utility room and gathering what she needed for a shower.

She went into the shower room and started undressing. She turned the water on and waited a moment for it to heat up before stepping into it. She let the water rain over her hair and her body as it soothed her. As she ran the bar of soap over her body, she thought of Torias and their many showers together. She could feel herself stirring as a warmth tingled across her belly. There was a knock at the door, startling her.

"Audrid, your husband's here. He's waiting in your room for you," the nurse said.

"Alright," Audrid replied.

A smile spread across her face. Without turning off the water, she stepped out and threw a towel around herself. She opened the door and saw that the hallway was clear. She left the door wide open as she ran to her room. Torias was standing there, looking out the window. The sun was starting to set as it bathed the landscape in pink. He seemed lost in it, not noticing her standing there, dripping wet. Without words, she grabbed his hand and tugged on him to follow.

"Hey there," he said with a smile. "You can finish your shower. I'll wait."

"Just come," she said in a commanding voice as she led him into the hall.

The coast was clear. She practically dragged him into the shower room and shut the door. A smirk spread across her face as she dove into a kiss, sucking on his bottom lip before biting it. He pulled away, wide-eyed.

"What are you doing?" he asked as he raised a brow.

"Shh... We probably don't have a lot of time before they get suspicious," she said as she dropped her towel and then started unzipping his uniform.

He stopped her, taking her hands in his. "Audrid."

"I had a dream about you last night, Torias," she said before leaning in to whisper in his ear.

"You fucked me so hard that when I woke up, I had to make myself come."

"Oh?" he asked as he stared into her eyes.

“Oh, yes,” she said with a smirk as she started quickly undressing him. “And now, we’re going to fuck because I can’t stop thinking about you. I miss you.”

“I miss you too, but this is very inappropriate,” he said with a little chuckle. “I don’t know if I should let this happen.”

“Listen to me,” she said in a firm voice as she tore his clothes off until his shirt was on the floor and his uniform bunched up at his knees along with his boxers. “You’re going to take me right here in the shower because I need you. I’ve lost almost everything. My life’s falling apart. You’re all I have left, and I barely have you. So, fuck me, Torias.” She took his cock in her hand and started stroking it as he groaned. “You know you want this too.”

“Oh, Audrid,” he groaned out as she stroked him harder.

When he was hard as a rock, she bent down and pulled his boots off. He no longer resisted. She pulled his jumpsuit off until he was standing there naked before her. She grabbed him by the biceps and steered him into the shower. Lust filled his eyes as he stared at her. He took her and pushed her into the wall as he dove in for a kiss. It was deep and hard as his tongue danced with hers.

He lifted her ass as she wrapped her legs around his waist. She let out a gasp as she felt his cock pushing into her. And then he started to thrust. She let out a moan.

“Oh... God...” she muttered as she held onto his neck, just staring into those hungry eyes.

He thrust into her again, harder this time. She moaned long and hard as he drove into her. His eyes were piercing hers the whole time. They were intense and lust filled. She stared back at him intensely as she bit her lip, trying not to cry out his name.

“Audrid,” he said with a grunt as he pounded her into the shower wall. The tiles were cold against her ass.

She let out another moan as he drove into her harder. He picked up the pace, and soon she could feel tingles spreading out her body. She closed her eyes as she let her head fall back against the tiles.

“Oh, Torias...”

He kept ramming into her hard as she tried not to scream out his name. But she was so fired up as pleasure washed over her. His name escaped her lips again.

“Torias!”

“Shh,” he said as he chuckled, pounding into her again.

“Oh, God...”

He just chuckled again as he watched her, pummeling into her harder and faster until all she could feel was a hot electricity surging through her and out her fingertips and toes.

“Oh, God, Torias!”

She felt like she was melting into the tiles as he rammed her into the wall again and again. She was panting heavily as bliss filled her. He pounded her again hard as a new wave of tingles washed over her. And again. Harder. Faster. She let out a loud moan as he drove her into the wall. She cried out his name.

“Torias!”

And then she was floating. Everything was light and airy and dreamy as stars washed over her eyes. She felt so warm. All she could hear was the pitter-patter of the shower, their heavy breaths, and her heart racing in her chest. She took a deep breath and gasped it out as he hit her harder than ever. He let out a loud grunt as he stiffened.

“Oh...” she mewled softly. “Oh, Torias...”

She could feel him releasing into her before lowering her to the floor and collapsing into her as her body pressed against the shower wall. His breaths were heavy against her neck. He kissed her sloppily just below the ear for a moment before pulling away breathlessly and staring into her eyes.

“I hope no one heard us,” he said with a little smirk.

“It was worth it,” she said as she pulled him into a kiss.

She was still breathing hard as she pulled away, biting her lip and staring into those beautiful blue eyes. She thought of her plans suddenly as she looked away. She couldn’t tell him. She sucked in a deep breath as she gently pushed him off her and grabbed a towel.

“I have only one towel,” she said with a little smile as she watched him standing there, dripping wet.

“Figures,” he said with a laugh. “You planned this so you could see me wet and naked.”

“And if I did?” she asked with a little smirk.

“If you did, then... hmm... I don’t know,” he said as he pulled her into a kiss before yanking the towel out of her hand.

She watched as he started drying himself off. He was so haphazard about it. She preferred things to be systematic. She grabbed the towel out of his hands and started to dry him off in an orderly manner, starting with his shoulders.

“I’m glad you didn’t get your hair wet. That would be hard to explain,” she said as she moved onto his chiseled chest.

“It’s going to be hard to explain why I’m coming out of the shower room with you,” he said as he lifted up his arms so she could dry his skin underneath them.

“We can wait until the coast is clear to make our exit,” she said as she moved onto his groin.

He let out a little groan as she toweled off his balls. She turned him around and started drying off his firm ass and then his thighs and his calves, and finally, his feet.

“You should get dressed,” she said as she tossed the towel aside.

“I would say the same to you. If we get caught, I might not be able to visit again,” he said as he slipped his boxers on.

“We won’t get caught,” she said as she slid on some panties and then threw a fresh gown over her head.

“You’re very confident tonight,” he said with a little smirk.

“You make me confident,” she replied in a husky voice as she leaned against the door, watching him dress. She admired his chiseled form, feeling disappointed when it was all covered up by his uniform. “Did you bring me dinner?”

“I did. It’s in the dining room, waiting for you,” he said as he looked in the mirror, finger-combing his hair into place.

“Wait,” she said as she took him by the waist and pulled him close to her. She reached up and tussled his hair just a little. “Much better.”

“My personal stylist at work,” he said before pulling her into a kiss.

“My new calling, perhaps,” she murmured between kisses.

There was a knock at the door as they jumped apart, her heart skipping a beat.

“Audrid, just checking on you. You’ve been in there for a while,” Nurse Chong said.

“I’m fine. Go away,” she said loudly.

“Alright,” she said.

Audrid pressed her ear against the door as she listened to her footsteps walking away. She held up her fingertip to her lips as she looked at Torias and then slowly opened the door, peaking out.

“Meet me in my room,” she said as she grabbed him by the arm and pushed him out the door before shutting it.

She counted to ten in her head and then opened the door and walked out as if she hadn’t just had sex in the shower at the psychiatric unit. She tried to suppress her grin as she walked to her room. He was sitting on her bed with a big smirk on his face.

“I’m hungry,” she said as she walked up to him and took his hand, tugging on him to follow. They headed to the dining room, where a bag of food was sitting on one of the tables. “What did you make me?”

“Baked Pasta al la Norma,” he said as he pulled out a container and handed it to her.

As she opened it, the delicious smell of garlic filled the room.

“Garlic bread too?” she asked.

“Of course,” he said as he pulled out a bun wrapped in tin foil.

The taste was divine, as it always was. She could feel him watching her eat, but she didn't care. She dug in eagerly and ate every scrap until the container was clean and the bread was nothing but crumbs.

"Here," he said as he turned her chin to face him and pulled her into a sloppy kiss, licking her lips before delving his tongue into her mouth. "You had a little on your lips."

She just smiled in return, feeling her cheeks warm. If all went as planned tonight, she would be home soon, and they would be back to their normal routine. Cooking and baking together. Dinners at home every night. Falling asleep in each other's arms. She would have her life back. He tucked a piece of hair behind her ears as he watched her.

"What are you thinking?" he asked softly.

"How much I love you," she said with a smile. "Did you bring dessert too?"

"Always," he said as he pulled a container out of the bag and handed it to her.

"Strawberry mousse?" she asked with a smile as she looked at the pink fluffy dessert.

"Raspberry, actually," he replied as he took the spoon and scooped up a heaping serving. He spooned it into her mouth. She relished the taste.

"Delicious," she said as she swallowed it.

He pulled her into a kiss. It was soft at first, but then he deepened it as his hand found her hair and his fingertips twisted in her long, wet strands.

"I love you," he murmured as he pulled away, cupping her cheek as his thumb caressed her.

"Everything will be good again soon," she said with a smile before pulling him back into the kiss.

And it would. She would make sure of it. She was going to get her life back.

"Huh?" he murmured as he pulled away. "Audrid, did I just see Private Milton walk by?"

"He's here," she said with a sigh.

"And you weren't going to mention it?" he asked, raising a brow.

"I was distracted," she said with a coy, little smile. She sucked in a deep breath. "Henley's here too. Not that it matters. Nothing matters anymore."

"Don't say that. All of this matters. When did they get here? Have you talked to them? I had no idea they had been transferred here. I should have kept tabs on them. Made sure they were okay after everything that happened," he said as he rambled on with furrowed brows.

"Don't be hard on yourself, Torias. This isn't your doing," she said as she took his hand and squeezed it. "Although..." She trailed off as she let go of his hand and looked into the distance.

"What?" he asked as he looked at her with concern.

“If you would just believe me. It would be nice to have one person on our side. I feel like Milton, Henley, and I are on our own. No one believes us,” she said with a sigh.

It no longer mattered because they already had a plan, and it was going to work. She wouldn’t stop until she saved them all. No one was dying today. They were her crew, and she would take care of them.

“I’m sorry” was all he said. They were quiet for a moment. She was lost in her thoughts.

So much has happened. And my own husband doesn’t believe any of it. He doesn’t trust me. He’ll see soon enough. They all will. We just have to make it back into that cave. We won’t stop until we’re saved.

“Are you mad at me?” he asked as he took her hand, running his thumb across her knuckles.

“I don’t know, Torias,” she said in a hard tone as she looked away. “It would be nice if my own husband believed me.”

“It’s just far-fetched. But you seem like you’re doing better. You’re calmer. Not as erratic or agitated. I think the medications are helping you. You just have to keep getting better so they won’t have a reason to send you back to Earth,” he said as he started running circles over the back of her hand with his thumb.

She pulled her hand away. “I’m not going to get better until this thing is out of my brain, Torias,” she snapped as she looked away.

“Don’t talk that way. If they hear you talking about your delusions, they’ll want to send you back to Earth.”

“I can’t believe you still don’t believe me. Look at Henley and Milton. They’re your proofs. I never told them about the cave beings or the offspring implanted in my brain. Yet they believe the same thing. Why?” she asked as she gave him a hard stare.

“Audrid.”

“Because it happened, Torias,” she said, raising her voice. “It happened. The cave entities exist. The cloud people. Whatever you want to call them. They’re real. Eventually, you’re going to have to start believing us. You’ll see the truth soon enough.”

“What does that mean?” he asked, furrowing his brows.

“You’ll see.”

“Audrid, talk to me.”

“I don’t know how to talk to you. You think I’m crazy even when the evidence is staring you in the face. You’d rather think I’m insane than believe me, your wife. Your partner. Your lover. You have no faith in me. How’s that supposed to make me feel, Torias? You let them lock me up here. If they send me to Earth, it will be your fault!” she yelled as she stood up abruptly and stormed out of the room.

“Audrid, wait,” he said as he ran after her.

“You know what? If the roles were reversed, I would believe you. I would take a leap of faith for you. Because that’s what people who love each other do. But I guess I love you more than you love me!” she yelled.

“Audrid, stop, please,” he said as he closed the distance between them.

He tried to take her hand, but she pulled it away as she felt the tears welling up in her eyes. She just stared at him, trying not to cry for all to see. She had plans, but did those plans matter if she didn’t have him? He couldn’t trust her. He couldn’t take a leap of faith for her. She thought she could live with it. But as he stood there before her, all she could see was betrayal.

“Sarge, you okay?” Henley asked as he ran up to her.

“We’re fine here, private,” Torias said loudly.

“We’re not fine,” she said as she turned and stormed to her room.

“You should believe her, sir. She isn’t crazy. None of us are,” Henley said.

Torias didn’t reply as he ran down the hall after her. She plunked herself down in bed as she buried her face in the pillow, her tears soaking into it.

“Hey,” he said softly as he sat on the bed, stroking her back.

“Go away,” she muttered into the pillow.

“I’m not leaving you like this,” he said softly, rubbing warm circles with his strong hand.

She rolled onto her back as she glared at him. “You hurt me, Torias.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to. But you’re ill. You’re delusional. You’re not thinking clearly. When this is all over, you’ll see that you were wrong and it was all part of your illness. You just need to get better first. Then it will all make sense. You’ll see,” he said as he caressed her cheek. “You talk about taking a leap of faith. Take one with me. Believe me. There’s nothing living in your brain. You need help.”

“Then how do you explain Milton and Henley?” she asked as she stared hard at him.

“I don’t know,” he said as he looked away.

“You can’t.”

They were quiet for a moment.

“Torias, listen to me. Something happened in that cave. This all started in the cave. There are entities living there. They attacked me. Maybe they’re making me crazy. I don’t know. Everything feels chaotic. My head no longer feels right. But it’s not because I’m mentally ill. It’s because there’s something growing in my brain.”

“Audrid—.”

“Listen to me!”

“Okay,” he said with a sigh.

“It all started with the cave. How do you explain the timing? I’ve never suffered from mental illness in my entire life. I walk into a cave one time and come out different. I can’t explain it any other way. I have dreams. The cave people talk to me telepathically in those dreams. They’ve told me what happened, what they did to me. I know you don’t want to believe it. But look at Henley and Milton. That’s your evidence. If you can’t take a leap of faith with me alone, then look at the evidence that’s mounted, and take it with the three of us. You can’t explain this in any other way. We have to be right.”

She watched as he sucked in a deep breath. He had a pensive look on his face as he struggled internally with this. Normally, she could read him. She always could, from the day they met. She had that connection with him. But now, he was closed off. He was lost in his head, and she couldn’t tell what he was thinking.

“I’m not crazy,” she said as she reached up and cupped his cheek. “One day soon, you’ll see that.”

“I want to believe you,” he said as he stared at her with glossy eyes. “I really do.”

“Then do.”

He sucked in another breath as he went quiet, looking away. She could see him gazing out the window. It was now dark outside. She could see the stars. She used to lie on the grass as a little girl at her grandma’s house and count the constellations, trying to remember all of them. She had memorized most of them. She had always wondered if the stars looked different on Mars and the moon. In some ways, they did. But in other ways, they were the same. The stars always felt like home, not Earth. And if they sent her back there, her life would be over. Mars was her home.

“Talk to me,” he said softly as he looked down at her.

“Believe me.”

“I can’t.”

“Then go.”

“What?” he asked with a hurt look in his eyes.

“Just go,” she said. “Talk to me when you believe me.”

“You’re throwing me out?” he asked as his eyes glistened.

“You’ll believe me soon, Torias. And when you do, you’re going to feel like a fool for not trusting me. I love you with all my heart. I would go to the end of the galaxy and back for you. I’d take that leap of faith and believe you, no matter what it was you were telling me. I would believe you. And when the truth finally comes out and you’re forced to see that I was right... I

just... I hope it won't be too late for us," she said as she stared at him. She felt a chill wash over her. "I don't want to lose you to this. But I'm afraid I'm already losing you."

"I don't want to lose you either," he said as he took her face in his hands and stared deep into her eyes. "I don't want to lose you, ever. Please, don't walk away from us. You're sick, Audrid. One day you'll be better. One day you'll see."

"Only one of us can be right, Torias. The other needs to take a leap of faith. It's time you took that leap with me."

"Audrid—."

"I'll talk to you..." Her voice started to break. "I'll talk to you when you believe me." Her voice was barely above a whisper as she stared up at him through tears. She blinked them away, feeling the sting as she looked into his eyes.

"Audrid, please."

"Just go."

"Please," he said as he leaned down to kiss her.

She didn't kiss him back. She just glared at him as hot tears spilled down her cheeks. Finally, he broke eye contact with her and left. She watched him go, and then she rolled onto her belly and cried into the pillow. He would believe her soon, but the fact that he didn't believe her now stung. It was a betrayal, and it made her heart ache to think about it.

Maybe this is exactly what Jared planned.

No. That's not real.

Is it real?

What's real?

That thing in my brain is real. But what about the rest of it? Is it making me paranoid, crazy, insane? I no longer know what to think. Everything's so confusing. All I know is that I have to get this thing out of my brain before it kills me. Then everyone will see.

Torias will see. He'll believe me, finally. And I hope it tears him up inside to know he didn't believe me. I hope it guts him and makes him feel as awful as I feel right now. I hope...

I just hope I don't lose him and everything else in the meantime.

I'm scared. I'm lost. I'm alone.

Chapter 17

Torias lingered in the hallway outside Audrid's room as his heart crunched in his chest. He turned back and saw her face buried in the bed as she sobbed. He wanted to run to her, soothe

her, kiss away all her pain, but she had just thrown him out. He turned and walked quickly to the unit exit. On the way, Audrid's nurse stopped him.

"Captain Riley, Doctor Medina was hoping to talk to you before you left," Nurse Chong said as she stood in the door of the nursing station. He sighed as he turned around and gave her a curt nod. "Everything okay?"

"Yes," he said in a bitter voice as he followed her down the hallway to the meeting room.

"Have a seat. I'll let Doctor Medina know you're here," she said with a smile before leaving and shutting the door.

He sat down at the conference table and waited. A few minutes later, the psychiatrist walked into the room. Torias studied his face as he sat down opposite him at the table. There was something off. It was like he was trying to hide something grim. Torias swallowed hard.

"Thank you for meeting with me, Captain Riley. I just wanted to discuss Audrid's treatment planning with you," Doctor Medina said as he clasped his hands in front of him on the table.

"She's doing better. The medications are helping," Torias said as he watched the man.

"While the medications are helping keep her calmer than when she first arrived, it's difficult to say how much they've actually helped her mood or her psychosis. She's been very guarded in her interactions with the nursing staff and myself," he replied.

"I can tell she's doing better. She talks to me. She no longer talks about her delusions," he said as he wrung his hands in his lap.

"Just because she doesn't talk about them doesn't mean she doesn't still believe them. Medications for psychosis don't work that quickly. It's unlikely that we would see a change that quickly. It's more likely that she's choosing not to talk about them to avoid having to stay in the infirmary longer. I suspect she's still very much psychotic," he explained.

"So, then give it time," Torias said in a hard voice.

"I'll be frank with you, Captain Riley. There's a transport leaving for Earth in three days. As you know, transports aren't that frequent, and it would be challenging to arrange a special transport for just a few people. We need to take advantage of the situation. We'll be sending Audrid to Earth for treatment on that transport—."

"You can't do that!" Torias said, raising his voice. "You said you would give her more time. You haven't even tried yet."

"Time is a luxury we don't have on Mars. As I've explained, we're not set up to treat her kind of illness. It would be in her best interest to be treated on Earth."

"Her best interest? I think you mean your best interest! Audrid's best interest is to stay here! Mars is her home!" he yelled. He could feel heat boiling up inside his chest as he glared at the man, huffing out his breaths.

“I get that you’re frustrated, captain. But the decision has been made. Audrid will be on that transport in three days. She won’t be going alone. Privates Milton and Henley are also being sent to Earth for treatment,” he said calmly.

“No. I refuse to allow it,” he said as he stood up, pushing his chair back. He leaned over the table at the doctor. “She’s not going to Earth.”

“That isn’t your decision, Captain Riley,” he said as he gave Torias a firm look.

“I’m not going to just sit by while you ship my wife off to Earth. I’ll fight this. I’ll talk to General Vasylyk first thing tomorrow. I won’t let you send my wife to Earth,” he said through gritted teeth. “I doubt Henley’s and Milton’s families are just going to sit by and let them go back to Earth either. We’ll stop this.”

“I think we’re done here,” Doctor Medina said as he stood up and walked to the door. He turned back before opening it. “We don’t plan to tell Audrid or the others ahead of time. I would appreciate your cooperation with that.”

“You want me to lie to her?” he asked as he looked at him with disgust.

“I would prefer not to distress her at this time. Right now, she’s managing on the unit. I would hate to see her end up back in the observation room because she became too upset to safely manage on the unit. I’m sure you don’t want that for her either,” he said.

Torias sucked in an angry breath as he glared at the man. He curled up his hands into fists as he stood there, ready to punch something. Doctor Medina didn’t seem phased at all. He simply opened the door and gestured for Torias to leave. He stormed past the doctor and headed straight for the unit exit. As soon as the nurse let him through those locked doors, he felt like his knees were going to buckle. He braced himself against the wall as he took a deep breath.

I can’t let them send her back to Earth. It will break her. I have to find a way to stop it. I have to.

Audrid lay in bed, staring out the window at the night sky. She was counting constellations to keep herself awake. Her bedtime medications made her very drowsy, and she could feel how heavy her eyelids were getting. It was a struggle to keep them open, but this was life or death. Every time she felt herself drifting off, she reminded herself of that. Milton and Henley were also relying on her. She was their superior officer. She couldn’t fail them. And so, she counted constellations instead of sleeping.

She could hear the door creaking open as she held her breath and closed her eyes. She opened them just a crack, seeing a flashlight beam on the wall before disappearing. She heard the click of the door shut. She counted in her head to 60. She figured that was enough time for the two night nurses to make it back to the nursing station. Her room was at the end of the hall, so she would be the last check. When she made it to 60, she sucked in a breath and walked to the door, slowly opening it. The coast was clear.

She crept down the hallway, keeping to the wall. The hallway lights were dimmed, and all the bedroom doors were shut. She made it to the nursing station and crouched down, listening to the two voices inside.

“You mind if I be the first to take a break? I’m exhausted,” a man’s voice said.

“Go for it. I’ll see you in a couple hours,” a woman said.

“Alright. I’ll be in the interview room, on the couch, if you need me,” he replied.

Audrid looked around as her breath caught in her throat. There was nowhere to hide. She jogged down the hall back to her room just as a voice stopped her.

“Audrid?” She slowly turned around to see the nurse standing there, staring at her with a raised brow. “What are you doing up?”

“The flashlight woke me up. I came to see what time it is,” she said as she faked a yawn and stretched her arms out.

“It’s midnight. Time to get some sleep,” he said.

She nodded and headed back to her room. Once inside, she closed the door almost all the way and peered out the crack as she watched the nurse grabbing bedding out of the clean utility room. When he had a pile of linens in his hands, he walked down the hall toward the nursing station and around the corner. She slowly crept out of her room and shut the door. She went to Milton’s room first. He had fallen asleep. She shook his shoulder.

“Milton,” she whispered. “Wake up.”

“Sergeant?” he asked as he looked around, confused, blinking his eyes several times.

“That’s right. It’s time to get moving. Get started on the door lock while I grab Henley,” she replied.

“Yes, sir.”

She waited just inside the door as Milton crept down the hall. Then she quietly walked into Henley’s room. He jumped out of bed the minute he saw her.

“Easy,” she whispered. “It’s just me. It’s time to go.”

He nodded and followed her down the hall, staying against the wall. They crouched down at the nursing station and crept below the windows. They turned the corner and saw Milton already at the door. As soon as they were past the nursing station, they stood up and quietly rushed over to him. He had the whole thing dismantled with a butter knife he had stolen from his dinner tray. There were loose wires hanging out as he reconfigured them. It looked like a mess. She sucked in a breath, suddenly unsure if their plan would work.

“How much longer?” she whispered.

“I’m almost done, sarge,” he replied as he focused on his task, crossing wires.

“What are you doing?” said a harsh female voice, startling her as her heart jumped in her chest. She swung around to see the night nurse staring her down. “I said, what are you doing?”

“Um...” Audrid started to say as she thought quickly. She glanced at Milton, who had stood up and was covering the panel with his body. He just stared at her, looking flustered.

She could feel Henley lean close to her as his breath hit her ear. “Should I take her out, sarge?” he whispered.

“I’ll take care of this,” she said without even looking at him. She sucked in a breath as she ran toward the nurse, startling her.

“Audrid, what are you—?”

Audrid let out a cry as she swung her elbow into the side of the nurse’s head, knocking her to the floor with a thud. She was panting hard as she stared down at the woman, who was sprawled out on the floor. She wasn’t moving. She crouched down next to her and checked her pulse, letting out a heavy breath when she felt it beneath her fingertips. *I didn’t kill her. Thank God.*

She turned to her accomplices. Henley was staring at her, with his mouth gaping open, while Milton focused on the door. She heard a click as the lock disengaged and the door opened.

“Let’s go,” she said as she stood up and ran toward the exit, grabbing their arms to follow. “Take the stairs.”

They headed into the stairwell as their steps created a cacophony of echoing thumps. She stopped at the door and peered through the little window. She didn’t see anyone on the other side, so she slowly opened it and looked around. The corridor was clear. She gestured for them to follow.

“Walk naturally,” she whispered as they casually walked down the corridor toward the lobby in their infirmary gowns.

She could see the doors up ahead, but there was a security station right next to it. Two security officers were sitting there, at computer terminals. She swallowed hard as she stopped and tugged on Milton and Henley’s arms until they were out of sight of the security station and pressed against the wall around a corner.

“How are we going to get past them, sarge?” Henley asked quietly.

Audrid looked around as she took a deep breath. She was at a loss until she saw the fire alarm on the wall down the hall from them.

“Wait here,” she said as she gave them both firm looks. “Run as soon as the coast is clear. I’ll meet you outside.”

They nodded. She jogged over to the fire alarm and pulled it down. An overhead alarm immediately started ringing. She hid on the other side of a corner from the security station as she peered around it, seeing the security men leaving. Milton and Henley ran out the front door, and she quickly followed them. Once they were outside in the dead of night, she let out a heavy breath. She turned to them.

“We need to get our environmental suits out of the lab in the engineering building first. Let’s go,” she said as they started walking down Rio Grande Street.

“How long before they come looking for us?” Milton asked.

“No clue, and no time to worry about that. We have a mission to complete, privates, and we sure as hell are going to complete it,” Audrid replied in a firm tone.

They walked down the sidewalk. It was dark, with nothing but the stars overhead and streetlamps to light the way. No one was around, and she hoped it would stay that way. It would be hard to explain why they were walking down the streets of New Horizons in the middle of the night wearing nothing but infirmary gowns. They turned a corner and headed down Madeira Road toward the military complex.

Audrid could hear the sound of a vehicle. She grabbed Milton and Henley by the arms as she yanked them into the shadows on the side of a building. They pressed against the wall as they watched the vehicle drive by with two people inside. It slowed down and then stopped. It wasn’t at a stop sign. It was just sitting there, engine running as it idled. Audrid’s heart thumped hard in her chest as she watched it, praying for it to leave.

“What do we do?” Henley whispered.

“Just stay still, and don’t talk,” Audrid replied, pressing herself into the wall even more as she held her breath.

Minutes ticked by. She could feel beads of sweat trickling down her forehead. She tried to keep her breaths even, but as her heart raced and her palms became moist with sweat, breathing became an effort. Finally, the vehicle started moving again as she let out a breath, sagging against the wall.

“Do you think that was routine, or were they looking for us?” Milton asked.

“No way to know,” Audrid replied as they started walking.

They stayed close to buildings this time, sticking to shadows when they could, and avoided the sidewalks. They rounded another corner. She could see the military complex just ahead. They just had to get through the gate. The main entrance had a security officer stationed at it. There was no getting past that officer in infirmary gowns. But there was another entrance around the corner that opened onto H Street. It relied on palm print readers alone. They headed to that one.

“You can get through the lock?” Audrid asked as they approached the H Street Entrance.

“Of course,” Milton said with a smile as he knelt in front of the palm print reader and pried off the front with his butter knife. After a few minutes of pulling out wires, the lock clicked.

“Bingo.”

He quickly put the lock back together so it wouldn’t be obvious that they tampered with it. Then they headed through the gate into the military complex, sticking to the shadows. There were a lot more people around. Most of them were security officers doing routine patrols. She had no idea

if anyone was actually looking for them yet. She hoped the fire alarm would keep them busy for a while. She was counting on that.

They headed into the engineering building and quickly found themselves at the environmental suit lab. Milton worked on the lock and got them inside within three minutes. He was careful to put the lock back in place after. They walked inside and shut the door behind them as Henley flicked on the lights. The lab was empty.

“Where are the environmental suits?” Audrid asked as she peered around at the empty workstations. “Why aren’t they here?”

“We could locate them on the computer,” Henley said as he walked over to a computer console. She rushed over and grabbed his arm to stop him.

“We can’t risk logging onto the computer here. It will alert Security that someone is in the lab unauthorized. Think. Where would the suits be?” Audrid asked.

“Decon,” Milton said.

“Decon,” Audrid said with a smile. “They probably haven’t moved them into the lab yet. We need to get to the decontamination unit.” She looked at both of them, her eyes intense. “Let’s move.”

They slipped out of the lab and into the hallway. The engineering building was empty at this hour. They didn’t run into anyone working on any late-night projects. It was a little eerie walking through the hallways in the dim lighting, but Audrid felt thankful. It also meant they could walk fast. They couldn’t waste time. Every minute was precious. *Let’s just hope that fire alarm keeps them busy.*

They walked out onto M Street and then headed down O Road to the airlock where the decontamination unit was. It was empty when they got there. Milton broke into the lock, and they headed inside. He broke into the decontamination unit, and they found their environmental suits sitting there.

“Let’s get ready,” Audrid said as she grabbed a suit and started getting in it.

When she had all but her helmet on, she walked out of Decon and waited for them to finish suiting up. She had to admit, she liked the feeling of being in the environmental suit again. This is what her life was supposed to be. And maybe it would be again, soon.

Or maybe I’m about to head to prison on Earth with Milton and Henley. The thought sent a chill down her spine. She had no choice but to attack the nurse. If they could prove they were right this entire time, maybe it would exonerate them.

“Sarge, I’ve been thinking,” Henley said as he came up behind her.

“What is it?” she asked, studying his face. His eyes were filled with concern.

“Sir, if we lose consciousness in the cave, no one will know we’re there. Who’s going to rescue us?” he asked.

She suddenly felt like she was going to crumple as she stood there defeated. *No one will be able to save us if we lose consciousness. No one will know we're there. Am I about to send Milton, Henley, and myself to our deaths?*

"We take the chance," Milton said firmly. They both looked at him. There was resolve in his eyes. "I'm not living the rest of my life with this thing in my brain. Either it kills me or I get killed trying to get rid of it. But there's no way I'm just going to go about the rest of my life with some creature burrowing in my brain."

"Torias," Audrid muttered.

"Sarge?" Henley asked as he raised a brow.

"Milton, you're right. We have to go into that cave no matter what. But someone needs to know where we are. I'll tell my husband. We'll leave right away after. Even if he runs here, it will take him ten minutes at least. We'll already be on our way to the caves by the time he gets here. He won't be able to stop us in time, but he'll know where we'll be so he can rescue us," Audrid said with an intense little smile. "He'll save us."

"What if he alerts Security to our presence here? He might not make it in time to stop us, but Security could," Milton said. "We can't take that chance."

"We have to," Audrid said, raising her voice.

Milton let out a huff as he walked away, pinching the bridge of his nose.

"Let me call Captain Riley," Audrid said as she looked at Milton. She walked up behind him, putting her hand on his shoulder. "I'll make this work. No one's dying today."

He turned to look at her. There was terror in his eyes. He just nodded curtly before heading to the armory. He started dismantling the lock.

"What are you doing?" Audrid asked as she watched him.

He didn't reply. A moment later, he gained entry into the armory. She looked at Henley. He just shrugged. She rushed into the armory and watched as Milton looked around.

"Milton?" she said firmly.

He held up a rifle. "I'm not letting anyone come between me and getting that thing out of my head. If I have to use this, then I will," he said as he walked past her, rifle in hand.

"It won't come to that," Audrid said as she followed him.

"Call your husband. We don't have a lot of time," he said as he started configuring the rifle.

Audrid swallowed hard as she nodded and walked over to the computer terminal.

"Call Captain Torias Riley," she told the computer. And then she waited, feeling beads of sweat trickling down her forehead and hoping to hell she wasn't about to make a huge mistake.

Chapter 18

“Incoming call,” the computer stated overhead.

Torias blinked his eyes open a few times as he yawned and slowly sat up. He furrowed his brows as he looked at the time. It was only 0030 hours. Suddenly, he felt a pit in his stomach when he realized it was the middle of the night and he was getting a call. He rushed into the den.

“Put the incoming call through,” he stated as he watched the screen turn on and Audrid appear. His breath caught in his throat as he looked at her. She was in an environmental suit, and she wasn’t in the infirmary. “What are you doing, Audrid? What have you done?”

“I don’t have a lot of time,” she replied.

“Audrid, what the hell did you do?!” he yelled.

“Don’t get mad. I need you to stay calm and rational. I need you to be on my side for once. I need you to trust me,” she said, her voice remaining cool and calm.

“Audrid, what’s going on?!” he yelled, his voice not remotely calm.

“I broke out of the psychiatric unit with Milton and Henley. We’re going to the caves to get these entities out of our brains. But if we lose consciousness in the caves, someone needs to know where we are. That someone is you,” she said.

“Audrid—”

“Look, you can’t call security on us. You have to trust me to do what I need to do. You’ll find us in the Hades Caves. There is an environmental suit you can use in Decon. I have to go now.”

“No, not yet. Don’t go yet. We need to talk about this.”

“I’m running out of time, Torias. We have to get to that cave before they find us here. They could be here any minute. We have to go.”

“Wait for me.”

“Torias.”

“No, it’s your turn to listen. I’m coming with you. I’m not letting you go in that cave alone. Just wait for me. I will run there. I can be at the airlock in ten minutes. Another ten to the cave entrance. Just don’t go into that cave without me.”

He watched as a pensive look spread across her face.

“Sarge, you can’t trust him,” a voice said in the background.

“Milton, I need privacy,” she snapped. She turned back to the screen. “Can I trust you?” Her eyes were invading him as they stared at him. He could feel her tugging on her soul.

“Yes.”

They just stared at each other for a minute. She was trying to find faith and trust in him as she studied his eyes. He had to make her believe him. He wouldn't betray her again, even if going into that cave with her meant the end of his career.

“Let's take that leap of faith together,” he said.

A little smile spread across her face as she let out a breath.

“Sarge, don't trust him.”

Her smile faded away, and she sucked in a breath, looking firmly at Torias. “We'll be waiting outside the cave entrance for you. Come alone. If you're not there in twenty minutes, we're going in without you.”

“Audrid—.”

“I love you.”

And then the screen went blank as he gasped in a breath, falling to his knees. She might die in that cave. He knew it. But she might be right. Either way, he had to get there. He scrambled off his feet and ran to the door, forgoing anything else. He took off for the airlock as his heart pounded in his chest. He just sucked in breath after breath and ran.

I have to make it there. I have to protect her from herself and from the cave and whatever might be there. She's right; it's suspicious. They share the same delusions. Why? What if she's right? Either way, I can't let her go in that cave with just Milton and Henley. It's too dangerous. She's desperate and ill. I won't try to stop her, but I sure as hell am not letting her go in there without me. Someone sane needs to keep them safe.

Torias jogged through the residential sector and past the recreation complex. When he passed the infirmary, he saw loads of firefighters and firetrucks outside, with their flashing lights on, along with numerous security vehicles. He kept running.

He made it to the military complex. He slipped in the back entrance on H street, then walked down O Road to the airlock. He was hoping she waited for him there, but knowing how stubborn she was in her ill state, she was probably already at the cave. He hoped to hell he wasn't too late.

Once inside the airlock, he saw an environmental suit waiting for him. He got into it. He quickly went through the airlock and climbed into one of the all-terrain vehicles, noting that one was missing. He thought about alerting Security to their presence, but something told him not to. *You just took a leap of faith with your wife. Don't go back on that. Don't betray her again.*

Maybe she's right, or maybe we're all going to our doom. Maybe everything is doomed either way. But I can't betray her again. I can always patch the intercom in the suit to Mars Mission Control. Even if there's no one there to listen, it will record my message, and they'll get it in the morning. They'll know where to find us. They'll know why we died.

He gulped hard as he pushed the accelerator to the floor and zoomed over the rough terrain of the red planet. It was dark and dusty, making it hard to see, but the stars were shining above him.

He tried to focus on the task at hand, but his mind kept going to the stars. It was like they were staring down at him. He didn't know what he believed. He was agnostic, reserving belief for the end, when it became apparent. *Maybe this is the end. Maybe I'm about to find my beliefs in that cave when we all die.* He felt a sense of terror wash over him, and suddenly, he wished he was a little boy again, counting constellations with his mom and dad as they lay on the roof of their house. Life was simple then.

Life's no longer simple. And I'm about to walk to my death with my wife. Maybe she's right. Maybe. I'll take that leap of faith. And if we die, we'll die together. Maybe this is how we were meant to go. Together.

He could see vehicle headlights up ahead. Three headlamps turned toward him. They waited for him. He parked as close to them as he could and jumped out. Milton held up his rifle, aiming it at Torias. He held his hands up.

"Easy. I'm on your side," Torias said.

"Milton, put down that rifle!" Audrid snapped.

"Sarge, we don't know if we can trust him," Milton said.

"I trust him. Look, he came alone, as he promised," Audrid said as she walked up to him and took his hand, squeezing it.

"Did you tell anyone where we are?" Milton asked in a hard tone as he held his rifle firmly, although it was no longer aimed at Torias.

"No one knows we're here. But it's just a matter of time," he said. He turned to Audrid, taking her biceps in his hands as he looked at her. "Do what you need to do."

She nodded. "Stay here and wait for us. If we don't come back in ten minutes, come check on us. At that point, if you have to call the cavalry in to help with the rescue, it's okay. We'll have done what we needed to do."

"Audrid, I'm not letting you walk into that cave without me," he said firmly as he held her biceps.

"Torias, it's dangerous in there. You might get infected with the offspring. Wait here for us. This is the safest way, I promise. Take that leap of faith and trust me."

He sucked in a breath as he stared into her eyes and then relented, giving her a little nod before letting her go. She smiled at him before turning around. He grabbed her hand and swung her to him until he was pulling her into a tight hug as their glass helmets clinked together.

"Whatever happens, I love you," he said.

“I love you too. All the way to the end of the galaxy and back. Forever and always. We’ve had a wild ride together, Torias. Whatever happens, don’t blame yourself. Just move on with your life. Find happiness, even without me,” she said with a sad smile.

“Be safe. Come back to me, Audrid.”

She just nodded, staring into his eyes for another moment and then letting go. His heart was racing as he watched the three of them enter the cave. He stood there useless at the entrance, listening to them walking away, hoping he would hear them if they needed help.

He tried to breathe. He tried not to let the tears welling up in his eyes fall. He tried to find a way to make it through that moment without breaking down. And more importantly, he tried to find a way to stay put. His entire being was telling him to run in after them.

Stay put, Torias. Take that leap of faith.

Audrid took the lead as they walked into the cave. She felt hot even though she knew the environmental suit was technically regulating her temperature. Of course, two of the suits had been compromised when Milton and Henley were attacked, and there was no time to figure out which suits those were, so she might be about to burn up in the cave. She pushed that thought aside as she advanced further, wishing she had her scanner.

“What do you think will happen?” Henley asked.

“I don’t know,” she replied.

“Should we call out to them?” Milton asked.

“No. They’re telepathic. They should know we’re here. We just have to get close enough to where it all happened,” Audrid replied as she took each careful step forward, unsure if she was walking them to their deaths.

“How do we know removing this thing won’t kill us?” Henley asked.

“Just be brave,” Milton said.

They walked in single file down the tunnels, which grew narrower. It was dark, with only their headlamps lighting the way. They came to a fork, and without words, she turned left, trying to remember the path she had taken. That day was singed into her memory. With every step, it came back to her. She could remember the cold, the chill, the cloud as it overtook her. Falling to the ground with a thud as it hit her. She felt a shiver run down her spine.

They walked a little further and turned a corner, going down a slope. She was careful, using the wall to help ease herself down. She continued on, every so often glancing back at the other two. They were following close behind her. She could feel herself growing increasingly hot. Sweat was beading on her forehead now. She looked down at the controls on her suit. “Heat Shield compromised” it read. She sucked in a breath. She didn’t know how long she had until heat stroke set in. She had to find those cave beings fast.

Her headlamp flickered and then went dark. She started fiddling with it, trying to turn it on again, but it wouldn't. It was dead. She turned to Milton and Henley as their two beams shone brightly in her face.

"We've got you, sarge," Henley said.

She nodded and turned around. She gasped as she hit a wall of clouds and took a step back. She could hear nothing but their heavy breaths and her racing heart as she stood there, fear boiling in her stomach.

"Who are you?" she asked. "What have you done to us?"

Torias couldn't take it any longer. Only a few minutes had gone by, but he couldn't just stand there and wait for them. Anything could happen in the span of time he was waiting for them to emerge from the cave. *They could be dead already.*

He sucked in a breath and rushed into the cave, following the tunnel as his headlamp lit the way. He ran, listening intently for voices, for screams, for any indication of where they were. He came to a fork in the tunnel. As he didn't have time to think, he just ran left without hesitation and continued through the tunnel as it curved and veered downward, getting steep at times. He could hear screaming up ahead. His heart stopped, and he sprinted as fast as he could.

He still couldn't see them, so he kept running. He got to the top of a slope and began running down, only to lose his footing and go tumbling. He rolled down until he hit a wall with a thud. He took a deep breath, pushing himself off the ground. His body ached, but nothing appeared to be broken. He stood up and continued down the tunnel, being more careful of his footing. The screams were getting louder.

Then something suddenly hit him, knocking him against the wall with force. He took a moment to center himself. He felt disoriented at first. *I'm in the cave. I have to save Audrid. Pull yourself together. Get on your feet and get moving.*

He sucked in a breath. The cave was full of shimmering, dusty clouds. He could feel a chill wash over him as he walked through the clouds. He didn't know what they were. Some sort of phenomenon that would need to be studied further, but not right now. He had to find Audrid and the others.

"Audrid?!" he called out as he tapped the intercom on his suit. "Audrid?"

The screaming had stopped, and now it was eerily quiet. Just his racing heart and his ragged breaths. He looked around. The cloudy substances were gone. It was just a stretch of blackness and his beam of light travelling through it. He turned back to the cave and ran. He found the first body. He knelt down. It was Milton.

"Milton!" he yelled as he shook his shoulder.

He wasn't moving. He grabbed his arm and looked at the control panel. His biosigns indicated he was still alive. He stood up and walked down the tunnel further. He found another body. Henley's, also still alive. He ran down the tunnel, searching for Audrid. It turned a corner. She wasn't there. He kept running as he tried to breathe. His heart felt like it would give out.

The tunnel came to a fork as his heart stopped. He shone his headlamp into both tunnels. Just darkness. He had to choose. He went right; he didn't know why. There was no thought. But he went with it. He had to find her. He jogged down the tunnel as he called out for her.

"Audrid! Audrid!"

And then his headlamp went out and he ran straight into a wall with a thud.

"Damnit," he muttered as he twisted the lamp to turn it back on.

It wouldn't go. He just started walking in the dark. He had no choice. It felt so cold all of a sudden. Like frozen rain washing over him. He couldn't explain it. But it was followed by an agonizing fire. Breathing was hard. He tapped the controls on his arm and extended the comm to include Mars Mission Control.

"This is Captain Riley to Mars Mission Control. Mayday. I repeat, Mayday. I need immediate assistance in the Hades Caves. I repeat, I need help now. I've got three officers with me, all needing medical attention. Private Milton and Henley are down. I think my suit has been compromised because it's damn hot in here. I can't find Sergeant Riley. I can't leave the cave until I find her. We need help in here."

He sucked in a breath and started running down the cave again, going deeper and deeper into the darkness. Suddenly, he tripped and fell over something, landing hard on the ground. He could see a small light glowing. He climbed off the object and realized it was a body. It was the control panel on the arm that was glowing. The biosigns indicated the person was still alive. He tapped the controls until a name came up on the suit. "Sergeant Audrid Riley." He let out a breath. She was alive. He found her. He scrolled through the control screen again. "Environmental Suit compromised," "Oxygen levels critical," "Heat Shield compromised."

His own suit started to beep. He could feel the air going thin as he blinked hard. He was starting to feel very drowsy. He looked at the controls on his suit. It was reading the same thing as her suit was. He felt like he was melting into a puddle of goo. He didn't have the strength to get up. If he tried hard enough, he might be able to crawl his way down the tunnel, but he couldn't carry her. He was too weak. And he wasn't leaving her. He lay down next to her and wrapped his arm around her back as she lay there face down.

"I'm sorry..." he said through heavy breaths. "That I couldn't save you... in time..."

Chapter 19

Audrid stood there as the clouds grew numerous around her. She could see them shimmering in the beams of Milton's and Henley's headlamps.

"Whoever you are, you need to help us," she said. "Get these things out of our brains."

She was breathing heavily as she waited. The clouds were just lingering there as the three of them looked around, confused.

"Help us! You need to help us!" she yelled.

And then the clouds darted toward them, knocking them to the ground as the three of them cried out. She tried to get to her feet, but it was like the cloud was on top of her, pushing her down.

"Stop it! I said help me! Let me up!" she said as she wrangled with it. She could feel its cold tendrils latching onto her as she tried to pry them off. "Let go of me!"

She heard screaming. She looked over at Milton and Henley. She could see the beams from their headlamps moving around through the clouds as they surrounded her. They were shimmering beige with specks of gold. She lay there, puffing out breaths as she stared at them. She struggled to get up. Finally, she was able to push her way off the ground, through the clouds, and down the tunnel into the darkness. Her headlamp was still off, and she couldn't see a thing. Her heart was beating a mile a minute as it pounded painfully in her chest. She just ran.

She hit a wall and felt her way around. She could feel the tunnel turning right. She started running again, keeping her hands out. She could feel heat in front of her; she felt like she was boiling. Yet, there was a wall of cold behind her, and it was catching up to her fast. A cold tendril slid past her arm as she jerked it away. She went crashing onto another wall and turned the corner again, running fast.

She tripped over rubble and went crashing onto the ground as she smashed her helmet on rocks. It didn't break. She scrambled to her feet, but it was too late. The clouds had caught up with her. She threw punches at them, but it felt like she was punching through frozen cotton candy. Their tendrils were all on her. She could feel them slithering inside her suit as they reached around her face. And then everything went dark as she crashed to the ground.

Audrid woke up. Or she thought she woke up. She wasn't sure. It was suddenly very bright in the cave. She was surrounded by shimmering clouds. She was no longer scared, though. Her heart felt warm. Her whole body felt like it was being soothed. She stood up and realized there was a body lying beneath her. Her eyes went wide as she looked down at herself. She was lying there unconscious... dead maybe... in her environmental suit. Her face was red, and she was all sweaty.

"What did you do to me?" she asked.

No one answered her. But she watched as one of the clouds reached its tendril deep into the brain of her corporeal body. As it pulled away, a much smaller cloud floated freely out of her head and disappeared into the crowd. She fell to her knees as she ran her hand over her glass helmet, looking down at herself. She was face down, with her head to the side, eyes closed. She looked at the clouds.

“Did you kill me?”

“The being is not dead,” an ominous voice said.

“The being will live if rescued in time,” multiple voices said.

“What about Milton and Henley?”

“The beings are not dead. The beings need rescuing. The beings cannot survive in the cave,” a cacophony of voices said all at once.

“You have to help me. I need to get back into my body. Help me!”

The clouds started to dissipate.

“Wait! Where are you going? You have to help me!” she cried out. “Don’t leave me here!”

And then it went dark, and the cold was replaced with heat. She felt herself being pulled downwards. She lay down on top of her body. Soon, she was melting back into it, and everything was darkness again.

Torias blinked his eyes open to see a bright white ceiling. He sat up quickly, looking around. He was in the infirmary, with curtains around his bed.

“Easy,” said an authoritative voice beside him. He watched as General Vasylyk stood up and walked to his side. “How do you feel, Riley?”

“Where’s Audrid?” Torias asked as his heart raced a mile a minute.

“She’s here, resting in another bed. She’s safe,” he assured him.

“Milton and Henley?”

“Resting. Everyone’s going to be fine,” he said. He sucked in a breath as his voice turned hard.

“Now, you’re going to tell me what the hell happened. How is it that one of my finest captains was found off limits in a dangerous cave with three fugitives, one of which assaulted a nurse?”

Torias let out a breath as he relaxed back into the bed. He took a moment to just breathe before looking back at the general.

“Sir, a lot has happened.”

“I gathered that when I got a call in the middle of the night, waking me from my sleep. Imagine my surprise when I found out that not only have three officers broken out of the infirmary, stolen

equipment and vehicles, and gone inside a cave that was off limits pending an investigation, but my trusted captain was with them. Explain yourself.”

“Audrid called me at 0030 hours. She said she was going into the cave and that it was too late to stop her. I begged her not to go. We eventually came to a compromise. She would wait for me, and I would go with them to keep them safe,” Torias explained.

“And you didn’t think to alert Security to this plan?” he asked in a hard tone.

“I couldn’t, sir. She would’ve known if I was lying. She knows me. She can read me. I couldn’t take the chance that she would go into that cave alone, just she and Milton and Henley. They’re mentally ill, sir. They’re not in their right minds. I couldn’t let my wife go into that cave like that. I had to be there with her.”

The general nodded as his face softened. He took a deep breath. “What happened then? Tell me everything. I want to know every detail, Riley.”

“They were waiting outside the cave for me. Audrid was concerned that if I went into the cave, I would be infected with the cloud beings’ offspring, as they were. She didn’t want to risk it, so she asked me to wait outside. I waited a few minutes, but I couldn’t handle it, so I went into the cave anyway. I tried to find them. That’s when I heard screaming. I ran, looking for them. Things get a little blurry after that.”

“What do you mean ‘blurry’?”

“I remember hearing screams and finding bodies. Milton and Henley. But not Audrid. I remember feeling hot and cold. I remember dust that shimmered. I remember hitting the side of the cave. I don’t know what hit me. I just ran, trying to find Audrid. My headlamp went out,” he said as he felt the chill of that darkness. “I tripped over a body.” He took a deep breath and slowly let it out. “It was Audrid. The suit said she was alive. But both our suits were compromised. We were about to die.” He furrowed his brows as he looked at General Vasylyk. “I called Mars Mission Control at some point. I remember that now. I didn’t think anyone would be there. No one responded. How did they find us in time?”

“Once the fire alarm was sorted out at the infirmary and they realized there was no fire, Security reviewed the camera footage and saw everything. They also talked to the nurse that was attacked once she regained consciousness. Initially, they did a colony-wide search, but it was taking too much time. They involved the psychiatrist and unit staff to figure out where they would go. Knowing the three missing patients’ shared delusions helped them figure out where to look. You were a surprise, though. No one expected to find you in the cave,” General Vasylyk explained.

“Yeah,” he said as he ran his hand through his sweaty hair. “I wasn’t exactly expecting that either, General. So now what?”

“That’s the question of the morning,” he said with a sigh.

“Is it morning already?” Torias asked as he suddenly felt very disoriented. Waking up in the infirmary left him with an unsettled feeling, as if he didn’t know where he was supposed to be.

“It’s 0730 hours. You’ve been unconscious since you were rescued around 0100 hours. You were suffering from heat stroke, theta-polaron radiation exposure, and hypoxia. It was touch and go. For a while there, I thought I’d lost one of my favorite captains. I had to think about replacing you. It was a terrible thought,” he said with a little smile.

“You’d probably be glad to replace me, sir,” Torias said with a bit of a grin.

“Never,” he said firmly. “Riley, you’re like a son to me. I took you under my wing years ago, when you were a fresh recruit. You were so eager to start a new life on Mars. One of the most hardworking new recruits. I knew you were going to be someone great one day. You’re the youngest captain on Mars for a reason. Maybe one day you’ll be the next general.”

“Making your exit plans, sir?” Torias asked.

General Vasylyk just chuckled lightly. “Not anytime soon, although my wife would be happy if I retired. But I’m not ready to be put out to pasture just yet. And I’m not ready to give up on one of my best captains. There’s going to be an investigation into the events of last night. I’m hoping it doesn’t turn up anything against you. So, tell me now, Riley, is there anything I should know? I’m a lot more forgiving when someone comes to me first and I don’t have to find out through an investigation that my officer did something wrong.”

He was staring hard at Torias now. He felt himself squirming under that gaze. “All I did was attempt to rescue my wife and two privates whose lives were in jeopardy. Maybe I made the wrong call, but I did it for the right reasons. There’s no subterfuge here. I was simply doing what I thought was right. If I let you down, I’m sorry, sir.”

“Fine. I trust your word. Cooperate fully with the investigation. You’ll be on leave pending the outcome. I warn you, though. It could lead to a court martial for any one of you. Maybe all four of you. Time will tell,” General Vasylyk said.

“Yes, sir. You can expect my full cooperation.”

“Good.”

“And, sir, my wife? What’s going to happen to her? Doctor Medina was planning to send her, Milton, and Henley on the next transport to Earth. Is that still going to happen?” he asked as he looked at the general, studying his eyes.

“No one’s going anywhere until the investigation is complete. What happens after will depend on the outcome of the investigation. For now, she will remain in the infirmary for observations. There will be a security team with them at all times. If Doctors Medina and Sharma decide to send her back to the psychiatric unit for observations, that will be up to them. I can’t interfere in medical matters,” he explained.

“Okay,” Torias said as he took a deep breath and relaxed against the bed. He wasn’t sure what to think or how to feel. He felt lost more than anything else.

“I’ll let you rest, Riley. I’ll make sure you’re kept informed about the investigation,” the general said as he squeezed Torias’s shoulder and then walked away.

Torias felt his stomach sink through him into the bed. He had to remind himself that they were alive and that was what mattered first and foremost.

“She’s in bed four by the way,” General Vasylyk stated as he popped his head in between the curtains before disappearing.

Torias looked at the IVs hanging from his arm. He felt drowsy and weak, but he needed to see her. He carefully got out of bed, feeling the cold floor beneath his feet. He rolled the IV pole with him and opened the curtains, revealing the emergency department. He looked around. He could see three security officers standing in front of three separate curtained areas spread out throughout the department. He looked for bed four.

“I just want to see my wife,” he said to the security officer stationed in front of it.

“Yes, sir. I won’t disturb you, sir,” he said stiffly.

He slipped inside the curtains and found Audrid lying on the bed, sleeping peacefully. He sat down beside her as he took her hand. It was warm and moist. He squeezed it as he watched her even breaths. He felt tears welling up in his eyes as he thought about tripping over her body in the dark. He swallowed hard. So much happened. Too much. He almost lost her.

She squeezed his hand back. He stood up, peering down at her as she slowly blinked her eyes open.

“Hi,” he said.

“We’re alive?” she asked as she looked around, confused.

“Just barely,” he replied as he removed a strand of hair from her face. “We almost didn’t make it, Audrid. We almost died in that cave.”

“I remember.”

“What happened? When I found you, you were unconscious. Your suit had been compromised,” he said as he gazed down at her.

“I saw the cloud people, Torias,” she said with a smile. “They removed the baby from my brain. I’m free.” There were tears in her eyes that hadn’t yet fallen.

“How do you feel?” he asked as he looked down at her with concern.

“I don’t know,” she said as her voice broke and she sniffled a little. “I remember everything, Torias. How awful I was to you, how terrible I was to everyone around me. All the sex. I was crazy. Out of control. All because of this thing that was in my brain.”

“And now?”

“And now I feel so stupid and ashamed and embarrassed and...” she said as the tears spilled down her cheeks. “And...” she tried to speak. Instead, she started to sob.

“Hey,” he said softly as he caressed her cheek. “You were sick. It wasn’t your fault.”

“I know. But it doesn’t change everything that happened. It doesn’t matter if it was my fault or not. It happened. Horrible things happened, Torias. I can’t go back and take any of that away. None of us can. I have to live with it. I don’t know if I can,” she said through her tears.

“Shh...” he said as he leaned down to kiss her forehead. “You’ll find a way to move forward. This isn’t the end.”

“It feels like the end, Torias. And maybe it should be,” she said, barely above a whisper.

“Don’t say that. I can’t live without you,” he said as he held her hand tightly, gazing down into her blue eyes.

“I might go to prison. Or to a forensic psychiatric hospital. I might be locked up for the rest of my life for the things I’ve done. I assaulted a nurse. I committed breaking and entering throughout New Horizons and the military complex. I’ve done things that the military and the government might not forgive. I don’t want to live the rest of my life locked up,” she said through her tears.

“I won’t let them lock you up.”

“You won’t have a choice.”

He just stared into her eyes, knowing she might be right. He couldn’t handle the idea of life without her. But she was ill. It wasn’t her fault. *Is she no longer ill? What happened in that cave?*

“You don’t know if you believe me,” she said as she looked up at his eyes.

“What?”

“I know that look. You’re trying to decide if I’m still crazy. But I’m not. I was. I was so ill. That thing in my brain made me insane. But it’s gone now, Torias. Whether you want to believe it existed or not, it’s gone, and I’m my old self again,” she said.

“I don’t know what to believe. I didn’t see cloud beings. I just saw a cloud of dust. It had a shimmer to it. But it wasn’t alive.”

“It was, Torias,” she said as she took both hands and squeezed them. “It was alive. It must not have wanted you. It was focused on us. If you don’t believe me about the cave entities, fine, but at least believe me when I tell you I’m no longer sick.”

He smiled down at her as he squeezed her hands. “I want to believe that,” he said before leaning down to gently kiss her lips. He lingered there for a moment before pulling away and just gazing into those warm eyes as they stared back at him.

“Then believe it,” she said as she pulled him into a kiss.

She parted his lips as her tongue delved into his mouth. He tangled his fingertips in her long, messy hair as he deepened the kiss, only pulling away when breath became absent.

“I love you,” he murmured before kissing her again, deep and hard this time. “I almost lost you,” he mumbled between kisses. “It would have been the end for me.” He slid his tongue into her mouth, exploring contours until they were dancing together and he could feel her tugging on his soul.

“I love you too,” she muttered. “I need you to hold me.”

He looked deep into her eyes as he nodded. He pecked her one last time on the lips and then moved her body over as she rolled onto her side so there would be room for him. He lowered the side rail and pulled back the covers. He then slid behind her and pulled the covers up and over them, careful not to tangle his IVs in the blankets. Afterwards, he wrapped his arm around her waist as he kissed her head.

“Stay with me forever, okay?” she said as she found his hand and squeezed it.

“Forever and always.”

“To the end of the galaxy and back.”

“You’re my whole life, Audrid. I won’t ever leave you. We’ll find a way through this. If they arrest you, we’ll fight it. If they send you back to Earth, we’ll fight it. I’m not giving up on you or the life we’ve built together,” he said as he kissed her head again.

“You promise?”

“I promise.”

Chapter 20

Audrid lay in Torias's warm arms as they fell in and out of sleep. For once, there were no cloud people in her dreams, just a darkness as it bathed over her. She woke up again to the feeling of him stirring behind her. She rolled over to face him. He cupped her cheeks, caressing them with his thumbs as he smiled softly at her.

"Did you sleep well?" he asked.

She nodded as she ran her hand through his messy hair with a smile. She then ran her hand down his temple, around his ear, across his jaw, and his lips. She leaned in to kiss him softly. She pushed him on his back as she settled into his side, resting her head on his shoulder as she wrapped her arm around his chest. She felt his arm wrap around her and hold her tight, his breath tickling her hair as he kissed her. They were quiet again for a while.

Eventually, she broke the silence. "What do you think's going to happen?" she asked.

"I don't know. General Vasylyk wasn't sure if there would be a court martial for all four of us," he said.

"What?" she asked as she looked up at him. "But you didn't do anything wrong."

"I didn't alert Security to your presence in the cave. They consider that wrong," he replied.

"I'm sorry," she said as she lay back down. "I don't want you to be in trouble over this."

"It was worth it. Saving you would be worth my life, Audrid. Never forget that. If I go down for this, I did it to save you, and that would always be worth it."

"Even if you lose your commission? Even if you get shipped back to Earth and end up in prison?"

"You dying in that cave was an unacceptable alternative. I've always said I would go to the end of the galaxy and back for you, and I meant it. No matter the consequences. I'd do it again. Time and time again."

She was quiet for a moment as she contemplated this. She would do the same for him, but it didn't change how awful she felt about him facing the consequences of her actions.

"You think Milton and Henley are going to be in a lot of trouble too?" she asked.

"I don't know. They could argue they were following their superior officer's orders. They didn't hurt anyone. But Milton has a history of misconduct. They could use that against him."

"No, they didn't hurt anyone. That was all me."

"They could call it conspiracy and say they were accomplices, though."

“Right,” she said with a sigh as she snuggled into his side. It felt like the safety of his arms was going to be short lived. “I just want to lie here quietly for a while. I’m so tired.”

“Me too,” he said as he kissed her head. “Get some more sleep. I’m not going anywhere.”

“Promise?”

“You’re lying on top of me,” he said with a chuckle. “You’ll be the first to notice if I try to leave.”

“Good. I like that,” she said as she sighed into him.

They were quiet again. She lay there, listening to his heart beating. It was slow and steady. She felt like hers was still erratic. There was so much to worry about. She didn’t know how he could be so calm. But he was the steadier person between them. He was strong, and she always found strength in that.

She found his hand and started playing with it. First, she drew soft circles on his palm. She then started tracing lines on it. His hands were warm and dry. She curled up his fingers until he was making a light fist, and then she ran her thumb over each knuckle, keeping her touch feather soft. She moved her thumb until it was drawing circles on the back of his hand now. She did this for a while, just absentmindedly stroking his hand. She felt him suck in a breath. She took his hand and kissed it softly. He threaded his fingers through hers, and they stayed like that as they both drifted back to sleep.

She could still hear his heart beating as she slept. The sound of his steady beats filled her dreams. And when she awoke, it was the only thing she could remember about her dreams. Just a steady heartbeat. She sighed, melting into him. She thought he was asleep as his breaths were so soft, but then he started stroking her bicep. She looked up at him with a smile.

“I thought you were asleep,” she said.

“I was.”

“Do you have nightmares?” she asked.

“No. You?”

“I dreamt about your beating heart. I don’t remember anything else,” she said.

“Wow, my heartbeat made it into your dreams. That must mean something,” he said with a little smile before leaning down to capture her lips. He lingered there for a gentle moment before pulling away.

“I think it means I’m tethered to you,” she said as she rested her head on his shoulder again. “It’s just you and me versus the universe, Torias. Two beating hearts. Whatever we face, we’ll face it together.”

“Amen to that,” he said as he squeezed his arm tighter around her.

They looked up as the curtains slid open just enough for a man to slip through. Doctor Medina wasn't smiling as he looked at the two of them.

"Sorry, sir," Torias said as he quickly got out of her bed and stood at her side. She found his hand and held it.

"Audrid, how are you feeling?" Doctor Medina asked soberly.

"I'm okay," she replied. She wasn't sure if that was the truth, but at the moment, it was accurate enough.

"I need to interview you if you're up to it," he said.

"I'll leave you be," Torias said.

Audrid squeezed his hand. "I want Torias to stay, doctor."

Doctor Medina looked at Torias and then at Audrid for a moment as he let out a little grunting "hmm...." Finally, he nodded and said, "If you wish."

Torias sat on the chair next to Audrid as she lifted her bed using its controls so she would be sitting up. She sat cross legged, with the blankets puddled on her lap as she wrung her hands.

"What do you want to know?" she asked.

"Tell me what happened," Doctor Medina said as he stood at the end of her bed, studying her.

She looked at Torias. He gave her a smile and a slight nod. She sucked in a breath, looking down at her lap.

"I don't know if you'll believe me, doctor," she said.

"I'd like the truth, Audrid. No matter how outlandish it might seem."

"The truth," she said as she took a deep breath. "The truth is hard to believe. If you asked me before I ever went into that cave if I thought I would find entities living there, I would have laughed. I didn't believe in such fanciful things. What kinds of beings would live in a cave that's too hot for humans to live in? Or without oxygen for that matter? Not to mention the theta-polaron radiation."

"And now?" Doctor Medina asked.

"And now," she started to say as she stared at her lap. "This is what I know. There are beings living in that cave. I believe they're either the source of the theta-polaron radiation or they live amid it. We found them when the readings went off the charts. They look like clouds. Beige, with a slight shimmer to them. They don't have arms or legs or heads, but they can reach out parts of themselves as tendrils. It feels cold when they touch you. They're also telepathic. I've never heard them talk aloud, but I've heard them in my head. They can communicate to you through your dreams. I felt a drive to get back to the cave. It became the most important thing for me."

“Tell me about the one you say was living in your brain,” Doctor Medina said as he studied her intently.

“That’s how they reproduce. They insert their undeveloped offsprings into the brains of corporeal beings to develop and mature there. But these corporeal beings must be in the cave for their offsprings to be extracted from them. The beings are capable of reaching inside your head with their tendrils to pull out their offsprings. I saw it when I was unconscious. I became detached from my body. I watched as the being’s tendril reached inside my unconscious body, in my head, and a smaller cloud emerged after. That was the last thing I remembered before waking up in the infirmary.” She looked up at him. “See? It’s hard to believe. Far-fetched and crazy. But it’s the truth as I know it.”

He just nodded. “Do you remember the events of the last 11 days?”

“Vividly. I remember behaving in ways I never did in the past. It was like I was a different person. The things I thought, the things I said and did...” She blinked away her tears as her words caught in her throat. She swallowed hard. “I did horrible things.”

“You were sick,” Torias said as he found her hand and squeezed it.

“Your husband is right. You were ill. And it’s my job now to determine if you’re still suffering from a mental illness,” Doctor Medina said. She just nodded as she sucked in a breath. “Tell me about Jared Weston.”

“Jared,” she said with a sigh. “I owe him an apology.”

“Tell me why you think that,” Doctor Medina said.

“Because I accused him of conspiracy, of loving Torias to the point of trying to get rid of me. It was ludicrous. I can’t believe I actually went to his office and confronted him. I must have sounded insane. I was insane. I wasn’t in my right mind.”

“And now? Do you believe he had anything to do with the events of the last 11 days, or that he’s trying to get rid of you?” Doctor Medina asked.

“No. That was all a delusion. I was paranoid. But I felt so sure of what I was saying then. I was horrible to him,” she said as she felt her tears brimming. “And I was horrible to Captain Johnstone too. I accused him of being part of the conspiracy. I accused a lot of people. I don’t know how I can face them again.”

Torias squeezed her hand again. “It wasn’t your fault. People will understand.”

“I wouldn’t,” she said in a hard tone.

“Audrid, how would you describe your mood right now?” Doctor Medina asked.

“Sad. I feel like crying,” she said as she swallowed past the lump in her throat.

“Do you feel keyed up at all or agitated?”

“No.”

“Do you feel energized? Like you have so much energy you don’t know what to do with it?”

“No.”

“Do you feel like you have any special powers or abilities?”

“No. I’m not crazy. I’m not delusional,” she said.

“But you still believe in the cave entities,” Doctor Medina said.

“Because they exist,” she replied.

“Captain Riley, did you see cave entities when you were in the Hades Caves?” Doctor Medina asked.

“I saw a cloud of dust that shimmered, but I didn’t think it was alive. In retrospect, I think it might simply have appeared that way because it didn’t want me. Perhaps without a need to interact with someone, it appears innocuous. But no, I didn’t see what appeared to be a living being. Still, something happened in that cave that I cannot explain,” Torias said.

“Do you believe there are entities living in that cave?” Doctor Medina asked.

“Yes.”

Audrid looked up at him in shock. He glanced at her with a soft smile.

“I believe my wife. Her presentation since waking up has changed dramatically. Yes, she believes there are cave entities and that one was living in her brain, but all her other delusions and paranoia have disappeared. Her mood has changed. She’s no longer manic. She’s not agitated. She’s my wife again. So, if my wife believes that cave entities exist and they occupied her brain for a time, then I believe her,” he said.

“Interesting,” Doctor Medina said.

“Are you going to call me psychotic?” Torias asked, raising a brow.

“I don’t see a psychotic man sitting before me. I just see a man devoted to his wife,” he said.

“So, what now, Doctor Medina?” Audrid asked. “Do you still think I’m crazy?”

“I don’t know what to think, Audrid. Your presentation has dramatically changed. There’s no sign of mania. You’re calm for the first time since I’ve met you. You haven’t had medications since last night, which means they can no longer be acting to calm you down. And it was too soon for either your mood stabilizer or your antipsychotic to take effect. You’re no longer paranoid or experiencing persecutory delusions. But you still believe in the cloud people. I’m at a loss for how to explain this change or how to label it,” he said as he stared at her, brows furrowed.

“Then doesn’t it make sense to just believe her?” Torias asked. “Isn’t that the most logical course of action?”

“I wouldn’t go that far. Believing there are aliens living in that cave and that they put their offsprings in human brains is still quite a leap to make,” Doctor Medina replied.

“Something happened in that cave,” Torias said. “Whether you want to believe it or not. But the most important question right now is, do you still believe my wife is mentally ill?”

“Inconclusive,” he replied. “You haven’t been medically cleared to come back to the psychiatric unit. I’ve talked to Doctor Sharma. She wants to keep you here overnight to be reassessed in the morning. You will be confined here, with Security present at all times. I will discuss your case with Doctor Sharma again in the morning. In the meantime, I have to talk to Privates Milton and Henley. Excuse me.”

He nodded curtly then disappeared to the other side of the curtains. Audrid readjusted her bed until it was propped up only slightly, and then pulled the covers down, patting the bed beside her. Torias smiled as he climbed in next to her.

“I want you here beside me the whole time I’m confined to this bed. Agreed?” she said with a smile.

“Yes, sir,” he said as he kissed her.

She rested her head on his shoulder again as she settled into him, soon falling into a semi-slumber in the safety of his arms.

Torias lay there, listening to Audrid’s breaths. Since she woke up the previous morning, they had been ragged and chaotic, never quite settling down into a regular pattern. But finally, her breaths were now slow and even. She even slept through the night.

After breakfast and after checking in with Doctors Sharma and Medina, Audrid settled down on Torias’s chest, relaxing into him as they both rested and awaited their fates. Every so often, she would stir, moving around just slightly, cuddling into him or getting comfortable, so he knew she wasn’t quite asleep. But she was quiet and seemed peaceful. As for him, he was full of “what ifs.”

What if she goes to prison? What if they lock her up in some forensic psychiatric hospital on Earth? Even if neither of those things happen, she could lose her position with the military, or even just her position on Mars. Her whole life is here. And she’s my entire life. If she’s sent to Earth, I can’t stay here without her. Even if I have to risk it all. I’ll go to the end of the galaxy and back for her. I’ll go to Earth if I have to. Even if that means evading the authorities and risking prison. Audrid’s worth the risk.

“Riley?” a voice said as its owner poked his head inside the curtains. “There you are. I should have known you’d be in Audrid’s bed.”

“General, come in,” Torias said as he pressed the controls to lift the head of the bed until he was sitting. Audrid let out a little moan beside him. She had obviously fallen asleep.

“General?” she said as she quickly sat up.

“At ease, both of you,” he said as he stood there with a grim face.

“What is it, sir?” Torias asked as he put his arm protectively around Audrid’s shoulders.

“We’ve discussed your situations, and a decision has been made moving forward. There will be joint court martial for all four of you.” Torias’s breath caught in his throat. He forced himself to breathe. “Doctor Sharma has medically cleared all four of you. Doctor Medina feels that a stay in the psychiatric unit is no longer warranted for you, Audrid, and for Milton and Henley. You’ll be confined to your apartments, with Security posted outside your doors until your court martial. It will take place on Mars in three days. Captain Johnstone feels that will give them enough time to conclude the investigation.”

“Understood,” Torias said.

“Understood, sir,” Audrid said. He felt her taking a deep breath. He found her hand and squeezed it.

“I’ll be in touch,” General Vasylyk said as he curtly nodded and left.

Doctor Sharma must have been standing right outside the curtains because she slipped inside as soon as the general left. She had a scanner in hand.

“I’ve already cleared Privates Milton and Henley for discharge. They’re being escorted to their apartments. It’s your turn,” she said as she held up her scanner.

“Go for it,” Torias said.

She began running her scanner over him first. “All readings are nominal. I’m satisfied with your progress, Captain Riley.” She began running her scanner over Audrid, who looked back at Torias with a nervous look on her face. “Your readings are also nominal. I’m officially discharging both of you. Doctor Skanlon will be making house calls to follow up and ensure that you’re both physically well and not requiring additional medical care over the coming days.”

“Thank you, Doctor Sharma.”

“If you start experiencing any signs of illness, please contact Doctor Skanlon right away,” she said. “A nurse will be in with your belongings.” She nodded and left.

“Looks like we’re on house arrest,” Torias said as he squeezed his arm around Audrid.

“Yeah,” she said solemnly.

She was about to stand up, but he pulled her back until she was against his chest as he wrapped his arms around her and kissed her head.

“Whatever happens, we’ll face it together. Even if we go to Earth together,” he said as he kissed her again.

He felt her sigh. She turned to look at him, resting her hand on his cheek. "I..." she started to say as tears welled up in her eyes. "I... Let's just go home."

"Let's go home," he said as he wrapped her up in a hug.

The nurse came with their belongings. Torias had the pajamas he was wearing when he rushed to the cave. Audrid only had an infirmary gown, so the nurse lent her a pair of baggy scrubs to wear home. Two security officers escorted them to their apartment. He nodded to them as they stationed themselves outside the door.

"We're home," he said with a little smile as he kissed her cheek before putting his palm on the reader.

"Home," she said, sharing his smile. It was sad and broken, though, making his heart crunch in his chest.

He just wanted to heal her. Keep her safe. Make everything better again. Something told him that no matter how hard he tried, no matter what resolve he had, their fates were out of his hands. He wrapped his arm around her shoulder and walked into the apartment with her, shutting the door to the rest of the world.

Chapter 21

Audrid felt an intense sense of relief wash over her as soon as she heard the lock to their front door click shut. She pulled Torias into a hug, feeling his warm embrace and melting into it. She could feel him kissing her head, the tickle of his breath in her hair. She wanted to stay like that forever and have the last 12 days washed away, as if the events on those days never happened.

After a few minutes, she pulled out of the hug and took his hand, leading him to the bathroom silently. Her hair was disgusting, and she felt so dirty after being in the cave in that compromised environmental suit. She wanted to feel the water running over her, and she knew he felt the same.

She pulled his pajama shirt over his head and tossed it to the floor before pushing his pants down his hips. He just stood there, letting her undress him, without words, as if this were all part of a therapy for them. When she finished pulling off his boots and socks, she pulled down his boxers.

She was about to remove the borrowed scrub top she was wearing when he stopped her. He lifted the hem up and pulled it over her head. He smiled just a little as he skimmed his fingertips up and down her torso with his feather-soft touch. She took his hands and kissed them before holding them to her heart for a minute. He leaned in to kiss her softly on the lips. When he pulled away, he took her pants and borrowed shoes off. She suddenly felt so cold as she stood there.

He turned the water on and then pulled her into a hug, keeping her warm until the water was the right temperature. When he let go of her, chills washed over her again. Sensing this, he rubbed her biceps for a minute to get her warmed up, but she stood there shivering anyway.

“You’ll get warm under the water,” he said as he escorted her in the shower, moving her until she was directly under the stream.

She just stood there, trying to get warm. He went back to rubbing her biceps. They stayed just like that as the bathroom started to steam up. After a few minutes, he grabbed her bar of soap and ran it under the water before rubbing it across her clavicle. She had been hugging herself to keep warm, but she dropped her arms to her sides as she let him run the bar of soap all over her front. She enjoyed the feeling of the slippery bar against her skin and his gentle touch.

She could feel the tears brimming in her eyes, but she blinked them away. So much had happened. So much. She didn’t want to think of it. She just wanted to be with her husband. He put the bar of soap down and started rubbing the suds into every inch of her front. He didn’t linger in any one place. He didn’t try to make it sexual. He just took care of her, without even being asked. When he was finished with her front, he moved onto her back, and then her folds, legs, and feet.

He ran her hair under the water, getting it saturated. He poured coconut shampoo in her hair and began to massage it. She was facing away from him when the first tear fell. She sniffled as she wiped it away. Too much had happened. Too much. She felt him kissing her neck, his warm breath on her skin.

“Shh... It will all be okay,” he murmured as he kissed her again.

He went back to massaging her hair. The sensation was intense, as if every nerve ending was firing and emotions were bubbling over her. She let out a little sob.

“Hey,” he said softly as he turned her to face him and pulled her into a hug. “I’ve got you. I’m here, and I’m never letting you go.”

He held her for a minute as she cried. She pulled away and put her head under the stream of water. He started finger-combing the suds out until her hair was free of soap. She wiped her eyes dry as she sucked in a breath and then took her turn washing him. She tried to focus on the task instead of the emotions brewing inside her.

She ran the bar of soap across his clavicle and chest, seeing the shiny streak of soap trailing across firm muscles. She ran it down his abdomen, smiling a little as it slid across his chiseled form. Then she rubbed all the soap in, massaging his skin until it was sudsy. She continued doing the same for his back, legs, and groin, focusing on nothing else but running her hands over firm muscles. Then she washed his hair using the same coconut shampoo.

When they were rinsed and free of soap, they stepped out of the shower. She stood there, shivering, as he grabbed her towel and draped it around her shoulders. She just held onto it as she hugged it around herself, feeling the tears welling up in her eyes. So much. Too much.

He was drying himself off as he watched her. He stopped, dropping his towel to the floor as he took hers and began to dry her. She felt immobilized. She couldn’t move. Too much. Too much.

“Shh...” he said as the tears started to roll down her cheeks. “Shh...”

“I did horrible things, Torias. And now I might lose everything,” she said barely above a whisper.

“You were sick. You weren’t in control,” he said as he hugged her. He pulled away as he took her face in his hands and stared intently at her. “This wasn’t your fault. I should have believed you. I should have gotten you to the cave sooner. I should have taken that leap of faith with you from the beginning.”

“Don’t blame yourself,” she said as she caressed his cheek. “I don’t want you to ever blame yourself.”

“Then don’t blame yourself either,” he said as he pulled her into a kiss. It was warm and tender. She wrapped her arms around his neck as his hands pressed onto her back, pulling her against him. “It’s not your fault,” he said as he pulled away to rest his forehead on hers.

She didn’t say anything. She just pulled him back into the kiss, deepening it quickly as she let one hand wander up into his wet hair. Tongues danced as tears welled up in her eyes. She pulled away as hot tears spilled down her cheeks. She took him by the hand and led him into the bedroom.

“I need you,” she said as she wrapped her arms around his neck again, pulling him into a kiss. “I need you to take care of me, Torias. All of me.”

His hands were up and down her torso, just gliding across smooth skin. He kissed her harder for a moment as he took her by the waist and moved her over to the bed. He let his hands wander over her body, feeling her belly and her torso, her hips and her ass. His touch felt good. Warm and soft. It soothed her.

She pulled down the covers and lay in her bed, letting her head flop down on the pillow. He lay down on top of her, his warmth like a weighted blanket wrapping her up in its safety, keeping the monsters away and making her feel better. He kissed her hard, taking her bottom lip between his teeth, before trailing kisses across her jaw until he was at the sensitive spot behind her ear. He continued trailing kisses down her neck. The entire time, her hands were tangled in his hair as she let out soft gasps. He suckled on the crook of her neck for a moment before trailing kisses down her clavicle to her breasts.

She gasped harder as his lips wrapped around her nipple. He thumbed the other one. She could feel how hard they were as he thumbed and suckled. He started massaging her one breast as her hard nipple pressed against his palm. He took her nipple between his teeth, tugging a little before suckling more. He switched sides, her wet nipple cold in the air. His warm hand quickly began massaging it as his mouth lavished her other nipple.

He started trailing kisses down her belly until he was at her mound. He gave it as a soft kiss as she felt herself growing wet. His breath tickled her hair, leaving a warmth to stir deep in her belly. He looked up at her with a smile before taking her leg in his hand. He started suckling on the back of her knee. She could feel his warm breath against her skin. As he started trailing kisses up her inner thigh, that deep warmth in her belly started growing hot. She could feel the moisture seeping out of her. When he was just shy of her folds, he switched sides and did the same.

Then he pushed both legs apart and buried his face in her. As he slid his tongue in her folds, she let out a heavy gasp. Her hands were still tangled in his hair, and as his tongue hit her clit, she tightened her fingertips, gripping hard as she moaned. He flicked his tongue back and forth before swirling it around as her belly filled with tingles.

“Oh, Torias...” she breathed out.

He started to lick harder as she moaned. And then he slid two fingers into her entrance as she gasped before letting out a long and hard moan. He started stroking her insides as he continued to lick her clit, leaving her to coo. A moment later, he started thrusting his fingers in and out of her entrance as she cried out his name.

“Torias!”

He licked harder at the sound of his name.

“Oh, Torias...”

He thrust and licked as the tingles in her belly spread out over her whole body until even her ears were tingling. She could feel herself melting into the mattress, only to become fired up again as he slid a third finger in and thrust harder as he licked her.

“Oh, Torias!”

Electricity was jolting through her body, starting with her loins, as it surged out her fingertips and toes. She curled them up as she squeezed her eyes shut, arching her back and gripping his hair tighter. He didn't stop, just making the waves of electricity surge through her until she saw stars flashing in her vision. She let out a long moan before mewling out his name softly over and over again.

"Torias... Torias... Ohh... Torias... Ohh..."

As she lay there like molten lava, she tugged on him to return to her mouth. He took her in a deep kiss as she tasted herself on him and felt her moisture on his face. She reached down for his cock, feeling it hard and hot beneath her palm as she stroked it.

"I need you inside me now," she said breathily.

She guided him in, letting out a long heavy gasp as he filled her. He settled into her, staring deep into her eyes with an unspoken anguish, sadness, and hurt, which she shared. They needed to heal, and they would do so together.

She nodded softly as he started to thrust. He was gentle at first as she mewled lightly. He gazed into her eyes the whole time. She felt like he was reaching into her soul and she was reaching back into his, just tugging on it. She wanted to tie a lifeline between their souls so they would have each other for eternity. He kissed her softly, just lingering there, and then he thrust harder into her.

"Torias..." she whispered.

He thrust again, harder, as she moaned. He picked up the pace, and soon he was pummeling into her hard and fast, like a high-speed train full of boiling emotions that were spilling out its windows. She let out continual gasps and long moans, and his name kept slipping from her lips.

"Torias..."

He started driving into her, harder, faster, harder, faster, like a wild stallion that knew nothing but the instinct to take his mate. He hit her G-spot hard as she cried out his name.

"Oh, God, Torias!"

He drove into her harder, hitting her sensitive spot again and again, his hot cock so hard inside her. She squeezed it, increasing the friction, as she let out a long guttural moan. She couldn't even find words any longer. The room filled with her cries and moans and his grunts.

"Ohh... Ohhh..."

He was pounding into her so hard that she gripped onto the bedding as she squeezed her eyes shut. Soft tingles had become hard jolts of electricity as they surged through her, making her curl her toes as she wrapped her legs tighter around him. He hit her again hard as she cried out his name.

"Torias!"

And then she turned to goo as she melted into the bed, just softly mewling his name over and over again.

“Torias... Torias... Oh... Torias... Oh...”

“I love you,” he uttered between breaths as he drove into her harder.

He kept going. Harder, faster, making new waves of pleasure wash over her. And then he grunted loudly as he stiffened, and she felt his hot seed spill into her. His hot body collapsed on top of her as heavy breaths filled the room, tickling her hair. She wrapped her arms around him and just held him as emotions washed over her. She had no idea what the future would hold. Everything was so uncertain. All she knew was that she needed him.

“I love you so much,” he breathed into her ear between pants. “I love you more than anything. I love you. Whatever happens. Remember that. I love you.”

He rolled off her onto his side as he stared intently at her, cupping her cheek with one hand as his thumb caressed her. She rolled over and pushed his shoulder down until he was on his back.

“I love you too,” she said as she kissed his chest before flopping her head down on it with a heavy breath. “Just hold me forever, okay? I’m never going to stop needing you.”

“Forever and always,” he said as he wrapped his arms around her and she settled into his side.

“Forever and always,” she said as she clung to him.

Audrid fell asleep in Torias’s arms as their bodies cooled down and their heartbeats began to slow. He pulled the blankets over them as she snuggled into his side. Her breaths had become soft and even. He kissed her head as he held her. He could hold onto her forever if he had to. He wanted to stay just like that, keeping her safe in his arms. But so much had happened, and soon they would face the consequences.

He lay like that for a while, drifting in and out of sleep. Every time he fell into that darkness, he felt something tugging on him, and he would find himself back in their bedroom, with her sleeping safely in his arms.

He let her sleep in his arms for a little while longer, then he slowly and carefully extricated himself from underneath her and slid out of the bed. He threw on a fresh pair of pajamas. Just a regulation black long-sleeve top with the Colony6 logo and black joggers. He headed into the living room to grab a drink of water. He sipped it as he looked out the window in the living room.

Mars was cloudy. He couldn’t see the sun as a gloominess settled over the colony, the light dim as it shone through the dome. He was glad they didn’t get rain at least. But he could tell that it was raining on Mars. He longed to go for a walk in the arboretum or even a hike in the simulator. But instead, he was trapped in his apartment. At least he had Audrid.

He walked back to the bedroom and leaned against the doorframe as he watched her. She had rolled onto her stomach as she sprawled out naked, arms stretched to her sides. The blankets had fallen to her waist. He didn't want her to be cold, so he gently pulled the blankets over her before bending down to kiss her head softly, taking in the coconut aroma of her shampoo.

He walked to the den and turned on the computer as he sat in the chair. He turned it onto TV mode as Mars News Network flooded the room. He wondered if the incident was on the news. But instead, they were talking about the forecast. There was a storm warning. It didn't mean much for New Horizons, but anyone planning to work outside the dome would have to stay inside during the storm. Maybe there would be a lightning show.

"Hey," said a soft voice at the door.

"Hi," he said with a smile.

"Did we make the news?" she asked as she walked up to him and put her hand on his shoulder.

"I don't think so. They probably want to cover this up," he said as he took her hand off his shoulder and kissed it. "They don't want anyone knowing about the monsters in the cave."

"They weren't monsters. They were sentient beings reliant upon corporeal beings to propagate," she said as she squeezed his hand.

"So, you don't blame them for what they did to you?" he asked, turning to her with a raised brow.

"I can't blame them for being who they are," she said.

"But they hurt you," he said, swiveling the office chair to face her as he took both her hands in his. She knelt in front of him, resting her hand on his cheek.

"They were just doing what they had to so they would continue surviving."

"They need to find a way to survive without hurting other people."

"They can't change who they are. And we can't change who we are. People need to stay out of that cave. We need to make sure of that. If they want to cover this up, fine. That's their prerogative. But whatever this investigation turns up, we need to ensure that no one goes into that cave again. No one should have to go through what we went through. If I go to prison or lose my job, just make sure you keep everyone safe," she said as she stroked his cheek with her thumb.

"I'm coming with you if you're forced to leave Mars. I'm not going to stay here and have a life without you. We'll find a way to make the future work, whatever that may be, but we'll do it together."

He watched as she sucked in a breath. "Let's just make lunch. I'm hungry."

"Okay," he said as he got up and pulled her into a hug. "Maybe we can make brownies together after."

“I’d like that,” she said as she pulled him into a kiss.

He just held her as his lips lingered on hers, relishing the feeling of her body pressed into him, her soft moist lips and the sweet taste of her lip balm on his tongue. He loved her. Whatever happened next, that would never change.

Chapter 22

Audrid looked in the mirror as she straightened her tie. It was a bit crooked, but she had to get it perfect. She sucked in a breath as she stared at herself. She felt like she had aged 30 years in two weeks, and yet, here she was at 32, about to go to a joint court martial with her husband and two privates for something she was responsible for. She looked at her bun. There was a little stray hair. It wouldn't do. She began unpinning and untwisting her bun roughly in frustration as she growled.

"Why are you redoing your hair?" Torias asked as he got ready beside her.

"There was a loose strand," she replied as she brushed her long strands before twisting her hair up into a bun again. He just stood there, watching her with concern in his eyes. "I'm fine, Torias."

She started sliding pins furiously into her bun until they were all gone and her hair was in a perfect and very tight bun.

"You're not fine," he said as he tugged on her elbow to face him. He pulled her into a hug. "And it's okay to not be fine. I'm not fine either."

"I'm sorry," she said as she melted into his embrace.

"For what?" he asked.

"For getting you into this mess," she replied as she rested her head on his shoulder.

"You didn't get me into this mess, Audrid. Those cave aliens did. They violated your body without your consent. They made you ill. I just hope the judges understand that," he said as he tightened his arms around her.

"It's still a mess," she said as she pulled away, gazing into his eyes. "And a mess you wouldn't be in if it wasn't for me."

"I would choose a mess over a tidy life if it meant I'd have you in it," he said as he pulled her into a soft kiss.

"You might not have me for long if they lock me up," she said as she pulled away and looked into the mirror, checking if her muted berry lipstick had been smudged.

"You look fine," he said as he squeezed her shoulder. "You look beautiful."

She sighed. "We should go before we're late."

"We have time," he said as he gathered her up in another hug. "I'm with you always, no matter what happens. And if things don't go our way, remember that you're the most important part of my life, and I'll run into a burning fire for you. I'll face the music, whatever it is. We'll face it together."

He pulled away to cup her face, his thumbs caressing her cheeks as he gazed into her eyes. She smiled a little, wishing she had some of that optimism, that hope. She felt a pit deep in her stomach as a sense of doom settled over her.

“We should go,” she said as she took his hand and led him out of their apartment.

The court martial felt long as Audrid sat next to Torias, her hand in his. She could feel how sweaty their palms were. She wasn’t sure if he was sweaty, too, or if it was her hand that was dripping wet. Her stomach was unsettled, and she was worried she might actually vomit right there in the court martial. Luckily, she hadn’t eaten anything that morning. But still, throwing up stomach acid in the middle of a court would be no good. Neither would losing everything, which is what felt like her fate would be as the three-judge panel stared down at her.

Beside her was Henley. Milton was on the other side of him. She glanced over at them from time to time, worrying about their well-being. She hadn’t checked in with them since the incident. They had all been under house arrest. And she didn’t want to just call them. Too much had happened for a simple phone call. Or maybe she was just afraid to face them. If she were responsible for ruining their lives, she wasn’t sure she could live with herself.

Henley looked over at her with a nervous smile. She watched him suck in a breath as he nodded to her. She nodded back curtly before looking at her lap. She slid her hand out of Torias’s and started fiddling with her hands, thumbs strumming together as if they were in an impromptu thumb war.

Everything was blurring together as the day progressed and evidence was brought forward. The prosecution had a heavy case. Many witnesses. It was daunting to sit there listening to it. That feeling of doom pervaded her whole body now. She took deep breath after deep breath, trying to keep it together when her life was falling apart.

“We’ll take a short recess now, and then the defense will put on their case,” someone said, though she barely took notice. She just sat there, numb.

“Audrid,” Torias said beside her. “Audrid.”

He shook her shoulder until she looked up at him, confused. She realized everyone around her was standing up. She stood up and followed Torias out into the hall. She turned back at the door and watched as the judges filed out. She just stood there, watching them go, knowing her fate was in their hands. Torias’s fate. Her junior officers’ fates. They had power over them, and she both resented them for it and envied them.

“Come,” Torias said as he took her hand.

They walked into a little meeting room off the main hallway in the Command building and sat down with Henley, Milton, and their lawyer.

“How do you think it’s going, Counsellor Tomako?” Torias asked.

“It’s bad. Just say it,” Milton said as he sat there across from Audrid, staring at his lap. “We’re doomed.”

“We’re not doomed,” Torias said firmly.

“Things are progressing as expected,” Counsellor Tomako said. She looked around the room.

“We still have to present our case. That will be our opportunity to show the judges that none of you was at fault. We haven’t lost, so buck up. You need to look confident in there. No more staring at your laps. No more fiddling with your thumbs. No long faces.”

Audrid could feel her eyes on her, even though she was looking down. She finally looked up, meeting her eyes.

“Maybe I should take the fall. Save everyone else. Is it too late to change our tactics?” Audrid asked, suddenly feeling horrible as she looked around the room at the people who were going to suffer because of her.

“Don’t talk like that,” Torias said as he took her hand. “I won’t let you take the fall here. You were sick. You weren’t responsible for your actions.”

“Captain Riley is right,” Tomako said. “And if you start talking about taking the fall, you’re just telling them you’re guilty. We have a psychiatrist testifying on your behalf about how ill you were. We have lots of evidence to support that. We have a good strategy, and we’re not changing it.”

“Okay,” Audrid said. “So what happens next?”

“We’ll present our side. The judges will then go into deliberations and come back with their decisions,” Tomako said.

“How long do deliberations take?” Audrid asked.

“There’s no way to predict that. We’ll just have to wait and see,” Tomako responded. There was a knock on the door. “Recess is over. Let’s go. Keep those faces up. Look confident. We’ve got this.”

They all filed back into the room and stood there at their seats. Audrid looked around at the crowd. She spotted Asha and Captain Johnstone. Her captain gave her a curt nod. She didn’t know if it was just polite or if he was on her side. She didn’t know how he could possibly be on her side after everything she had done.

She looked away. Jared caught her eye as she did. He gave her a grim smile. She just stared at him for a moment, memories washing over her of that day when she accused him of being in love with Torias and trying to ruin her life. She took a deep breath and looked at the judges. Everyone sat down. It felt like the room was taking a deep breath together. And slowly, they all let it out.

Their testimony fell heavily on Doctor Medina, who was first to testify. He sat in the witness stand in the middle of the room as Tomako questioned him.

“Tell me your impressions of Sergeant Riley when you first met her,” Tomako said.

“She was a very ill woman. She had to be locked in our observation room because she was so agitated and out of control. She remained there overnight until several doses of medications managed to calm her down enough to be manageable on the rest of the unit,” Doctor Medina said.

“And what diagnosis did you give Sergeant Riley?” Tomako asked.

“Manic episode with psychosis,” he replied.

“What about Private Milton?” she asked.

“Private Milton was suffering from a severe psychosis. His mood wasn’t as elevated as Sergeant Riley’s, but his delusions were intense.”

“And Private Henley?”

“The same. They were all suffering from intense delusions. They shared the same delusions.”

“What delusions were those?” Tomako asked.

“That there were cloud people living in the cave and they had inserted their offsprings into their brains to develop there. They said if they didn’t return to the cave to get the offsprings out of their brains, they would die,” he explained.

“And how do you explain this shared delusion? According to all three of them, Sergeant Riley never told them about the cave aliens ahead of time.”

“I can’t explain it,” he replied.

“And now, after everything, do you believe the cave aliens did exist and that this was in fact not a delusion at all?” Tomako asked.

“I cannot deny the possibility. It’s peculiar that all three of them suddenly had a change in presentation after being in the cave. It seems far-fetched to believe in cave aliens, but their illness is otherwise unexplained. I honestly don’t know,” he said as he glanced over at the defendants. Audrid could feel his eyes on her. She sucked in a breath and looked straight ahead, not making eye contact.

“Let’s assume for a minute that the cave aliens do in fact exist and they indeed put their offsprings in the brains of Sergeant Riley and Privates Milton and Henley. Would that mean that they were never mentally ill?” Tomako asked.

“They were mentally ill, without a doubt. All three of them recognized that when I interviewed them after the incident in the cave. Whatever the cause, whether it was an alien influence or something else, all three of them suffered from severe mental illness,” he said as he looked over at them with a grim expression on his face.

“Would you say they were responsible for their actions?”

“No. Their judgment was grossly impaired, they had no insight, and they had no impulse control. There’s a reason they were confined to the psychiatric unit receiving medications.”

“And now?”

“They all still believe in the cave aliens and that offsprings were implanted in their brains, but all other delusions, paranoia, and mood abnormalities disappeared after the incident in the cave. They no longer meet the criteria of having a mental illness,” he explained.

“Even if the cave aliens don’t exist?”

“Having a delusion alone does not make a person mentally ill. They now have insight, their judgment is intact, they are no longer thought disordered, and their moods are now stable. As I said, they no longer meet the criteria.”

“So, they’re no longer a danger to others or themselves?” Tomako asked.

“No,” he said firmly.

“What would you like to see happen to them now?”

“I think they need to be monitored through outpatient psychiatry for a time, but ultimately, I don’t think they need to be locked up. As I said, they’re no longer mentally ill. They’re not a danger to society or to themselves. In time, they could return to duty.”

“Thank you, doctor. That’s all,” Tomako said.

Audrid sucked in a deep breath as she watched the prosecution step up to question the doctor. It seemed like the prosecutor was just asking the same questions. Even Doctor Medina seemed frustrated. She sat there, listening to it all, trying to keep that confident look even when she felt crushed. She was ill. But was it enough of a defense? She felt that looming sense of doom washing over her again.

Milton testified next. Then Henley. She thought they were brave as they sat there telling their stories. They didn’t blame her. They both said they would follow her into combat if they had to. They were loyal. She just felt sad as she watched them. No one should be following her into combat. She wasn’t in her right mind. And now they were all facing the consequences.

She testified third. She barely remembered it. She just remembered trying to speak when her mouth was so dry it was like cotton was shoved in there and her whole body was sweating to the point that she thought she needed a towel. She didn’t know if she made a fool of herself up there. She honestly couldn’t remember a single word that she said. She sat back down next to Torias as he squeezed her moist hand. She took it after and wiped it on her skirt as she sucked in a breath. And then it was his turn to testify.

“Captain Riley,” the prosecutor, Counsellor Troy, started, “you went into the cave believing your wife and her two colleagues were mentally ill and yet you chose not to notify Security. Explain yourself.”

“I couldn’t let my wife go into that cave without me. She was severely mentally ill. All three of them were. Their judgment was off. They weren’t thinking clearly. They were a danger to

themselves. I had to convince my wife to wait for me, and the only way to do that was to tell her I would go inside the cave with her and promise not to call Security first,” Torias explained.

“Have you never lied to your wife before?” Counsellor Troy asked as he raised a brow at Torias.

“I don’t lie to my wife,” Torias said firmly as he narrowed his eyes at Troy.

“Even in life and death?”

“My wife would know. She would have gone into that cave without me. Security would never have made it in time to stop them. I needed her to wait for me. The only way for that to happen was to be honest with her and make that promise. It was the only way,” he said as he eyed the man.

“You really can’t lie to your wife then? That’s hard to believe. As a captain, don’t you have to lie sometimes to those beneath you? You must have a poker face. It’s part of being in command,” Troy said as he badgered Torias, who didn’t waver.

“I don’t know about you, counsellor, but I have a healthy relationship with my wife. She knows all my faces. She knows when I lie to her. She knows when she can trust me. I had to ensure I had her trust. It was the only way,” he said as he glared at the man.

“So, you don’t regret your decision, even though all four of you almost died because of your error in judgment,” Troy said as he cocked his head, staring at Torias.

“You call it an error in judgment. I call it a life-saving choice.”

“Your life-saving choice almost cost four lives, including your own. I call that an error in judgment indeed,” Troy said.

“Objection,” Tomako exclaimed. “That isn’t a question, just a judgement.”

“Sustained,” one of the judges said.

“That’s all I have for you, captain,” Troy said with a smug smile.

Torias let out a huff before taking his seat. He sat stiffly beside Audrid. She took his hand and squeezed it, letting her thumb caress his knuckles. She could hear him taking a deep breath.

“We will now have a recess to deliberate,” one of the judges said.

They filed out again. Audrid felt like her heart was beating chaotically in her chest. Maybe she was having a heart attack. She wasn’t sure. She couldn’t breathe. She followed Torias into the meeting room and went to the window, looking out into the military complex. She could see personnel going about their days, their lives not about to be ruined. She felt a tug on her arm. She turned as Torias wrapped his arms around her and held her tight. Suddenly, she could breathe again as she melted into him.

The room was quiet as they sat there. It felt like forever and quick all at the same time. Two hours and 15 minutes went by. Silent time, during which they just sat there, contemplating the future. Finally, they were called back into the room and told to stand.

“Privates Milton and Henley,” one of the judges said. “It was clear you were acting under duress. You were suffering from a documented mental illness that impaired your judgment and were following the orders of your superior officer. Although all three of you were technically on medical leave, the court recognizes that it is difficult to break the chain of command even when you’re on leave. Therefore, you will not be held accountable for your actions. You will remain under the care of outpatient psychiatry until such a time when they deem that you no longer require that care. You will return to service when they deem you fit for duty.”

Audrid let out a sigh of relief as she looked at them. They were both smiling as they nodded to the judges.

“Sergeant Riley,” the judge said. She sucked in a breath and held it. It felt like her heart had stopped. “You seem to be the ringleader here. You even had a superior officer playing into your hands, even if he was your husband. You have a power over these people, and you used that to your advantage.” Audrid couldn’t breathe all of a sudden. She swallowed hard. “However, the court recognizes a profound level of illness that was influencing you. You cannot be held accountable for your actions, however dangerous they were. We discussed sending you to a forensic psychiatric facility on Earth, but after hearing testimony from Doctor Medina that you’re no longer suffering from a mental illness, it would seem like a waste of resources.”

The judge took a deep breath as Audrid stood there before him, feeling like her heart was in a cinch. Torias’s hand found hers as he squeezed it.

“Sergeant Riley, you will undergo mandatory outpatient psychiatric care. You will remain on medical leave until such a time that your psychiatrist feels you are ready to return to active duty, if such a time comes. I caution you, though. If your psychiatrist feels that you require more care than can be provided on Mars, this court supports the decision to remand you to Earth for treatment.”

Audrid just nodded, feeling her palm sweaty in Torias’s hand. She wasn’t going to be locked up. She wasn’t going to be sent away. She wasn’t going to lose everything. But the warning was clear. She swallowed hard past her parched throat. She felt Torias tighten his hold on her hand.

“Captain Riley, you were the one person here who was not suffering from a mental illness, and yet you took dangerous actions, nonetheless. In some ways, you should be held most accountable. However, the court recognizes the duress you felt in having three mentally ill subordinates threatening to go into a dangerous cave alone. While your actions did not ultimately save lives, it was the swift actions of Security who went to the cave that did, we recognize that your actions were done out of a sense of duty to your fellow officers and to your wife. There was no ill intent on your part. Still, you made the wrong call,” the judge said in a hard tone. “We’re putting a letter of reprimand in your permanent file. It will not affect your current position but may affect any future commission, especially if you will be in a position to supervise your wife.”

Audrid squeezed Torias’s hand as she looked at him, giving him a little nod.

“Finally, the court orders that the cave be sealed off and all entrances to them be barred until such time when technology allowing safe entry into the cave exists. At that point, they will be investigated for the possibility of life,” the judge said. “This court is adjourned.”

Audrid collapsed into her chair as she tried to breathe. At first, she couldn't, but as two hands landed on her shoulders and gave them a squeeze, she finally found the will to breathe again. She looked up at Torias with a smile.

“Let's go home,” he said as he leaned down to kiss her cheek.

“Let's go home,” she said with a smile as she stood up and pulled him into a hug, feeling warm and safe in his embrace.

As soon as they walked into the apartment, Torias went to the drink cart and poured two glasses of whiskey. He handed one to Audrid. She took a sip of the brown liquid and sighed, leaning against the island. She watched as Torias chugged his whiskey down in one go and poured another glass.

“Easy,” she said. “We should be celebrating.”

“We should be,” he said with a little smile as he put the full glass down on the drink cart.

He took her glass out of her hand and put it next to his. Then he grabbed her by the waist and pulled her close to him as he parted her lips and dove into her mouth, kissing her hard. She could taste the whiskey on him. She deepened the kiss as she ran her hands up and down his back. He pulled away breathlessly to look into her eyes. She could feel him reaching inside her soul as lust filled those eyes. He dove back into the kiss, sucking on her lower lip before biting it.

He pulled away as he started unbuttoning her navy-blue blazer before pushing it over her shoulders and to the ground. She did the same with his. He loosened her tie and slipped it over her head, tossing it aside. She loosened his and carefully pulled it over his head. He kissed her again, sucking on her bottom lip before pulling away to unbutton her blouse. He was careful with the buttons even in his frenzied state. He had done this before, and he knew there would be hell to pay if he wrecked her dress uniform. She took her white blouse off and tossed it to the floor.

He kissed the skin between her breasts before sucking on it. She started unbuttoning his dress shirt at the same time. He unclasped her bra, and it fell to the floor. He immediately took her hard nipple in his mouth, suckling it before biting lightly as she gasped. He massaged her other breast for a minute before switching sides. She let go of his dress shirt to grab hold of the counter as his teeth grazed her hard nipple.

“Torias...” she breathed out.

He suckled for another minute before going back up to her mouth and pulling her into a deep kiss. She pushed his dress shirt off his shoulders before starting to unbuckle his belt. She unbuttoned his pants and pushed them down his hips. His arousal was evident through his boxers. It made her want to grasp his cock and feel its heat on her palm.

He reached around and unbuttoned her skirt. It quickly fell to the floor. He finished taking off his pants, shoes, and socks. Finally, he slipped his boxers off, and his erection sprung up. She bit her lip as she eyed it. He slid her panties down, wasting no time. He turned her around and pushed her into the counter on the island. She reached her hands across and grabbed hold of the edge of the counter.

And then he pushed his hard cock inside her as she gasped. She could feel it stretching and filling her. He grabbed her bun before thrusting into her hard.

“Oh, God,” she muttered as she felt him sliding into her. He went harder. “Oh, God...”

He started pounding into her as the edge of the counter dug into her waist. She didn’t care. The feeling of his hot cock inside her felt so good. She wanted more.

“Harder,” she said urgently.

He drove into her harder as her belly jammed into the counter. And harder. Again. Harder. He pounded her into the counter as his cock drove deep into her. His grip on her bun tightened, pulling her hair painfully. It only spurred her on more.

“Faster.”

He went faster, just pummeling into her.

“God, Torias, keep going!”

Soon she could feel a heat radiating out from her loins. It was boiling down her thighs and up her belly until even her ears were hot. She was on fire.

“Keep going!”

“Fuck,” he muttered as he drove into her harder and faster.

“Torias!”

A jolt of electricity spread throughout her whole body and out her fingertips and toes. She could feel how wet she was for him as he slid in and out of her with ease. She squeezed her insides around his cock to increase the friction. It felt so good, and it made him take her harder.

“Torias!” she cried out as he hit her G-spot. He hit it again. “Torias!”

She gripped the counter more as he tightened his grip on her bun. She could feel it coming loose. He kept pounding into her. Her whole body was ablaze now. Tingles were washing over her. Hot, fiery tingles that surged through her body and only made her want to cry out his name louder.

“Torias!”

“Fuck,” he yelled as he rammed into her harder.

Her bun came loose. He let go of it and grabbed her shoulders as he continued pounding into her. She felt herself melting into the counter as her cheek pressed onto the cold surface. She let go of

the edge as she relaxed. And then he pounded into her sensitive spot again as she gripped the counter and cried out his name.

“Torias!”

She could feel her loins seizing up as a new wave of tingles washed over her body. Soon she was one with the counter and him. The pleasure was too much. She let out a long guttural moan as her forehead pressed onto the counter.

“Ohh... God...” she muttered. “Ohhh...”

And then she turned to molten lava, just spreading out on the countertop as her husband, the man she loved more than anything, pounded into her with the might of a stallion. She began mewling his name as she whimpered softly.

“Torias... Oh, Torias... Ohh...”

He rammed into her hard as she gasped, and then he let out a grunt and stiffened. She could feel his seed shooting into her. It was so satisfying. She moaned out a sigh. She started panting hard as he collapsed on top of her, the heat radiating off his hot body. She could feel the edge of the counter on her belly as her sweaty body plastered its top. His breaths were heavy against her skin. She could feel him kiss her back before resting his head on it. They just stood there, bent over the counter together, trying to catch their breaths.

“I feel like making cookies,” she said breathily after a long moment.

“We can make cookies,” he said. She could feel him smiling. She looked back at him, and indeed, his dimples were showing. “What kind of cookies?”

“Let me look through your mom’s recipe book,” she replied.

He kissed her back before sliding out of her. She could feel a chill as her sweaty body met the air. She turned to him, and he wrapped his warm arms around her, just holding her tight.

“Let’s make cookies,” she murmured into his shoulder.

“Yes, let’s.”

Chapter 23

Audrid stood at the counter, brushing her teeth, as Torias stood next to her, doing the same. She could see his dimples showing as he smiled at her. She spat out the toothpaste and rinsed out her mouth before staring into the mirror.

She was a different woman. Everything had changed. Not long ago, she was celebrating her first anniversary with him. Her career was everything to her then. But maybe it shouldn't have been.

"Let's have a baby," she said bluntly.

"What?" he asked with a mouthful of toothpaste. He quickly spat it out and turned to her, his mouth gaping open.

"You heard me," she replied with a smile.

"Say it again. I think my ears were clogged. It sounded like you just said we should have a baby," he said, raising a brow.

"That's what I said," she said, smiling even more.

"Audrid," he said softly as he pulled her into a hug, just holding her tight in his warm embrace.

He didn't say anything right away, but after a moment, he pulled away and cupped her face, his thumbs stroking her cheeks as he gazed at her.

"I love you," he said before pulling her into a soft kiss. "What changed your mind?"

"Everything," she replied as she stared back at him. "I guess I realized that my priority in life is you."

"You don't have to have a baby to have me," he replied. "I mean, if you don't want one, don't feel like you have to just for me. You have me. All of me. Baby or no baby."

"I almost lost everything, Torias. I could have lost you. My mind was so wrapped up in my career. It always has been. But what did that get me? A court martial, a stay in the psychiatric unit."

"But your career is everything to you."

"You're everything to me. My career matters, and I'm not saying I'm going to give it all up to start a family. I just realized that a career isn't the only thing in life that matters. You said before that you loved me so much that you wanted to expand on that love. What if you're right? Maybe I have enough love in my heart for more than just this," she said as she took his hands and held them against her heart.

"Are you sure?"

“I’m sure,” she said with a smile as she pulled him into a soft kiss. When she pulled away, she ran her thumb across his cheek. “But I’m not giving up my career. And neither are you. We’ll find a nanny.”

“Okay,” he said as he took her hand and kissed it.

As he gazed into her eyes, she could see tears about to fall. He blinked them away. He kissed her cheek softly, and then her other cheek. His hands tangled in her hair as he pulled her into a kiss, parting her lips as his tongue delved into her mouth, exploring contours. She deepened the kiss until their tongues were dancing together as her arms draped around his neck.

“Should we make that baby now?” he asked as he pulled away.

“My contraceptive injection is still in my system. We’ll have to wait to make a baby,” she said.

“We can practice,” he said as he kissed her again.

He started trailing kisses across her jaw until he was suckling on her earlobe. She pulled his pajama shirt over his head and tossed it aside before running her palms across his chiseled chest. His skin was hot. She leaned down to kiss it as she ran her hands up and down his strong biceps. She bit his clavicle, tasting his skin.

He pulled her pajama shirt over her head as his hands found her breasts, kneading them. She slid his pants down, underwear and all. His erection sprung up. She grasped his cock, feeling its heat on her palm as she stroked it.

He tugged her pajama pants down, leaving on her panties. Then he lifted her up until she was in his arms. He carried her into the bedroom, gently lay her down on the bed, and leaned down to kiss her belly before trailing kisses down to the edge of her panties. He ran his finger between her legs, grazing the moist fabric.

And then he slowly pulled her panties down and tossed them aside. He kissed her mound softly, his breath tickling her hair. He took her knee and suckled in the inside of it before trailing slow, careful kisses up her inner thigh. She could feel moisture seeping out of her as she went wet for him. He switched sides, teasing her until anticipation stirred deep in her belly.

“I need you, Torias,” she said breathily.

He pulled her hips until her ass was at the edge of the bed. Then he leaned over her and pulled her into a kiss just as his fingers slid inside her. She let out a heavy gasp before kissing him harder. He started thrusting his fingers in and out of her as he trailed kisses down her neck. He suckled on the crook of it for a minute before trailing hot kisses down further until he was biting her clavicle, and then down until he had her hard nipple between his teeth as he played with it. She tangled her fingertips in his hair.

“Oh, Torias...”

He thrust his fingers faster and harder as he switched nipples. Eventually, he trailed kisses down further until he was going down her belly, and then her mound, and was sliding his tongue inside

her folds. As his tongue hit her clit, she bucked her hips and let out a long moan. His fingers were still thrusting in and out of her as he flicked his tongue over her. She felt so wet for him.

“Torias...”

Warm tingles were spreading out from her loins. Soon, there was a fire spreading down her thighs and up her belly. She let go of his hair as she thumbed her hard nipples. He licked harder as she felt her loins seizing up. She grabbed her breasts and squeezed them as electricity jolted through her.

“Ohh... Torias...” she moaned. “Ohh...”

Tingles spread across her body as she melted into the bed, her arms flopping to her sides. She tugged on him, and he stood up, leaning over her body to take her lips in his. The kiss was deep and passionate as their tongues danced together. She reached down, found his cock, and caressed it. He let out a throaty groan as she stroked him harder and faster. She could feel his cock pulsating on her palm. He pulled her hips until she was at the edge of the bed, and then he slid his cock inside her as she gasped.

“Oh, Torias...”

He settled into her as he massaged her breasts and thumbed her nipples. And then he thrust into her. It was gentle at first. He was good at that, being gentle, taking his time. She relished it for a moment, enjoying his gentle thrusts. But then she wanted more as she felt a hunger take over.

“Harder,” she said.

He just smirked, tugging on her hips until her ass was almost hanging off the bed. He then drove into her hard. And again. Harder.

“Keep going,” she said. “Harder.”

His smirk grew as lust filled his eyes. He held onto her hips tight as he pounded into her again and again. Her loins felt like they were on fire, and soon her whole body was ablaze. She could feel the heat burning her fingertips and toes as she curled them.

“Harder!”

He pummeled into her harder and faster, all gentleness quickly disappearing as his fingers dug into her hips. She wrapped her legs tighter around him as she gripped the bedding. He thrust so hard it felt like he was going to ram through her. Harder and faster. Harder and faster. Warm tingles spread throughout her body. He hit her G-spot, and she cried out his name.

“Torias!”

Soon, she was melting into the bed as she let go of the bedding and just seeped into the mattress. He rammed into her G-spot hard. His name flew out of her lips again.

“God, Torias!”

He pounded her. Rammed her. Pummeled her. She couldn't take the pleasure any longer, and she let out a long, guttural cry. She was sure the neighbors could hear it. But he just fucked her harder.

"Torias!"

Electricity jolted through her as stars filled her vision and her cheeks lit ablaze. Even her ears felt like they were on fire. Soon, she was melting into the mattress again. She started mewling his name between soft whimpers.

"Oh, Torias... Torias... Ohh..."

He pulled her hips toward him again as he rammed her hard. She let out a gasp as his cock stretched her. And then he grunted loudly as he stiffened and his seed shot into her. She moaned softly, feeling a warm satisfaction filling her. He collapsed on top of her with an oomph. She wrapped her arms around him as she felt his heavy breaths against her chest. His hands found her breasts as he cupped them, just holding on. She ran her hands up and down his hot sweaty back as her legs dangled over the edge of the bed.

"That was..."

"Good," he finished as he kissed the skin between her breasts before standing up.

"Very good," she said with a smile.

She got up and pulled down the covers before climbing into bed. He walked around to his side of the bed and slipped under the covers. She settled into his side, resting her head on his chest. She just lay there, listening to his heart racing as she felt his chest rising and falling raggedly beneath her. Soon, breaths were caught and hearts began to slow down as they lay there.

"I love you," she said as she snuggled into him.

"I love you too," he replied as he tightened his arms around her.

They lay there quietly for a while as loud thoughts filled her head. *I almost lost it all. I almost lost everything. I almost lost Torias. I was trapped in darkness, and I couldn't find the light. Not until—.*

"I can hear you thinking," he said softly as he held her.

"I'm just thinking about the darkness."

"Hmm..." he said before kissing her head. She could feel his breath tickling her hair.

She rolled onto her belly as she looked down at him. "It was all darkness. But then you found me. You brought me into the light."

He cupped her face as his thumbs caressed her cheeks. He just gazed into her eyes, tugging at her soul. She leaned down to kiss him. His lips were moist and warm. They felt soft against hers.

"Thank you for bringing me back into the light," she said as she pulled away.

“I always will,” he said with a soft smile and warm eyes.

“Forever?”

“Forever and always. I love you, Audrid.”

“I love you too,” she said as she kissed him softly before settling back into his side.

She listened to his heart beating steadily as she slowly drifted off in the safety of his arms, feeling whole and complete. She tumbled into dreams about babies and family and the future. There was no cave. No darkness. Just hope.

Torias was walking through the dark cave as a chill washed over him. His headlamp was flickering on and off. He adjusted it, trying to get the light to come on steady. It flickered off as everything went black. That chill went deep into his bones. He didn't know why he wasn't in his environmental suit. He wrapped his arms around himself, unable to see where to go. He just wanted to find Audrid. He walked into the darkness, step by step, fear washing over him until it filled his belly with razor-sharp butterfly wings.

“Audrid?” he called out as his voice echoed through the cave. “Audrid?”

There was no answer. His heart started to pound in his chest as he worried about her. He had to find her. He started to run. The cave turned as he ran into the wall. He just kept running, keeping his hand against the wall to find his way.

“Audrid!” he called out. “Audrid!”

Nothing. Just darkness. His heart felt like it would give out. Where was she? Where was Audrid?

“Torias,” a voice said. It didn't belong to Audrid. “Torias,” the voice said again. “Come back to us, Torias.” It was ominous as it reverberated off the walls of the cave. “Come back to us, Torias. We need you...”

Torias woke up with a startle. He sucked in a breath as he blinked his eyes open. There were beads of sweat on his forehead. He could feel a warm body against him. Audrid. She was safe in his arms, and they were in their bedroom. Everyone was safe. He started to drift off again.

“Torias. Come back to us, Torias...” the voice said again as a cold breeze slipped past him. He stood there in darkness as more voices joined in. “Come back to us, Torias. We need you...”

“Who are you?” he asked as terror filled his belly. “Where's Audrid?”

“Come back to us, Torias. We need you...”

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About the Author:

Run Away to Mars is Una Rose McKinley's debut novel. She has been writing since she was 10 years old but decided to pursue a career in nursing. Writing has always been her passion though and she is thrilled she reconnected with it. She loves writing psychological stories, especially those featuring a dark edge. She makes her home on the west coast of Canada with her feline writing companion.

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