

Victory

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Chapter 1

It's the perfect kind of rainy day. A blanket of puffy gray clouds is covering the sky, blocking all of those annoying, bright sunbeams that hurt my eyes. Random sprinkles just starting to fall leave warm, wet spots where they alight on my face and arms. I am headed north on Penn Lane, a bustling area downtown. It is the middle of the afternoon, and the walkways are filled with umbrella-wielding pedestrians.

Despite the crowd, I always have plenty of personal space around me. I have a certain kind reputation that I've worked very hard to achieve and will maintain at any cost. Because of it, I am given a wide berth. People part when they see me coming, some swear, some gasp, they all shudder—which is why I'm shocked when someone calls out my name from across the tracks.

"Hey, Vic! Stay out of Whiskey Neat's! We don't want your scary fucking face ruining the ambiance anymore!"

Whiskey Neat's is a dive bar I frequent, and its ambiance is *if you don't know me, you probably shouldn't risk talking to me, so just have your drink, pay, and leave*. If anything, its ambiance is magnified by my presence.

I know that was Solana's snarky voice I heard, even though she's hiding in the crowd on the other side of the tracks. She's not brave enough to face me, yet she's suicidal enough to make a scene. I cannot let that go. Like I said, I have a reputation to maintain.

But it will have to wait. I have bigger fish to fry at the moment. Grutto owes me, and it's time for him to pay up.

When I reach the alley that runs between Grutto's butcher shop and the artisan store beside it, I use it to walk around the building and enter the shop through the back, where the processing takes place. The air back here is cool and filled with mist from the backsplash of hoses spraying blood off metal tables down drains in the concrete floor. The crisp smell of ice mixed with raw meat hits my nose, expanding my nasal passages.

Grutto senses my presence and spins to face me with a look of terror on his chubby face.

I don't say anything. I don't need to.

He drops to his knees and begins to beg and offer excuses. He sputters something about how the guy that buys from him is late, so he doesn't have the money, and could I please spare his life for just two

more days—blah, blah, blah. I don't actually need the money, but again, the reputation. Sometimes it can be exhausting to keep up.

I could go ahead and kill Grutto right now. Someone else would most likely take over his business, but then I would have to get to know the new guy, teach him his place, and who wants to deal with all that unnecessarily? So, I grab the last finger on one of the hands he's holding up and begin to twist instead.

When I feel that slight pop of his finger dislocating from his hand, I use a bit of power to rip it the rest of the way off. It makes a liquidy, suck-tearing kind of noise as I remove it, and blood starts spurting from the stump like a broken faucet.

Grutto is no longer sputtering excuses, which is nice, but now he's shrieking nonsense instead. I throw the detached finger in his face and tell him how unhappy it will make me to have to come back down here and replace him. So unhappy, in fact, that the *replacing* will be carried out in the most horrific way I can imagine.

I'm pretty sure he's received the message when he finally stops screeching long enough to ask, "How long?"

"Your finger bought you until hour five tomorrow."

Once I'm done dealing with Grutto, I head to the herb shop one block over to pick up some gittersnip for P. Normally I wouldn't run errands for anyone, but P is my roommate, and if I get this for her, she'll make dinner for me. I hate to cook, but I love to eat, and P is an excellent chef. She is also brilliant, which is why I let her stay with me and why I'm willing to foot the bill for all her experiments.

As soon as I walk in the door of my palatial home on the south side of the city, P yells to me from somewhere down in her lab.

"Tory, get down here! You have to see what I caught today! It's so cute!"

This should be interesting. P doesn't get excited over nothing, so I descend the stairs to the enormous lab that takes up the entire east wing of the basement.

She has all manner of things down here—a computer lab with multiple servers, steel tables for dissection, multiple refrigeration units, incubators, and a couple lab ovens. Her latest addition has proven to be the most interesting so far, four plexiglass enclosures two meters wide by two meters high.

I call them pods, but they're just large, clear boxes with security doors and a slot to pass things through. We have to be cautious not to

open the door or the slot—they are bio-contained so anything that comes into them doesn't get into our atmosphere.

And what I mean by *comes into them* is that P has created portals in each of them.

P, my brilliant little scientist, has figured out how to open portals between galaxies, and ever since, she has been searching for a planet that is consistent with ours. About fifteen days ago, she found one “a couple of galaxies over”, as she puts it, that has potential. She's been sucking things from it through her portals ever since, and up until now, it has mostly just been a wide variety of bugs.

When I reach the bottom of the stairs, I head for the pods to see what she has caught. As soon as she sees me, her buoyant mood evaporates, and her happy smile transforms into a pissed off scowl.

“Did you just maim someone, or did you murder them?” She exclaims in that adorable little way of hers. It's so funny when she gets angry. She's trying to be scary, but she looks too much like a cutesy little cartoon character throwing a tantrum for me to take her seriously. I'm surprised steam doesn't come out of her ears, but I guess it's not her fault she's so tiny and cute. She is extremely intelligent, and I am sure it irritates her to constantly be disrespected because of her appearance.

“So far, just maimed, but it's still early. Why do you care?” I reply in the bored, nothing-phases-me tone I am famous for.

“Because you're wearing what used to be my favorite shirt! But now it's got blood all over it!”

“If it's your favorite, what was it doing in my room? I just threw on the first thing I found this morning.”

“Jack must have mixed up the laundry.”

Jack is our part-time housekeeper. He comes every ten days to clear the major damage.

“There's not that much blood on it. He can probably get it out.”

“Doesn't matter now, you've already stretched it out with your giant balloon boobs.”

“My boobs are not that big, little miss no-tits, and if it means so much to you, I'll replace your stupid G-U-V equals 8, what the fuck ever shirt.”

“It's the general relativity formula, genius.”

“If you say so. What is it I 'have to see' that made you bring me down here in the first place?”

My question disarms her, and a half smile returns to her face as she raises her arm and gestures towards the ground of the second pod.

A smallish four-legged creature with short blonde fur, a stumpy tail, and pointy ears that stick straight up is wriggling around inside. Whatever it is, it looks like someone smashed it in the face with a frying pan. Its big brown eyes keep looking between me and P while its backend shimmies back and forth nonstop.

P is right. It is quite cute.

“What does Niles think of it?” I ask. Niles is the name of our artificial intelligence. It’s short for Networked Information Loading and Exchange System. The pods are hooked up to him so he can analyze the creatures she brings into them.

“It’s a carbon-based life form. It breathes oxygen, bleeds blood, and needs food and water just like we do,” she replies as the smile on her face expands.

Before her head grows so big that she floats away I ask, “What’s for dinner?”

“How can you think of food at such a monumental moment? We are literally looking at a living being from another galaxy that I, in my infinite wisdom, was able to figure out how to transport here intact and still living. Do you not comprehend how huge this is?”

“Yes, I get it. You’re kind of smart. What’s for dinner? I’ve got things to take care of tonight.”

“Ugh! Why do I bother?” P asks herself more than me, really. Then she mutters *you’ll never care* under her breath as she heads for the stairs.

After she finally gets around to making dinner and we’re sitting in the living room watching news videos while we eat, a loud thump rises from the basement, followed by someone yelling. We both freeze mid-bite and look at each other for an instant before dropping our forks and running down to the lab.

When we get to the bottom of the stairs, we can already see what appears to be a nude male in the first pod, and man, is he pissed. Neither of us can understand a word he is saying, but whatever it is, he’s saying it loudly and vehemently.

As we stand there staring at him, it slowly starts to dawn on him that he’s naked, and he stops banging on the side of the pod so he can use his hands to cover his genitals instead.

“Looks like you sucked someone out of bed before they had a chance to dress.”

“The portals only transport biological material. He most likely *was* dressed, and his clothes remain in a pile on the other side of the

portal. Can you believe how anatomically similar to us he is? Other than his oddly shaped ears, you wouldn't know he wasn't from here."

P stares in awe for a moment before she hurries to the computer to read Niles' analysis. She must like what she is reading, because she seems to grow happier as she goes. Then she starts typing rapidly and says, "If we can get the alien to talk, Niles should be able to analyze his language and translate it for us."

The alien has gone silent, however. Now he's just standing still, covering himself as he observes us and his surroundings, so I study him in return. He is very attractive, handsome face, toned body—I particularly appreciate his exquisitely chiseled pecs and abs. He must work out regularly. He's about my height, but I'm tall for a woman at 180 centimeters. He has blond hair about the same shade as the furry creature in pod two, but longer and shaggy-looking.

"If you could get him to recite his alphabet, that would be great."

"Sure, thing P. While I'm at it, I'll have him explain the meaning of life."

I am interested in knowing what the alien can tell us, so in an effort to at least get him to say something again, I knock on the glass and say hello really loudly. He stares back at me and says...something. Great. Progress?

I ask him a few questions, but it really doesn't matter what I say. He cannot understand me, and he can tell I cannot understand him. He must decide that trying to communicate is useless, because stops talking again.

Unlike P, I have no patience for exercises in futility. Besides, Solana has now been breathing for two hours longer than she ever should have been allowed to.

Grabbing a carry pack, I toss in a roll of sticky tape, a bottle of water, and a flask filled with Ruzh. I strap a hunting knife to my right thigh. Decapitation is the most effective and efficient way to end a life. I typically use my hiptukee sword to get the job done, but I am not interested in efficiency tonight.

After gearing up, I catch the next train headed back downtown. Whiskey Neat's is located a couple of blocks east of Grutto's butcher shop. Solana might be there by now, and if not, whoever is tending the bar tonight might know where to find her. She's one of their waitresses, and when she's not working there, she's often there anyway as a

patron. Sometimes it's hard to tell the difference between whether she's there to work or drink.

When I arrive, there are only a handful of customers in the bar, but it's still early for the drinking crowd.

The entrance to Whiskey Neat's is nondescript and somewhat hidden on the side of the building. The bar takes up most of the back wall, and there's a stage at the opposite end. Booths line the walls from the edge of the stage back to the bar, and there are a few mismatched tables and chairs in the center.

It's a small place, and the furnishings are worn. Sticky tape holds in most of the stuffing in the booth cushions, and all the tables are defaced with carvings of names, doodles, and whatnot.

The ceilings are low and the lighting is dim. Combine that with the dark color scheme, and it's difficult to see what anyone is doing in any detail.

When there is a live band playing, it's far too loud to carry on a conversation. Right now, programmed music is playing a few decibels lower than the typical band.

I take the seat at the dead center of the bar. The man that was sitting at the stool on my right gets up and moves to a table. Like I said before, *wide berth*.

Dick is tending bar at the moment. Without a word spoken between us, he makes my usual and sets it in front of me.

"Is Solana here?"

"She's out back."

Perfect.

I guzzle my drink and pay on my port. The automatic payment approval response dings, and I exchange goodbye nods with Dick. Then I walk around the edge of the bar like an employee and head down the hall that leads out back.

The rear door is propped open with an industrial sized floor fan sucking in the somewhat cooler air from outside. When I step around the fan and out the door, Solana turns from throwing something in the garbage processor and begins to say, "What a nice sur..." She cuts herself off midsentence when she realizes that I'm not who she was expecting.

After glaring at me with hatred in her eyes for a moment, the direness of her situation finally sinks in, and she tries to run.

I grab a fistful of her hair to stop her, tighten my grip, then bash her head into the wall a couple of times. She falls to the ground

unconscious as soon as I let go. I didn't actually mean to knock her out, but oh well.

Grabbing her by the hair again, I begin to drag her limp body out of the alley and down the walkway. There are far more efficient ways of moving her body where I want it, but I take satisfaction in the dragging.

On the way, we cross paths with another pedestrian headed our direction. He pretends not to see anything amiss, but quickens his pace in the opposite direction.

The city's train system is devised of two sets of elevated tracks every kilometer north to south, and two sets of tracks in trenches every kilometer east to west. Bridges over the tracks in trenches connect the walkways on each side, and stairs lead either up to board north-south trains, or down to board east-west ones.

We pass under a set of north-south tracks as a group of people are headed up the stairs to board. They all see me, and every one of them turns their back.

When we get to a lamppost on Penn Lane, near the place Solana had called out to me earlier today, I prop her up and wrap sticky tape around her to adhere her to the pole.

This part of town is nowhere near as busy at night as it is during the day, but the bars nearby keep it from being completely vacant. As I run strips of tape around her forehead, shoulders, upper thighs, and ankles, a few people pass by, but no one stops or says a word.

Once I have her sufficiently secured, I take out my hunting knife and eviscerate her. As she hangs in front of me with her intestines dangling out, I slice bites of flesh from her until she bleeds to death.

Chapter 2

Dealing with Solana gives me the kind of rush that keeps me out all night, but eventually, I start to crash and make my way back home. I fall asleep as soon as my head hits the pillow and wake up late the following day.

When I finally drag myself out of bed and into the living room, I can hear P and Niles having a conversation down in the lab. Niles is not capable of carrying on a conversation on his own, which means that P must have figured out the alien's alphabet.

Still dressed in the same clothes I had on yesterday, I pause before heading downstairs. P's shirt has much more than just a little blood on it now, so I take the time to throw on a new shirt before she sees me.

Down in the lab, I find P talking to the alien and Niles translating his responses. She has also slipped food and water into the pods, which means she has opened the slots. I guess she has determined that they don't pose a threat—at least not a biohazardous one, anyway.

P gives me a look of distaste and asks, "Late night?"

"Yep."

"I saw Solana on a news video this morning. Was that you?"

"Yep."

"You're a monster."

P means this as the worst kind of insult, but I take it as a compliment.

"I see you've figured out how to talk to the alien."

"Mostly. Niles says 'no translation' a lot. I guess there are several things on his planet that we do not have a word for on ours."

"Hmm." I look at the alien. He says something, then Niles translates, "Are you Tory?"

"I'm Victory, but everyone calls me Vic."

"I thought Penelope was referring to you when she said *Tory*."

"P calls me Tory to get back at me for calling her P. You and everyone else will call me Vic."

"Why do you call her P if she doesn't like it?"

"Because Penelope is an idiotic name."

P replies, "P is an idiotic name. It's like you're calling me piss."

"You should think of it like a pea in a peapod, instead of pee as in piss."

"You should call me Penelope. It's a beautiful name."

“That’s just not going to happen, P.”

“Tory.”

“What’s your name?” I ask the alien.

“Nathan Donaldson, but everyone calls me Nate.”

“He knows what the furry thing in pod two is,” P says, “but whatever he’s calling it doesn’t translate, so he named it Max.”

“He named that squatty little thing Max? Wouldn’t Tiny have been more appropriate?”

“Maybe he meant it as an oxymoron. Anyway, he asked if I’d put it in his pod with him, but I’m not sure about opening the doors to the pods yet. Just because there isn’t a biohazard doesn’t mean they do not pose other threats.”

I look at Max and try to imagine him as a threat. I cannot help but chuckle.

“Do you want me to go in there with them?”

“Would you? I don’t know everything about them yet. They could have powers beyond any we’ve ever seen.”

“If they had power beyond me, they wouldn’t still be sitting in these pods.”

“Good point.”

“Why don’t you get something for Nate to wear?”

Nate says *thank you* to this. How odd that he is still polite while being held captive. I sure as fuck wouldn’t be.

P heads upstairs to get the clothes for Nate, and he asks me, “What did you mean by having power?”

I do not sense any power in Nate, but he is an alien. He could have some form that I cannot detect and could be biding his time, waiting for the right opportunity to spring it on me. The idea excites me. I love a good fight.

“On this planet, we all have a different amount of power within us.”

“What do you mean? What kind of power?”

“It’s hard to describe, but it’s like an internal energy that we can emit externally. Most people only have a tiny amount and can only move small objects for a short time with it before they deplete themselves. Some have a decent amount and can move large objects like furniture for a few hours. A handful of us have a large amount and could move mountains with it if we wanted. We can sense someone else’s power level when we’re close. The more power someone has, the further away you can feel them.”

“You have a lot of power. More than Penelope,” Nate states rather than asks.

“How can you tell?” I question, wondering if the alien can sense our powers when I do not sense any from him.

“I don’t know exactly. It’s obvious that you’re in charge by the way you interact, but it’s more than that. I can feel this pressure in my chest when you’re near that I don’t feel with her, like I’m going to have a heart attack or something.”

“A heart attack? What’s that?”

“You know, when your chest starts to hurt, and you have to go to the *no translation*...I guess you don’t have them here... Why do some people have more power than others? Are you born that way?”

“First of all, we’re not born here anymore. We’re created in labs. We used to be born, thousands of years ago, but the practice was stopped for population control. But we are all created with the same amount of power to begin with. Some people end up with more because they work for it.”

“How?”

“We can increase our power by using it, practicing with it, but it hurts a great deal, so most people don’t bother. Have you ever burned yourself?”

“Sure.”

“Then you know how bad that smarts. When we use our power, our insides burn, then they heal. It’s very painful. You have to build up a tolerance for it slowly. You also have to know when to stop, or you’ll kill yourself. Many have.”

“So you can just heal from internal burns? How?”

“I don’t know. The same way we heal from any injury. Don’t you heal when you’re injured?”

“Eventually, if it’s not too severe.”

I hear P coming back down the stairs as I ask, “So if I were to cut you open right now, how long would it take you to heal?”

“Do *not* injure my alien! I swear, you can’t be left alone for a moment without cutting or killing someone.”

Nate’s quizzical expression rapidly morphs into apprehension when he realizes he’s been chatting with a fiend, not a friend.

“Are these okay?” P asks as she holds up a pair of my baggy pants and one of my box shirts.

“Yes, they’re fine,” I answer, then take them from her and move to the door of Nate’s pod.

Making a point of being swift about it, I open the door, step in, and close it behind me. Nate keeps his eyes on mine, but he's slowly backing away from me.

When he bumps into the wall behind him, it startles him, and his eyes dart to the bloodstains on my pants. Droplets of sweat begin to form on his forehead, and he swallows hard before asking, "Did you hurt yourself?"

I can tell he doesn't really think I have, but he is hoping for a reassuring explanation.

"No."

"Oh," he inhales. "I, uh...thought...that was blood on your pants."

"It is."

He swallows hard again, but doesn't say anything else. His eyes are wide and following my every move as I approach. When we are close enough to touch, I hold the clothes out to him.

Reluctantly, he reaches out, but just as he tries to take them, I grab him by the arm with my other hand. Sternly staring into his eyes, I dig my fingers into the soft side of his forearm in a way I know to be painful.

I'm trying to provoke him, but he doesn't fight back or even try to get away. He just looks scared, not like someone that is planning an attack. He is either harmless or extremely cunning. I don't really think he's that clever, but you never know.

When I finally do let go and take a step back, he lets out a sigh of relief. Then he starts grabbing for the clothes that had fallen to the floor. Amazingly, despite his obvious anxiety, he has an erection.

Seeing that I've noticed, he quickly pulls on the sweatpants and nervously asks, "Can I go to the bathroom, or at least get a bucket or something?"

"Sure." I reply as nonchalantly as possible to try and put him more at ease. "P, let us out."

"Are you sure that's a good idea? What if he wrecks the place or runs off?"

"Where do you think he's going to go? Catch a train to the next galaxy? He wouldn't last one hour outside this house."

P hesitates at the door to the pod, looking in at me for a while before finally opening it.

After walking through myself, I stop to hold it open for Nate while P hides behind me.

“P, why don’t you show him to the restroom and pick out a bedroom for him to stay in?”

“Why don’t you come with us?”

From the look she’s giving me, I can tell she’s still afraid of the alien, so I say, “after you” and gesture towards the stairs. Nate says something on our way up, but since he is no longer in the pod, there’s no Niles to translate. This makes P stop in her tracks and head back down the stairs.

“I’ll program a port for him,” she explains on her way back down.

The alien grows nervous at her departure. How funny—he’s afraid to be around me, and P’s afraid to be around him.

I continue up the stairs, but Nate hesitates. I think he’s unsure if he should follow me or retreat to P, but he must really need that bathroom, because he ends up catching up with me.

After guiding him to the facilities, I leave him to his business. P’s going to have to get over her fear, because I’m not going to be the one taking care of him. He is her lab copu not mine, and I don’t care what he does to this house.

I hate this place. It’s about ten times larger than I need, and I let P make all the design decisions. She’s into pop art and deconstructivism. It looks like a deranged pack of haxafals live here.

The only reason I live in such a large place in the first place is because of P. She actually needs the lab space, and thinks she needs the status symbol. I only use four of the fifty or sixty so rooms this place has, and I insist that they’re next to each other. To make that happen, I had to turn a dining room into my bedroom, since it was the only room adjacent to a kitchen.

A massive spiral staircase at the far end of that room leads down to the lab or up to the second and third stories. The staircase is encapsulated in clear glass like a giant test tube, and its frosted glass steps light up in different colors when they are stepped on. Other than my four rooms and the occasional trip down to the lab, I almost never see the rest of the house.

The part of the house that I use is done entirely in white—white walls, white trim, and mostly white appliances, and as far as I know, the rest of it is done that way too. However, in contrast P, has bright, bold art popping out all over the place.

My living room has a bright pink sofa shaped like a pair of luscious lips, a yellow chair in the shape of a hand, and a pair of eyeball footstools, among other equally appalling pieces.

The ceiling is six meters high, with three giant windows on the wall that faces the block of 80th Lane this place takes up. P has enormous glass sculptures traversing the gigantic windows, with swoops and swirls of bright blue, red, yellow, green, orange, and purple.

I must admit, it truly is gorgeous how they shimmer when the sunlight shines through. They are pretty much the only thing in this house I do enjoy, but P loves living in this colossal cartoon freak show, and it pisses her off to no end that I sleep in the dining room.

While I'm sitting in the living room catching up on news videos, Nate wanders in. He looks around, taking it all in, and starts to talk before remembering we cannot understand each another. When I just look at him in response, he smiles sheepishly and takes the furthest seat away from me that he can find.

Eventually, P returns with a port for him.

"I download the translation for your language," she tells him as she hands him the port, and it repeats what she has said.

"When will I be able to go home?" he asks.

"Never," P replies. "The portals can only bring things here, not take things to other places."

I am not sure why she has decided to lie to the alien about this, but like I said before, he is her lab copu. She can do whatever she wants with him, as far as I am concerned.

"But I have to go back. My *no translation* is waiting for me," Nate says in noticeable distress.

"Your what?" P asks.

"My *no translation...no translation...mate.*" He finally finds a word we have something comparable to.

"Oh, you have a mate you're in love with?"

"Yes, Jennifer. She's probably worried sick about me. I need to get back to her."

"Sorry, you bought a one-way ticket," P replies.

The alien seems to be taking this information hard. He looks to me and asks, "Is there something you can do?"

"You're the dipshit that walked through a portal with no idea what would happen," I reply.

“I was curious. Can you honestly say you wouldn’t have done the same thing?”

“Yes,” me and P both say simultaneously. To be fair, we have both seen many different things that can happen from going through a portal. P didn’t find a compatible environment on the first try. I’ve seen her pull through things that imploded when they got here, things that seemingly suffocated, things that burst into boils and melted, and about everything else in between.

If I hadn’t seen all those things, I probably would go through a portal if I came across one. Not that I am going to admit that out loud, however.

The alien complains about his plight for a while longer, and then P starts asking him questions about his planet as she types things into her port. I get the feeling this is what she’s been doing ever since she’s been able to communicate with him, because he stops trying to get information from her, slouches down in his chair, and answers her every question like a robot with no free will.

When she starts asking him about how time is tracked on his planet, I’m interested at first. Apparently, they have something similar to our years, days, and hours, but they also have other breakdowns that we do not. Then Niles starts saying *no translation* a lot, and it gets on my nerves, so I decide it’s a good time to go take a shower.

After peeling off my blood-caked pants, I take a quick shower, then return to my room to dress. Since my bedroom is really a dining room, it doesn’t have any doors, just these large, open archways leading into each of the adjoining rooms. Anyone in the living room or kitchen can see straight in to whatever I’m doing, and from the chair where Nate is currently sitting, he has a front row seat.

P, on the other hand, has her back to me. She hasn’t seemed to notice the shift in Nate’s demeanor since he started watching me, but I have.

I didn’t come in here naked to mess with him intentionally. In fact, I don’t even normally think about whether I am nude in here or not, but now that I know I have his attention, of course I am going to have some fun. I’m fairly easy on the eyes, if I do say so myself— P might exaggerate about the size of my breasts, but they are big. I have nice curves in the right places without carrying extra weight elsewhere. There is visible muscle definition in my abs, arms, and long legs, and none of this seems to have escaped Nate’s notice.

As I amble back and forth through my room for no real reason at all, I make sure I still have his attention before pausing to stretch my arms above my head, arching my back. Then I start to knead one of my nipples between my fingers while I run my other hand down between my legs.

At this point, the lull in conversation from Nate has started to become noticeable, so I stop playing around before P clues in to what is happening behind her.

I throw on a pair of cargo pants, a bra, and whatever tank is on top in the drawer. Other than my trusty leather outback hat, this is pretty much my standard outfit. Sometimes I switch up the cargo pants for jeans or the tank for a box shirt, but that is about the extent of my fashion prowess. I'm not into trends or pretty dresses. I'm all about comfort and functionality.

With a pair of socks in one hand and my boots in the other, I head into the living room. Nate and I lock eyes as I head towards him, but I don't smile or in any way indicate anything untoward has happened, and neither does he.

Our eye contact is broken when I sit down in the chair to his left, but he continues to watch me as I put on my socks and lace up my boots. He stopped answering P's questions when I first walked in the room, so she has paused the inquisition, and I can tell she's studying us. I guess she doesn't like the way he's looking at me, because she steps in between us and loudly clears her voice.

"Nate! How many days are in one of your years?" she snips in irritation.

Startled back to awareness, he returns his attention to her. However, before he has a chance to answer, I announce that I'm leaving.

"And exactly what kind of damage are you off to cause today?" P asks.

"Maybe none. Depends on Grutto."

"Hmph. Will you be home for dinner?"

"I don't know. Don't wait for me."

She looks at the alien and suddenly remembers that she's afraid of him.

"What if I need you? Will you be close?"

I turn to Nate and say, "Don't kill P while I'm gone, or I'll kill you when I get back. Understood?"

"Understood." He replies apprehensively.

Chapter 3

After leaving Nate and P, I catch a train downtown and check my account as I go. Grutto has managed to find a way to pay me, so it looks like I won't have to replace him just yet.

My stomach growls, reminding me that I haven't eaten in a while, so I hop off at my favorite sandwich shop, place an order, and take a seat in my usual spot.

As I'm sitting alone, enjoying my cugoon sandwich, I feel Kreid come into range. Kreid is the only other person in this city with a power level close to mine. We can feel one another from about ninety meters away. On this whole planet, there are only twenty-three other zeniths, as we are called. There is one person in Wisford working her way up, but she hasn't made it to a level we would consider a zenith yet. We all keep tabs on one another, since we're each other's only real competition.

Normally, two zeniths wouldn't live in the same city. Whoever was there first would stay and the other would leave. However, with me and Kreid, it's a little vague on who was here first. He has lived here his whole life, but I became a zenith here a little earlier than him.

He loves this place—hometown pride or some such shit. I hate this city like I hate my house in it, but there are only two gateways to the southern hemisphere. There's one here in Rainston and another on the other side of the world in Griek. Since I hate Griek even more, I am not leaving.

There is a bit of a risk in us both staying in the same city, though. Zeniths tend to get twitchy when they see other zeniths together.

A long time ago, two zeniths became mates and together, they decided they were going to take over the territory of another zenith. After they killed her, the rest of the zeniths alive at the time got together and killed the mates so they wouldn't try the same shit on them. Then the remaining zeniths made a pact that they would not form relationships with each other, and if any of them broke the pact, the rest would immediately gang up on them before they had a chance to threaten anyone else.

Nowadays, not all zeniths are about ruling over territory. Most still are, but I have no desire to rule over anyone. I worked my way up to zenithhood so no one could fuck with me, not because I want to be in charge. Even when I was still a child, I never meshed with authority

figures very well. I don't like being told what to do, and now no one dares unless they want to end up like Solana.

I'm not sure what Kreid's deal is. He hasn't made any plays to try to rule over the people here either, but he does seem to enjoy his groupies. People suck up to us and try to hang out with us all the time, but I won't stand for it. I've always been a loner. P is the only groupie I allow around me, but Kreid often has a whole crew of people with him.

We don't know each other well. We make a point of avoiding one another, but being zeniths makes us famous enough that everyone knows some things. One thing I have noticed is that he either follows me a lot, or we just naturally like a lot of the same places. I think it is the latter rather than the former, because sometimes he is already at places I was heading to before I get there. Whenever we come across each other in these instances, whoever was there first stays and the other leaves. It happens at least ten to fifteen times a quarter.

When I leave the sandwich shop, I head in the opposite direction, away from Kreid. I guess I'll catch the train to the stadium. There's a game tonight that I don't really care about, but it will be better than spending the evening listening to P drill Nate about one boring thing after another.

This is weird. Kreid has come back into range, and he is closing in on me. It's not like him to continue to advance on me when we encounter one another. He must actually want to speak to me, which is unheard of. We strictly avoid one another so we are never presumed to be cohorts—it's bad enough that we risk living in the same city.

I turn around and look in the direction I feel him, and sure enough, he's headed straight for me, so I move off to the side of the nearest building a little way up the alley to give us some privacy for whatever it is that he wants. We stare each other down as he approaches. He appears to be angry.

When he reaches me, he puts one hand on my chest at the base of my neck and slams me against the wall. For an instant, there is a look of confusion on both our faces. For me, it's because I can't believe he actually touched me at all, much less thought it would be okay to slam me against a wall. I guess he's confused that I didn't resist him.

"What the fuck! Kreid!" I yell, then scowl at him. He broke a fucking collar bone. I can feel it healing.

He reduces the amount of pressure he's applying to my chest, but he doesn't remove his hand. The warmth coming off it is starting to make me hot.

Kreid's a big man, probably twice my weight, about thirteen centimeters taller, and built like a brick wall. His skin is the most exquisite shade of ebony, and it matches his predacious eyes.

Today, his hair is pulled back in long, small braids, and he has stubble on his face barely grown in, as though he'd forgotten to shave this morning. Somehow, he manages to look completely terrifying and completely gorgeous all at the same time.

"I thought we had an unspoken agreement to leave each other alone!" he growls at me in his gravely baritone.

"We do, which is why it's unclear to me why you think it's okay to throw me against a wall!"

"You broke my toy, and now you have to pay. That's how it works, Vic. You know the game."

His toy? It takes me a moment, but then it dawns on me.

"Solana?"

"Yes, Solana. What else?"

"Look, I didn't know she was your current piece of ass, but regardless, that doesn't make it okay for her to call me out." Although that does sort of explain why she thought she could.

"What do you mean, she called you out? Like she was gonna take you on or something?"

"Of course not. No one is that big of an idiot, but she very publicly stated that I should stay out of the bar, as if she's allowed to command me in whatever fantasy world runs amuck in her head."

He takes his hand off my chest and looks me in the eyes for a moment.

"I understand why you killed her then, but where does that leave us? Why didn't you know she was with me?"

"I'm supposed to keep tabs on who means what to you at any given time?"

"Yes. I do on you."

"Big fucking deal! P is the only person consistently meaningful to me. It's easy to keep tabs on that. I don't have the time or inclination to give a shit about who you give a shit about. Next time, let your toys know not to play without you."

"There has to be some kind of retribution. How would it look if I let you get away with killing one of mine? People would assume I

couldn't take care of my own. I can't stand for that, and you know exactly what I'm talking about. You wouldn't let anyone harm one of yours and get away with it."

He is absolutely right about that, and it's another reason why I do not have groupies.

"Why don't you leave Rainston? What does it matter to you anyway? You're from New Poge. It's a bigger city and no other zenith is there."

"Why don't *you* leave Rainston, Kreid? I've been a zenith here longer than you."

"Barely."

"Doesn't matter how *barely*. First is first."

Kreid makes a short sharp growling noise like he might take a bite out of me, then looks off into the distance like he's contemplating something.

When he turns back to me, he starts slowly expelling a tiny bit of his power at me. Suddenly, this has become a very dangerous game he has decided to play. Two zeniths going at it could rip a path of destruction kilometers wide.

He's not throwing much at me though, just feeling me out, seeing if I will rise to the challenge. It excites me, and I push back at him with my power, wondering if it has the same effect on him.

It must, because there's a brief flicker in his eyes that reflects all the same things I feel.

We go on like this for a time, him pressing his power at me while I respond in kind. He turns it up. I match him. He turns it down, so I do too, back and forth. Then the ground starts to vibrate beneath us.

"We can't do this here," Kreid says on strained breath.

"No," I reply, a bit out of breath myself, but not from exertion.

"Meet me at the reserve at hour three on day 124. We'll settle this there."

After Kreid walks away, I'm no longer interested in a ball game, and I need to fill P in on our encounter. Just because he had said we would settle this later doesn't mean he won't go after her in the meantime, so I get back on the train and head home.

This time, when I walk through the door, Max greets me with his wiggly little butt. What a strange creature.

"P!"

"What?"