

# ONE

## *Court*

**Y**ou've escaped one prison before, so you'll be escaping another in no time." Mykal spoke those optimistic words thirty-one days ago, but I didn't have the heart to remind him that it took me five years to flee Vorkter Prison.

Now that we're trapped aboard an enemy starcraft and only fed scraps every three days, we don't have five years to spare.

Our bodies heave in miserable hunger and pain, and I'm in far worse shape.

With time running out, I refuse to lie on the only cot, our only comfort, and I sit on the hard floor.

Slumping against the firm wall, my spine aches, and a sharp *pang* in my hip radiates like hot agony throughout my rigid bones. I breathe shallow breaths between dry lips, and my shaking hand constantly hovers near my hip. As though I can fix what's wrong, but the only remedy is outside this brig. Medicine, antiseptic, *water*.

I have none.

We're all together, but there is nothing here besides a single cot. There are no bars to peer out of, like at my last cell. This is just a tiny, bare, enclosed room inside a starcraft. Clean with polished floors, sterile walls, and a spotless padlocked door, all bathed in soft pink hues from an overhead rouge light.

Mykal hunches as he stands, the ceilings too low, and since I'm much taller, I spend most of my time sitting or crouching.

Franny squats next to a hatch on the cumbersome door. No

windows, the hatch has been our sole view outside the brig, but it only opens when they feed us.

She presses her cheek against the chilly pink metal. Listening.

With our linked emotions and senses, I try to concentrate on Franny. Just for a reprieve from my own torment. I wouldn't be able to hear what she hears or see what she sees; we still only share touch and taste and smell. I can barely feel the bite of the cold door against my jaw and ear.

Her senses, *his* senses—they both sweep past me as another pang of misery scratches at my flesh.

I look down.

Crude, gnarled stitches weave jaggedly along my lower abdomen. My golden-brown skin is sickly green and inflamed. I resist the urge to itch.

Franny scratches her own hip—*she feels my pain*.

I shut my eyes for a long moment. Hating that they both *feel* the deep cuts from a man I loathe. From Bastell: the man I shared a Vorkter Prison cell with, the one who relentlessly hunted me until he attacked me at Yamafort's museum.

We may've left Bastell behind on our home planet, we may've stolen the *Saga* starcraft and reached space, but he left real wounds that can't disappear easily—*focus*.

I open my eyes and try to focus on our plans of escape. Though we've failed each and every day. I try to think of anything to forget that last encounter in the museum.

*We're out of Bastell's reach.*

I try to breathe stronger, and then I wince and shift, a stabbing pain shooting up my side. *Gods be damned.*

Mykal swings his head back, his hard-hearted blue eyes meeting my grim grays. If he could beat down the door with his fists alone, I'm certain he would.

Because he's already tried. Until the skin on his knuckles busted and bled, and sores formed.

"What are you moving for, Court?" Mykal asks. "Rest yourself. You've hardly slept one blink of an eye."

“It’s not so easy when we need to leave,” I say in a single breath. I sink my head back to the wall, our eyes not detaching.

*Mykal.*

I asked him to fly away with me, and I’ve led him to a prison. No apology I speak can erase the guilt. I just need to free Mykal and Franny from this place.

I have to.

“There’s no time,” I say with another wince.

Franny stiffens and cautiously glances back at me. I don’t know how to ease her worry.

Mykal takes a step toward my spot on the floor. I don’t know how to ease his either.

“Don’t,” I say weakly, stopping him.

He scratches his jaw. Frustration burrowing through his body and mine. He stays an arm’s distance away and gestures to me. “I may not be a physician like you, but once upon an era, I nursed you from the brink of something foul. I can do it again, you realize?”

*It’s too late for that.*

His muscles flex. “Court?”

He can’t read my mind, and so I’m left to wonder what emotion accompanied my thought. What did he sense?

I blink a few times. Unsure of what I felt. But I want him to know something. “I still remember . . .” I swallow hard and fight to speak louder. “I still remember the winter wood.”

His eyes redden. “Yer telling me this now?” His northern lilt breaks through. I’m truly happy to hear it again.

In a whisper, I clarify, “I know what you’ve done for me.”

“Court—”

“I wouldn’t have survived without you.” My voice cracks, days and months and years rushing toward me. Frostbitten skin and the crackle of fire and his impossibly bright laughter. I remember the moments after I escaped Vorkter.

Where Mykal brought me to his warm hut out of the wet

snow. Hovering over my gaunt frame, nearly nose-to-nose, he lathered mud and herbs on my wounds. Grenpale remedies.

He was a wild Hinterlander.

I was a lost boy of fifteen, and years later, we've found ourselves in a similar position. I'm on the brink of something foul again, but there are no trees, no mud, no plants, nothing that can save me by his hands.

*I'm afraid.*

I take in a breath, finally understanding my emotions, and I do everything I can to contain them. Bottle them. Swallow them. So they won't know this fear.

*Let me suffer alone.*

Mykal bends low to be at eye level, palm on the floor. "I don't want yer praise. I got you in this mess—"

"No." I cut him off.

He's still kicking himself for not stopping Bastell. In his mind, he broke a devout promise. He swore that I'd never encounter that cruel bastard again, but I did.

I already forgave Mykal a hundred times, even when he didn't need to be forgiven. He's just not ready to absolve himself yet.

He reaches out his hand to me . . .

"I don't want your guilt," I say, more strictly than I intend. Purposefully pushing him away, and it works.

He retracts his callused palm. And he flicks his forefinger in a vulgar Grenpalish gesture. Rising to a hunched stance again.

I try to bury my disappointment. Because I long for Mykal. I want him closer and closer, our chests pressing together and the heat of our bodies easing us into a contented sleep. I'm called toward him. Every minute of every day.

Toward his kindness and fortitude and foolish optimism. A great pull beckons me into his arms, but in the same breath, I'd rather Mykal be far, far away from my suffering.

If we touch skin-to-skin, the link will make him feel what I feel tenfold, and since we've kissed, we've already heightened this bond between us a significant amount. He's noticed the

shortness of my breath, whereas Franny can't distinguish the subtleties as well.

He's even started recognizing emotion in me that I can't even name.

"I'll just be standing right here," Mykal says, angling toward me, "where I can stare at your handsome face."

I roll my eyes, but I don't mind him staring at all. I want to smile, but it seems like an impossible feat.

Quietly, his gaze slides down my weakened frame. Inspecting me from afar.

I do the same to him. Sweat builds up on his pale skin and drenches his wheat-blond hair.

All we've ever known was the ice and snow on our frozen planet of Saltare-3. None of us are used to the sweltering room temps here.

The brig stinks badly of a musky odor, our stench the obvious culprit.

We've all shed our onyx-and-gold StarDust uniforms to combat the scorch. No slacks, no cloaks, and Franny slung off her bra. Left only in black underwear, we sweat through those and make the best out of the absolute worst.

Beads roll off Mykal's sideburns and slip down his stubbly jaw. I watch his eyes lower to the tangled scars and ink over my heart, and then I scrutinize his brawn. Bands of his muscle have begun to lose their tautness, not as carved or cut as they once were.

My squared jaw tightens, and a rock lodges in my throat. I want to believe that he's fine. That he's not hurting, but I can feel him starving. I can feel his stomach gnawing on itself and his body withering away.

Franny is worse. Her rib cage is visible and juts in and out as she breathes, more skin and bones than either him or me.

My concern for her grows and grows every day.

She refuses to eat our rations. No one is willing to take more than our share, but we've all volunteered to take less.