

Entheóphage

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For B, my biggest cheerleader

Chapter One

Aboard the *Pasteur*, Vliat, Nlaan Islands

Thursday, October 31, 7:15 a.m.

(Austin, Texas, Wednesday, October 30, 1:15 p.m.)

South Pacific sun stabbed Isobel's eyes into a squint. She cursed and slapped shades on her face as she headed for the ship's tender through air so salty its tang stung her throat. Travis, her crew liaison, looked up at her approach.

"Doctor Fallon. You ready to go?"

"Yes." Isobel rubbed sunscreen onto her fair skin. "Tell the divers to get started while we're gone."

"We aren't supposed to approach the reef until the Nlaantu give their final permission." Travis peered at her. "It took a lot of wrangling to get them to agree to this meet. If they find out you jumped the gun, they might send us packing."

Isobel grunted. "Picky, are they?"

"Something like that."

She grimaced. Gabe needed that coral. The medicine it would create. Isobel wasn't leaving here without it.

She stepped to the starboard railing. The Nlaan island chain consisted of a string of atolls—ring-shaped islands formed by coral reefs atop dormant undersea volcanoes—that stretched beyond what she could see. The closest one, a narrow cay that breached the Pacific's surface on the atoll's curve, lay in the distance off the *Pasteur*'s starboard side. Seabirds gathered there or flew overhead. Must be good hunting. She pointed.

"That's our target?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"And the island where we're meeting with the Nlaantu leaders?"

Travis appeared beside her. "You see that bigger island past the sand bar? The green one?"

“That’s where they live?”

“No, ma’am. That little spit ain’t big enough for a village.” He made a circling gesture. “We’re going past that one, a good ride on the other side. The Elder Council’s on one of the four big islands, kinda dead center of the island group.”

Isobel scanned the area. “Do they come out here often?”

“If they’re fishing, they might. Why?”

“You said this arrangement was all but a done deal. I mean, they already have the boats we promised, even if they are primitive. Carbon fiber proa have to be better than wooden ones, so at least there’s that. You’d think they’d want sonar and engines,” she shrugged, “but to each their own. We’ve delivered the rest of the agreed items, too, right? Medicines, canvas, beads, bananas. What else?”

“Scrap metal.”

Isobel frowned. “For what?”

“Fishing spears. Arrows. Knives. They’ve been using shaped stone, carved wood from trees with huge thorns, that sort of thing. They have a few knives from trade, but this will level them up for sure.”

North Sentinel Island’s inhabitants also used metal that washed ashore on their island to tip their arrows, then fired them at outsiders who dared approach. “We aren’t in any danger, are we?”

“No, ma’am. I think they want us here.”

“Why?”

“Rumor is some of their folks are pushing for more modern items,” he said, “like medicines. They’ll need outside contacts to get those.”

“Oh. Well, they have everything we promised them, right?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Then what can it hurt if we start a little early? Except for this meeting, which we’re about to complete, we’ve kept our end of the agreement. I don’t need a full harvest yet, but I want a sample of the star queen by the time we get back. If they say anything, I’ll take responsibility.”

“You’re the boss.” Travis went to fill in the dive teams on the changed plan.

Isobel waited on the utilitarian ship’s aft deck where crewmen worked. The rear wall of the main cabin, topped by two satellite arrays, cut off her view of the bow. Large cranes, once white and now some indeterminate color, loomed above stationary storage containers to port and starboard. Behind the ship, the South Pacific stretched in endless, undulating waves. Smaller ripples flashed and shimmered in the sun. Even a boat the size of the *Pasteur* bobbed on the bigger swells. She’d been aboard just over two days but still wasn’t accustomed to that constant motion. She turned into the breeze and stared at the horizon to combat the slight discomfort.

Within minutes, Travis returned and the two of them climbed down into the tender. The boatman rounded the *Pasteur*’s bow and aimed inland.

Two days’ travel from the nearest outposts of civilization, this isolated region shimmered

with pristine radiance. Deep blue ocean filled the space between and beyond the islands as far as she could see, but closer to the shores its cobalt cast transitioned to patches of bright, clear aquamarine where the reef grew near the surface. Inside the characteristic pale ring of the nearest atoll, a turquoise lagoon rippled in the breeze. Vegetation in uncountable hues of green spanned the nearest large islet, while spots of vivid color flitted among the boughs on jewel-toned wings. A few dozen meters off the starboard side, a pod of dolphins raced their craft. She watched until they veered aside, bored and on the hunt for fresh entertainment. In the distance, a line of clouds bruised the horizon.

The wind felt good, cool against the heat. For a while, she took in their surroundings. Evidence of life in the limpid water around them registered as distractions, along with bird calls and the peaty smell of the thick ferny jungle on the uninhabited islet as they passed it on their left. She noted Nlaan's beauty, and filed it away to consider another time. Right now, the small, jagged atoll behind them snagged and held her thoughts, along with all she had riding on this bet. This place could save her son's life. But if the Nlaantu denied her team's access—

Well. She couldn't dwell on that.

Spread before them, a few black and green islands hunkered above the ocean's surface like moss-covered pebbles strewn across a puddle. "It's smaller than I expected."

Travis's sharp amber eyes narrowed even beneath the brim of his hat. An old scar puckered the skin around his right eyelid. "Oh, this ain't all of it. Not by a long shot. The last count was sixteen islands. Four big ones with Nlaantu populations, and the rest too small to hold much." He leaned back in his seat and crossed his bared arms.

Why did ex-Marines always have tattoos? She considered the sun-browned visage of this man, Holschtatt Pharmaceuticals' best negotiator in these kinds of transactions. Sunlight gleamed on the small gold hoop in his ear and made his white Van Dyke beard glow. "What restrictions have they imposed? Anything that'll be a hardship?"

"No, ma'am. Little stuff. We can't go ashore on any island other than that closest green one. You and I are the only ones allowed to interact with any of their people. No hunting birds. A limit on our fishing. That sort of thing."

"And you've passed the word to the crew to keep this project a secret?"

"Yes, ma'am. Everybody knows not to talk about it in calls or emails."

"Good." A troublesome controversy, if the world learned of their activities on this Edenic snippet of land, would cost Holschtatt millions in recovery PR. The news would come out eventually, sure, but by that time she'd have developed a treatment for Milani Syndrome and could point to that as justification for the costs in any perceived environmental issues. Not that there would be any beyond the loss of a few chunks of reef and that didn't seem to be a problem at Nlaan, where the reefs stretched for miles and miles. If the crew dropped a little trash, that could be easily cleaned up.

The island dead ahead, much larger than the small strip behind them, boasted actual cliffs, sheer slopes of black volcanic rock that loomed above the water. Offshore, in the crashing surf and in between the emergent strips of land in the distance, smaller black crags jutted from

the water. Some held feathered occupants and the inevitable white paint of guano from repeated use by generations of nesting seabirds. Grizzled squawking, audible over the roar of the engine and wind, drew her attention to the skies, where a growing collection of the birds circled the tender, dove into its wake, and rose again.

The boatman veered left, and Isobel shifted her focus to this meeting with the Nlaantu. Travis had all but finalized this crucial detail in the past few weeks, but the island's leaders had demanded one last formality, to meet her and "measure her spirit" before they approved her project. What would they be like?

The water around them paled as the boatman threaded the passage between the surrounding crags and atolls. Nlaantu islanders paddled past in their traditional and carbon fiber proa or drua and glowered at the noisy boat. It hit Isobel how far from civilization she was. Surrounded by a culture so alien to her own she didn't have any idea what to say or do, she suddenly felt very exposed.

Travis must have sensed her unease. "Follow my lead," he said. "Do what I do. But you should expect them to grant you more respect than they do me."

"Why?"

"You'll see." His mouth curved up at the corners in a secret grin. "Relax. Listen more than you speak. Nod and smile."

The shore drew nearer, and Isobel ignored the flutters in her stomach. Above the tide line, a group of women, both young and old, waited. Some wore what appeared to be hand-woven fabric in skirts and wraps around their chests. Others sported bright patterned pants with wide legs, and loose tops tied at the shoulders. One wore a beautiful fabric length tied like a sarong. Their gleaming black hair held beads, shells, feathers, and small bones in an impressive array of designs and styles. Everything about their presence screamed traditional Nlaantu culture, or what Isobel fancied that to be. None wore shoes.

To either side, small groups of men and children observed, fascinated by the strangeness of this loud, stinky boat and its peculiar occupants. They too were barefoot. Otherwise, their clothing seemed almost disappointing in its normalcy. Even here on isolated Nlaan, Western fashion had made its mark with t-shirts and everyday trousers or shorts.

Behind the islanders stretched a break in the trees and beyond that, a clearing. Large, lodge-sized structures with open sides and thatched roofs squatted above the ground on carved wooden pylons. Rolls of bright textiles hung below the roof at the sides Isobel could see, perhaps to be dropped as screens for protection from the sun, or for privacy. That must be the village.

The boatman dropped the engine to idle as they approached the beach. When the hull touched the sand, he cut power and jumped out of the boat with Travis to pull it ashore. Close as they were, the women did not give way. Instead, they stood with regal bearing as if they owned the whole damned island chain.

Which, of course, they did.

Travis helped Isobel out of the boat. On the beach, she extended a hand to the women, but Travis stepped forward.

He bowed, a shallow movement. “Mtuji, you honor us.”

They never acknowledged him. Instead, they watched Isobel. Her gaze darted to Travis for guidance.

He flicked his thumb at the women in a subtle signal. *Do what I do.*

She mimicked Travis’s action for the waiting group. “Mtuji, you honor us.”

One of the women stepped forward. “I will translate your words for Mtuji, and Mtuji’s words for you. I am called T’nei.”

Isobel introduced herself.

One of the other women, a century old if she was a day, stepped forward and spoke in a language Isobel had never heard.

T’nei repeated her words to Isobel in English. “Why are you here?”

Isobel fought the urge to look at Travis. “To harvest a special coral from the reef.”

“No,” T’nei snapped. “Anyone could do that. Your men could do that. Why are *you* here?”

Isobel’s mind raced. What was Mtuji after? “Because I am the lead scientist among these men. I know which coral to harvest, and how it is processed. Only I can do that.”

“Only you? Among all your people?”

Isobel pursed her lips. “No. But I am the one who began this research, many years ago, in search of medicine for a very rare disease. I found what we needed in a special coral. I learned that this coral grows here.” She paused. “I started this project. I came here because I intend to finish it.”

T’nei regarded her, then translated her words for Mtuji.

The other women murmured among themselves, staring at Isobel as if they could see through her, see the truth of the matter. The elders among them wavered. Some argued. The younger ones held their ground.

Isobel’s stomach knotted.

At length, the crone who stood front and center spoke aside to T’nei, who turned to Isobel.

“And if we say no, go home?”

Isobel’s jaw tightened. “Then we will go home, and I’ll start again. Find another way. But it took me years to find this coral. Thousands of children are born with this illness. None survive it.”

Mtuji absorbed her words in silence.

“What would you do,” Isobel went on, “if your children were born this way and I could save them? If you had to watch your children die because another nation’s leader denied me access to their reef?”

T’nei hesitated, then translated Isobel’s words.

Mtuji flinched and looked Isobel up and down as if to determine her character by examining her bearing, her confidence, her stance. She said something to the others, all of whom blinked. They studied Isobel with renewed interest.

The wind carried sounds of children playing nearby, along with a whiff of frangipani and bougainvillea. Calls of seabirds and the lapping of small waves against the boat behind them reminded Isobel of their precarious situation.

The other women spoke. Mtuji listened without taking her eyes off Isobel. They conferred before Mtuji spoke again.

T'nei translated for Isobel. "You may take coral from Vliat..."

Mtuji continued, and T'nei translated.

"...if you do so with care. Take only what you need. Do no harm beyond that you cannot avoid. T'nei will be your guide. Speak to no other Nlaantu. Respect our land, our people, our ways. We will be watching."

When T'nei finished translating, Isobel nodded to Mtuji. "Thank you. We—"

The women behind Mtuji withdrew in the direction of their village. Mtuji lingered. Isobel twitched beneath that piercing scrutiny.

"Thank you, Mtuji," Isobel said.

Mtuji lingered a heartbeat more, then followed the others past the trees.

Isobel walked forward to follow, but T'nei stepped between her and the other women.

"Outsiders may not enter the village." T'nei's stance discouraged any argument Isobel might have proposed.

She winced and retreated, prickles flushing her cheeks like she'd committed some major faux pas but didn't quite know what it was. At the tender, she glanced over her shoulder. T'nei still formed a solid barrier between Isobel and the Nlaantu. Men and children had withdrawn into the trees, though a few of the youngest ones peeped out from behind tall ferns. She gave a little wave, then got in the boat.

Travis and the boatman pushed the bow off the beach, then hopped in. Once they were on their way to the *Pasteur*, Isobel let the tension go bit by bit.

"What is 'Vliat'?" she asked Travis.

"That's their name for that atoll where we'll be working."

"Ah. And this Mtuji, she's their leader?"

He grinned. "Technically, yes. But Mtuji isn't a name, it's an honorific. All those women, including T'nei, are Mtuji."

"They're matriarchal?"

"Yes, ma'am." He winked.

"You could have told me."

"Oh, I don't know. You picked it up pretty quick. Congrats, Doc."

His smile grew sad. Isobel cocked her head. "Is something wrong?"

Travis looked away. A second later he pointed. In the distance, a spray of water spouted up from the sea, droplets shattering the sunlight into a circular rainbow.

"What is that?" she asked

"I'd guess whales. Too far to know for sure. Several types pass through here in their migrations," he said, his voice distant, sad.

“Are you okay?”

“It’s a shame, that’s all. Such a beautiful, unspoiled place.” He sighed. “Aren’t many of those left in the world.”

Isobel shrugged. “Don’t worry. We’ll just take the star queen and go home. Easy peasy. Besides, whatever small damage we might leave behind will be worth it to save those kids.”

“I hope you’re right, Doc.”

“I know I am.” A significant number of trials showed the coral protein would neutralize the Milani effect. It wasn’t a cure, but it might mitigate the horrific symptoms, and allow Gabe—allow the *patient*—to live a more normal life.

This project would be a success. It had to be. Anything else was unacceptable.

##

Chapter Two

Behn-Kaur Residence, Austin, Texas
Thursday, October 31, 6:00 a.m.

Number of infected: 1

Kyndra wasn't in her bed. A corner of her green blanket, grey in the dim light, hung from her bunk. She also wasn't at the cluttered desk beneath, nor in her yellow reading tent, where a stack of books had tumbled over to sprawl across its floor.

Lukas Behn rubbed sleep from his eyes and tried to remember the last time she'd awakened before him. This might be a first.

He padded to her bathroom. No light shone under its closed door. "Kyn?"

HVAC vents hissed in response as the system kicked in. Luk tapped on the door.

"Honey? You okay?"

Still nothing. He pushed open the door. His daughter's bathroom was empty, save for the dirty towel on the floor—how many times would he have to chide her for that?—and the jumble of bandaids, soap, toothbrush, and toothpaste on the vanity.

He went to the hallway.

"Kyndra? Where are you, kiddo?"

No response.

Maybe she'd fallen asleep on the couch. Luk pressed down the hall to the living room, then the den. No Kyndra. A tendril of worry threaded a prickly path through his calm.

Wide awake now, he checked his office, the kitchen, even the pantry. His mind wrapped around the empty spaces where she should be, and he shouted her name as he continued to search. Kyndra was not in the house. Worry blossomed into near panic by the time he jerked open the front door and barged onto the porch without switching on the lights.

At the edge of the sidewalk beside their street, his pajama-clad eight-year-old stared into

the pre-dawn sky above a neighbor's house. She didn't move, not even in reaction to the noise he'd made.

Austin's early morning nipped at his bare chest with a chilly breeze, seasonal for late October in central Texas. He crossed his arms against the chill and stepped off the porch in her direction, peering up to see what had her so mesmerized. Kyndra loved the night sky, but she'd never before come out here on her own.

What was she watching?

He padded barefoot across the grass. "Kyn?" he called, keeping his voice low. Not all their neighbors rose this early.

She gave no sign she'd heard.

He touched her shoulder. "What're you doing, kiddo?"

She still stared at the skyline across the street. "The trees are burning," she said, her voice distant. Vague. "Like Mama's pyre."

Was she dreaming? Luk pulled her around, stooping down to her level.

"Kyndra, talk to me. What's going on?"

She blinked in slow motion, a glint of growing twilight in her eyes. "Dad?"

"Yeah," he said. "Are you with me?"

Kyn looked around. "What're we doing in the yard?"

Luk straightened. "I was hoping you could tell me. You don't remember coming out here?"

"No." She tilted her gaze skyward again.

Odd. She'd never sleepwalked before. He saw nothing in the direction she'd been staring. Only shadowy neighborhood houses and trees cast against ambient city lights rested there. "It's time to get our day started. Do you plan to ride your bike in your jammies?"

Her hands went to her hips. Her mother had done that.

"Dad."

She walked to the house, and he followed in companionable silence across the damp lawn.

In the foyer, she stopped to stretch. Her belly peeked out between her pajama top and pants that were too short. She needed bigger ones. Luk sighed. His little girl wasn't little anymore.

"Go get dressed."

She nodded.

"Five minutes."

"Okay," she said through another yawn.

Luk went to his room long enough to exchange his sweatpants for a pair of comfortable shorts, an old t-shirt, and a pair of socks. In the foyer, he plucked his runners from a semi-neat row of shoes and slid them on. Standing on one foot, he pulled the other up behind him, stretching his muscles. He held the pose, feeling the burn, before he swapped legs. Small sounds from deeper in the house told him Kyn was dressing. So mature, his daughter. Most people who

met her had a hard time believing she was only eight. Losing her mother at such an early age might have had something to do with that.

He bent and flattened his palms against the floor, felt the stretch through his glutes and hamstrings, and tried not to think about Marin. Hard, that, since every time he looked at Kyn, he saw her mother. Same beautiful brown skin and eyes. Same low forehead, similar even to the tiny mole above her left brow. Same thick black hair, though where Marin's had hung past her waist, Kyn liked hers shorter. The main difference between their features was in Kyn's small, full mouth. Marin's had been wide, her smile as big as her spirit.

That familiar gnawing loss reared its toothy head, and he shoved it inside the cage he'd built to contain his grief. He needed to snap out of it. Marin had been gone two and a half years now. It was time he listened to the advice of friends and moved on with his life.

He leaned into a slow-mo lunge, first one leg, then the other. Kyn loved these morning outings. Sometimes she would offer thoughts on the latest BehnWerks game. She'd been testing Hyde and Seek for a few days and would have solid feedback by now. Marin probably would not have approved, but Kyn loved doing it so much she must have been born with pixels in her blood, same as he was. As a designer and the founder and CEO of BehnWerks Games, he'd been able to make a good living, and give his daughter some nonviolent entertainment in the process. Kyn had been one of his alpha testers for the last year, starting with LeapFrogge, moving up to Two-by-Two, and now Hyde and Seek. The child showed a clear aptitude for it. She often caught something he and the other BehnWerks crew had missed.

Kyn shuffled in from the hallway and stuffed her feet into her sneakers without untying them.

"You're going to break down the backs of those shoes if you keep doing that."

"I know."

"If you break them, you'll have to buy your next pair with allowance money."

He couldn't see her face, but he'd bet five bucks she had rolled her eyes.

She snagged her helmet from a wall hook and fiddled with the buckle. "You ready?"

"Yep." He gestured at the lightweight jackets hanging on hooks near the door.

"Nah, I'm good."

Luk let them out onto the porch. Kyn was as lightly dressed as he was, in jeans and a short-sleeved t-shirt with a Neil deGrasse Tyson slogan that always tickled him; "You matter, unless you multiply yourself by the speed of light squared...then you energy." He understood her refusal of the hoodie, though. They'd warm up soon enough.

He locked the door. Behind him, Kyn murmured. He glanced over in time to see her scoop something off of her blue Schwinn with her bare hands.

"What's that?"

"A spider," she said.

Just like that. Casual. As if this happened every day.

"A what?" Luk asked, eyes wide. Eight-legged creatures never entered Kyn's personal space without a minor display of hysteria. "Who are you, and what have you done with my

daughter?”

Kyn shooed the arachnid into the shadows of the unruly shrubs and finished unlocking her bike. “Dad, you’re so weird.”

Luk grinned. “You should be proud. Getting over a fear of spiders is no small thing, child. But whatever shall I do with myself if I no longer hold the title of Spider Savior around here?”

She laughed, a giggly little-girl sound he loved. “You need another job, I guess. What about burger flipper?”

“I already do that.”

“Oh yeah.” She tapped her chin. “Maybe you could clean my room?”

“Hah. Nice try.”

She shrugged, then sniffed, her nose wrinkling. “Ugh.”

“What?”

“You don’t smell that?”

Luk sniffed the air. “No. What does it smell like?”

“Like something died.”

“You mean the crickets?” A few insect corpses had accumulated on the porch since he’d swept yesterday. At least cricket season was mostly over for this year, and he could soon use the porch lights again and open the door without being invaded. “I don’t even notice that anymore until you mention it.”

“No,” she said. “This is bigger than crickets.”

He regarded his daughter. Three odd behaviors in less than an hour cut through his usual morning fog like a beacon. He took in her stance, her attitude, her comments, but she seemed her usual self. Luk sniffed again. “Huh. I got nothing. Come on, let’s go.”

She pushed her bike down the steps and onto the driveway, then hopped on and pedaled into the street. Luk took a jogging position between her and the traffic lane. Most houses had at least one light on, but the inhabitants were probably still drinking coffee and trying to wake up.

They passed the time in silence for a bit, as usual. He liked the quiet of Hyde Park before everyone awoke. Kyn liked it too, even spoke in hushed tones as though she were reluctant to disturb the soundtrack of birdsong that accompanied these outings. Together, they’d pass through alternating patches of shadow and pools of light from streetlamps, moving down Avenue H to zigzag between lettered and numbered streets, working their way west and south toward Avenue B, where the owner of that little grocery was always arriving as they passed. Turn at 44th, loop around Shipe Park, and go home. Overall, it was nearly two miles every morning, great exercise for them both, and quality father-daughter time when they could talk, reminisce, or laugh, comfortable in each other’s presence. Luk wouldn’t trade it for anything in the world.

He ran beside her through early morning air scented with evergreen sumac, clematis, and Texas sage. This neighborhood boasted great gardeners, many of whom had planted devil’s trumpets, jessamine, and other fragrant night-blooming vines and perennials. Some trimmed their yards into neat landscapes. Others surrounded their homes with mini wildernesses thick with ivy,

herbs and flowers, or wayward shrubberies. It gave the whole area a character Luk loved. Many houses sat beneath old trees. Here a cypress, there a live oak. He caught a whiff of desert willow. Marin had loved the way those drew hummingbirds.

Marin again. He grabbed at the first distraction that came to mind.

“How goes the testing on Hyde and Seek?” Luk asked.

“I like it,” Kyn said. “Some of the trees are a little pixelated. And there’s a bug in one of the scenes where the program lets a gate slam on my arm. Shouldn’t it give me a flesh wound, or at least dent my skin?”

Luk squinted at her. “Is that the kind of video game you want to play?”

She giggled. “No.”

“Whew. Thank the gods.”

“You might wanna fix that glitch in the code, though. I mean, it’s funny and all, but you should prolly edit out stuff that maims the players.”

“Good point.”

They were almost to the slight bend at Avenue F. “Even with the icky gate,” she said, “I like that I can tell the game what neighborhood I want, and it sets the scenes with real-life backgrounds.”

Luk grinned. Hyde was written to wrap around a Google-Earth-type street-view framework so it would resemble the real world, but it wouldn’t be exact. Too much risk of enticing players to explore private property outside the game. He’d had fun with the idea. Simon Tanaka and the other three BehnWerks financial backers did too, except Luk wasn’t moving quickly enough on its development to make them happy. He should pass it to the rest of his team, let them wrap it up, but he hadn’t written a game all by himself in a while. These days his input was limited to offering suggestions or critiques on new games and strategies on how to make them work, then coding the finishing touches. The rest of his time was mostly consumed by marketing, business details, and boring minutiae. He missed those passionate early days when he was the one doing all the coding, but that wouldn’t pay the bills anymore.

He wasn’t too worried. Sometimes these things took longer than projected. Simon wasn’t likely to complain about a couple of days. He and the others had made too much money on BehnWerks’ creations in the past to get antsy now.

“It’s cool,” Kyn said, bringing him back to the moment, “because the settings are all familiar. It’s like...I kind of know my way around, but the game makes me investigate things I might not notice in the real world. You know, peek under buckets, inside tree holes or up in the branches, like that. So I can find the things on my list.”

“Good. What else?”

“You could make it more realistic.”

“Tell me how.”

She rounded the corner onto Rowena Avenue, Luk beside her. “I mean, the buildings and trees and all that seem real. But there’s no trash on the streets or in the park.”

“You want me to put litter in the game?”

“Why not? It’d be more real. I know we mostly ignore it outside the game, pretend like it isn’t there.”

Luk glanced at his daughter. “Has the homeschool co-op been talking about the environment lately?”

“Yeah, but I see it myself, too. Like that.” Kyn pointed at evidence of a dumped ashtray beside a parking spot on the roadside. “Ick. That person shoulda cleaned up their mess. Birds might eat those cigarette butts and get sick.”

She was right. All along the roadway lay small exhibits to support her argument. A soda can. A Woko Loko takeout box. The more he looked, the more he saw. A scrap of paper. A sliced zip tie. A broken balloon. None of it was enormous. Added up, it might fill a small trash bag.

“Hey, I know! You could design it so that when the player picks up a piece of trash and throws it in the garbage can, they find a prize. If they check the can without adding trash, they get nothing. Ooo! You could even make it a double prize for recycling bottles and cans!”

Luk offered a silent mantra of thanks. This was more like Kyn, following random rabbit holes of potential in his games rather than playing with spiders or sleepwalking. “Maybe I could throw in some random doggie poo while I’m at it,” he joked.

“Yeah!” Kyn giggled. “That’d be cool! Add some doggie stations like we see at the park, with the little green bags and garbage cans, or even a compost station. Give the players points for trashing it. Give ’em more if they compost it.”

He frowned. Gods knew getting adults to pick up their trash could be a never-ending struggle, as evidenced by what he could see from his current position. Coding in trash would make the game’s world more authentic, but most players, especially the kids BehnWerks wrote many of their games for, wouldn’t welcome that level of realism. Besides, Simon and the other investors would probably never go for it.

“Noted,” he said. “What else?”

“Graphics are still a little jerky, especially when I first go to a new scene. If I’ve been there before, it’s fine, but—”

She disappeared from his peripheral view. A heartbeat later, he heard the crash.

Luk whirled.

His daughter lay sprawled on her side on the asphalt, legs tangled in her bike frame.

“Kyn!” In a second, he was on his knees beside her. “Kyndra!”

Pre-dawn light turned her lips grey. A scrape on her chin oozed blood, beads of blackish-red against skin two shades paler than it should be. Sweat glistened on her brow below the helmet’s ridge. She wasn’t moving.

“Honey?” He stroked her cheek.

Her body jerked in a befuddled reaction. Her eyelids fluttered. She tried to speak.

He fumbled for his iPhone.

“Daddy?”

Phone forgotten, his hands hovered over Kyn’s prone form, afraid to move her. Afraid

he'd make it worse. "I'm here. Are you hurt?"

"Yes. Ow." Kyn rolled over and touched her chin with a hiss, then gripped her left shoulder. "What happened?"

"I don't know. One second you were riding beside me and the next you crashed. You stopped talking and fell. Did you hit a pothole?"

Her features puckered. "We were talking about the spider..." She trailed off.

Luk froze, staring at her. "That's the last thing you remember?"

"No, wait." She sat up. "You were telling me how you're gonna raise my allowance to fifteen dollars a week."

"Hmm. It must have been me that hit my head because I don't remember that at all."

"We were talking about the game. You said you're gonna put in doggy poo. I told you about the jerky graphics."

Relief rippled up the back of his neck and he let go of the breath he'd been holding. "So you're okay?"

"Yeah, just clumsy." Kyn got to her feet, brushing the dirt from her chin with a grimace.

Luk sighed. She'd have another scar there, a lopsided mate for the one on her brow from falling out of a tree a year ago. She'd been lucky to have only a few scrapes from that affair. Marin wouldn't have been as tolerant of those activities.

"Are you feeling shaky at all?"

"Yeah. A little."

Sugar crash? It would be the first time he'd seen that in Kyn, but she was getting older. Her body was changing. Tomorrow he'd see she ate something before they left for their outing. "Let's get some breakfast. That'll make you feel better."

She picked up her bike and remounted like nothing had happened. "Yeah. I am kinda hungry."

That settled it for Luk. He took up a comfortable stride next to her bike. "I know what happened."

"You mean what made me fall?"

"Yep."

"Tell me."

"Gravity."

She laughed. "Dad!"

He belted out the first line of the "Gravity" song and she joined in. Together they sang the whole thing louder than they should have given the early hour, but so what? All he wanted right now was to get his daughter home, put some food in her belly, and bandage her chin. Everything else would sort itself out.

##

Chapter Three

Aboard the dive boat *Jewel One*, Vliat, Nlaan Islands

Friday, November 1, 11:45 a.m.

(Austin, Texas, Thursday, October 31, 5:45 p.m.)

Number of infected: 1

Isobel straightened the straps on her swimsuit and sat to slide her feet into her flippers. She glanced at Travis, who'd joined them on this adventure.

“Sure you don't want to come along?”

His grin puckered the scar around his eye. “I've seen it. Someone has to stay topside.”

“Your loss.” Isobel shrugged into her tank harness, which was heavier than she'd expected, and cinched it snug around her chest. She grabbed her mask and went to sit beside Duvre, her dive leader, dangling her flippered feet in the warm water.

“Don't forget to spit-clean your mask, as I showed you,” Duvre said, his English thick with Sami accent. He demonstrated the technique again.

Isobel spat on the faceplate and rubbed the saliva around before she dipped her mask into the water.

“Now you can put it on.” Duvre secured his own around his eyes and nose.

Isobel followed suit and, at first, felt as though she were suffocating. She used to love diving reefs like this one, seeing all the diversity that lurked below the surface, an alien world right beneath her nose. The last time she'd dived, she and Jake had gone together in the nearby Solomon Islands. That trip had been all about fun, beauty, a new experience. She hadn't been a mother then. This dive meant far more.

Watching Duvre, Isobel mimicked his motions, feeling the familiar routine come back bit by bit. She pushed the breather into her mouth and took slow, normal breaths. She gave Duvre the thumbs-up sign, and the two of them lifted themselves off the platform and pushed forward

to drop into the water.

Duvre had said the water temp averaged 27°C, and that they wouldn't need wetsuits, but it was still cooler than bathwater. Isobel took a moment to adjust, then nodded to Duvre and they dove.

Light filtered through the water with a bluish cast, yet as clear as it was, visibility stretched only a few meters. Murky silhouettes of schooling fish passed in the distance, scattering at the humans' approach. Longer, streamlined forms of barracuda passed close enough to reveal their blotched bellies and white fin tips.

As she and Duvre neared their goal, creatures grew more colorful, their forms more varied. A reddish-orange sea slug with ruffled edges waved and flapped along its way to whatever sea slugs might do. Striped bannerfish with their yellow backs swam past, their long white banner fins flowing out behind like a regal train. Ahead, the reef took shape in a solid mass of clustered life that writhed and undulated with the current. Schools of silvery fish passed, darting en masse in sudden changes of direction, bodies flashing in the filtered light. Smaller fish swarmed adjacent to the reef in clouds of bright colors and a wild variety of stripes and spots. The silhouettes of reef sharks haunted the waters, always moving, ever vigilant.

On the reef itself, corals and anemones in more shapes and colors than she could have imagined filled every centimeter along the angled surface. Tiny species filled minuscule niches between the larger animals. She scanned the whole edifice, or at least what she could see of it, until her attention snagged. There it was. The star queen. Benign in its appearance, but the one thing that stood between life and death for Gabe. Around it, a panoply of other life forms. She recognized some. Sea fans, brain corals, shelf corals that resembled giant mushrooms with flat caps, these were familiar to anyone who had seen so much as a photo of a reef. But there were too many others for an amateur like herself to know them all. Some swayed in the current like clusters of grass or flowers. Others stuck up from the surface like naked, branching trees.

Above and to the right, clusters of white, feathery tentacles swished through the surrounding water and curled inward to feed. Down and to the left hung another that resembled mountain laurel flowers, some open, some closed. A group of orange anemones extended tiny white tentacles like delicate fingers that grasped at the water. In another section, a group of grape-sized puffballs pumped water in and out through their bodies in constant motion that made them appear to be breathing. A black coral stood out amid all the vivid colors, its thick fingers and tiny charcoal-grey tentacles filtering the water.

But the animals that made up the massive edifice weren't the only things living on the reef. Black and white striped sea kraits wove in and around the structure's layers. Clownfish hovered among the anemones. Sea snails, nudibranchs, and starfish crawled along the ridges. A giant clam, wedged in among the rest, siphoned bits of nutrients falling from above. Seahorses in vivid colors and ghostly pipefish—so tiny, so delicate—clung to branches of the coral or darted about in search of a meal. One animal looked something like a jellyfish but wasn't free swimming. Instead, it had attached itself to the crusty outer polyps of another species. What in the world was that? A lump she'd believed was part of the reef flushed a mottled red and brown,

pushed out bumps and ridges, then darted away. An octopus.

In the gap between some of the mounds, where tall seagrass grew anchored to sandy ridges, swam a family of dugongs. The reality of their size came through much stronger here than in the photos and online videos. Most of them had been hunted to extinction in years past. This species, if she remembered her studies, was the sole remaining branch of that family in these waters.

Isobel pivoted, her movements slow and ponderous. All around her, life in a dizzying array of colors and shapes went about its business. Batfish she recognized, and a moray, its nose protruding from its hole in the reef. Another animal—an eel?—did the same, but that was no moray. Electric blue with yellow fins, this eel sported feathery protrusions on its nose, and tiny needle-like teeth in its open maw. Isobel gave it plenty of room.

The one thing she didn't see was trash. No plastic bags had snagged on the reef. No soda cans lay on the sandy ridges. No straws floated in the water to fool passing fish. Nothing marked the passage of humans. The animals present both here and in the Solomons ran similar, but the crystalline nature of the water and the immaculate sandy bottom surprised her. The way the Pacific currents circled, it seemed unlikely—if not impossible—to find such an unspoiled site. Every other South Pacific locale she'd visited, as beautiful as they all were, boasted trash. Perhaps this was part of the reason the Nlaantu wanted no outsiders in their territory? She'd have to take pains to hide any trash or waste from them so they would have no cause to complain. Her team could always run a clean-up op before leaving once the project was complete. Leave it as clean as they found it.

But that was an issue for the future. Right now, she focused on Gabe.

Duvre signaled and pointed, and Isobel followed his line of sight. Emerging from the shadows, a tiger shark glided into view. Isobel held her ground, as Duvre had instructed, but damn that was a big shark. Twelve feet, at least. Isobel's pulse hammered in her ears as it swam closer, investigating these intruders in its realm. Duvre's tap on her shoulder reminded her to breathe normally. She tried and failed. What a beautiful animal! So majestic and fearsome! It went its way in peace, cleaner fish keeping easy pace with its enormous mass.

They followed the contour of the atoll for a short way, both noting the locations of the star queen. Isobel swam close to one of the colonies, clusters of bubbles billowing around her from short, rapid breaths. Such tiny animals to shoulder the future of her son, and the continuity of her career. She forced herself to take slow, regular breaths and observe in a clinical fashion. If she planned to use this coral to make the Milani treatment, she needed to know all she could about how to grow it in artificial tanks. Others would follow her down later, and make further notes, but she wanted to see it for herself.

The star queen's distinctive form lay in patches along the reef, thick enough in many places that they had grown atop one another in layers like underwater condos. Each level of coral grew up from a central "core" support, leaving enough room for the lower colony members to feed. At first glance, the colony resembled one of those flat-topped mushroom-like structures. But on closer inspection, tiny details emerged. The overall mass formed from pale blue-lavender

hexagonal cells, each topped with a veiny star design in iridescent blue. At the very center of the star, a spiked purple dot glowed, as if lit from inside. Tiny tentacles extended from the circumference of the purple dots, reaching out to filter the surrounding water and snatching morsels of food into that purple maw. Each of the small hexagons appeared to be a single animal. Yet this one colony consisted of hundreds, maybe thousands of them, their motions combining to make the collective present as a single creature.

She got as close as she could without touching the reef to find the star queen's base. She'd need to know how it attached, what kinds of foundations it required. But the surrounding animals were packed in too tightly to see any gaps.

She backed up and scanned left, right. There—a scar where the initial dive team had taken a sample. She swam over to the gap. A small piece of the star queen had remained at the harvest site, missed perhaps, though the animals at the edge of the scar had been compromised and would probably die. The lifeforms around it, though, seemed to grow in such a way as to support one another. Further inspection showed that neighboring animals repeated at each star queen site. Companion animals, perhaps? Each helping the other in some obscure way? She'd let the dive teams know to take samples of those, as well, for planting in proximity to the star queen in Austin.

Closer inspection revealed that star queen had been anchored to the “bones” of older corals, bleached and lifeless. She broke off a piece for study. Perhaps it had a specific chemical compound they could include in Holschtatt's artificial reef structure, something that would improve their chances for successful growth.

She put some distance between herself and the reef again, taking in the whole. All that unspoiled beauty, save for the gouge where divers had pried chunks of the star queen loose. By the time they were finished here, pockmarks like that would mar the living ridge all the way 'round. If their holds allowed adequate space, she would claim from this atoll every piece of star queen they could find. The acknowledgment sobered her. But it isn't like she was killing the last of its kind. The animal would thrive elsewhere in Nlaan, and the protected Coral Triangle.

Besides, this was for Gabe. She pushed away the wisps of doubt about what she'd come here to do.

Duvre signaled the end of the dive, and they swam to the boat. In the distance, coming closer, swam an enormous manta ray, its motions as graceful as a dancer. A school of jellies drifted in the distance, visible because of the rust-colored ruffles beneath their bells. A group of barracuda passed below them, followed by a couple of ghost sharks. Even a sea turtle made an appearance before they surfaced by the dive platform.

Travis helped her aboard, then gave Duvre a lift. Her dive leader pulled his mask off.

“Well?” he asked. “Did you find what you are after?”

She nodded, a little out of breath as she doffed her mask and gear harness. “I did.” She glanced at Travis. “The reef is wild with it. We'll have plenty for what we need.”

He tugged on his hat. “So, we have a go?”

“Yes. The holding tanks are ready?”

“Almost. The frames are set up in both of them, but the water needs tweaking. While you were diving, I had them run tests to make sure we have the proper pH levels, temperatures, all the essentials. They’re adjusting those now. You ready?”

“Yes.” The sun felt good on her skin but fair as she was, she didn’t dare stay out here long without sunscreen. She moved into the shade of the canopy.

Travis gestured to the pilot, and the dive boat circled around the way it had come.

Isobel slipped out of her flippers and let Duvre take her gear in exchange for a thick towel. She squeezed the water from her ponytail. “Tell the dive crews they can get started as soon as the tanks are ready. I want the live samples first, then we’ll begin the harvest for my lab tests. How soon can they make the first dive?”

“Thirty minutes, max.”

“Good.” Isobel dried herself, then wrapped the towel around her waist. “I’ve got a lot of work ahead of me.”

Travis’s amber eyes gleamed. “I guess you do.”

*

Behn-Kaur Residence, Austin, Texas

Thursday, October 31, 5:45 pm

Number of infected: 1

Luk inspected Kyndra’s facepaint design, a sugar skull from Marin’s tales of Mexican traditions. Flower petals surrounded the black eye circles. Twining vines curled from the corners of her mouth into the blackened hollows of her cheeks. An orange-and-red sunburst covered the bandaid at her chin. She’d dressed all in black, though Luk insisted she put reflective tape around her sleeves and pant legs. With her natural dark coloring, the effect was startling.

“Good job,” he said. “You ready?”

“Yep.”

“Alrighty then. Let’s go.” They stepped out onto the porch and Kyn’s nose wrinkled.

“That smell’s still there.”

Luk sniffed the air. “I don’t smell anything. Is it the same thing you noticed this morning?”

“Yeah.” She sniffed the air like a bloodhound on a scent trail, then swung around the desert willow at the edge of the porch and started toward the corner of the house.

“You sure you want to do this now?” Luk jabbed a thumb at the neighbors’ place across the street. “Candy awaits.”

Kyn glanced that way. “The other kids aren’t there yet. We have a couple of minutes. I think that smell is coming from the side yard. Mom’s flowers are sick too.”

Luk frowned. “The dahlias?”

“Mm-hmm.”

“Why do you say that?”

She shrugged. “Because they are.”

“Okay.” He followed her across the front yard and around the corner.

Along the outer wall beside their house, Marin had planted a row of black dahlias in the weeks before Kyndra’s fourth birthday. Since then, the tubers had grown every year and spread to cover the whole side of the house. Every plant grew tall, too. Three-foot bamboo stakes provided support, but the dahlias topped them all. A handful of blossoms remained in the front, but withered flowers and plants lay on the ground at the rear of the mulched bed. This late in the season, the blooms would naturally be starting to fade, but this had to be some sort of disease. Many of the leaves had dropped, and the ones left were brown, or covered with fuzzy mildew. He never would have noticed this from the front of the house.

“That’s weird. I fertilized them a month ago.”

Kyndra stared at the dahlias, and at the other flower beds along the edge of the lawn. “Mom loved these gardens, didn’t she?”

A pang tightened Luk’s throat. “She sure did. I’ve let them go, haven’t I?”

Kyn’s gaze was even more piercing from that sugar-skull mask. “It’s okay. We can fix them together.”

Luk’s brow inched higher. “You want to garden?”

“Sure.” She indicated the wilted flowers. “The neighbors might appreciate us fixing up the yard, and it’d be fun. Maybe Sadie can join us, too. When she’s not working at Perkatory.”

He narrowed his eyes. “Are you playing matchmaker right now?”

She gave him her most innocent expression. “I would never do that, Dad.”

“Right.” Luk sniffed the air. At last, he caught a whiff of decay. “Oh, I do smell something now.”

Kyn walked closer to the sick dahlias. “It’s really strong here.”

“No, honey, step back.” He gestured. No sense letting his daughter find the dead whatever. He parted the drooping dahlia stalks to see the ground beneath.

A squirrel, or what was left of it, rested in the growing shadow beneath the flowers at the far end. Fur spread around the carcass like a puddle, rippled with evidence of insect industry. Exposed skin and what muscle remained stretched in stiff repose, taut against the animal’s bony frame. The only thing intact was the tail, which lay separate from the rest.

He straightened. His inquisitive child had been peering past his guard at the remains. “Have you been playing over here?”

“No.”

“Then how did you know about all this?”

“I smelled the squirrel.”

“What about the flowers?”

“I just knew. I could feel them.”

She could feel them? “What—”

From across the street, excited children squealed with laughter. Trick-or-treaters were gathering.

“We can talk about the flowers later. Let’s go bag some treats.”

Kyndra grinned, her real teeth gleaming between the painted ones on her lips and cheeks, and she took off running.

“Watch for traffic!” he shouted, following at a slower pace. How appropriate to find grisly remains on Halloween. He laughed. Tomorrow was trash day. He’d come out early with a shovel and remove the ex-squirrel to the bins before the truck arrived.

Kyndra waited for him on the sidewalk. They crossed the street in the slanting afternoon light, approaching the neighbor’s house with its chunky pumpkin vines along the wall and verdant flora in raised beds, plants heavy with life all through the growing season. Rachel’s rampant yard, one of the wildest green spaces in Hyde Park, trumpeted her love of gardening.

Behind their house, which was always in need of small repair, Rachel and Joy had transformed their two-car, two-story garage into the Central Texas Educational Cooperative, a small schoolhouse complete with bathrooms, classrooms, and a lab. The homeschool building never wanted for attention. Most subjects were taught right here, and Kyn loved everything about Cee-Tec. Joy and Rachel’s twin boys, along with Kyn and a dozen other neighborhood kids, made up the student body.

The twins must have been at the window. Their door burst open and the boys practically flew into the yard, Zach dressed like a vampire and Oliver like a werewolf. Joy followed, her slender form dressed all in black, and laid down the rules for the group. Rachel came after, stepping over the creeping rosemary to meet Luk. Renegade strands from her red braid gleamed like a frizzy halo.

“You ready to go?” she asked.

“Yep. Some of us more than others.” He glanced aside at the trio of costumed kids, Kyndra laughing as loud as Rachel’s boys at some joke.

“Any other problems since this morning?” she asked

“Nope. I’ll feed her tomorrow before we go out. It’s strange though. That’s never been an issue before.”

“Well, she is about the right age to start her cycles.” Rachel shrugged. “That’ll change a lot of things.”

Luk sighed. “Yeah. I thought of that. I may need your input when that drama begins.”

She laughed. “You’ll have it.”

Joy approached them clutching a giant bowl of candy. Dark bangs hung in shaggy fringes over her pale forehead, strands of grey catching the light.

“Hey, Luk. Kyndra’s makeup is fabulous.”

“That’s more due to her talents than mine, but thanks. You coming with us?”

“No.” Rachel reached up to kiss her wife. “Joy’s doling out the sugar stash while we gallivant the neighborhood.”

All three kids whooped, jumping up and down as their friends approached. Other trick-or-treaters had emerged along the street. The scent of moonflowers drifted on the breeze. In the mulch beneath the sunflowers along the fence, crickets sang their randy come-on to no avail. This late in the season, potential mates had all moved on. A backyard fire burned somewhere in

the neighborhood.

Luk waved a greeting to another woman who joined the outing. Behind her, trees rose in dusky silhouettes outlined by the glow from streetlamps beyond. Zach ran over, his vampire mask pushed up.

“Mama Rachel, come on! All the candy’s gonna be gone!”

Behind him, a group of neighborhood kids approached with expectant faces and open bags.

“You’re up,” Rachel told Joy. “Don’t forget our Samhain ritual starts at eight. Circle members ought to start arriving around 7:15 to set up the altar in the garden. We still have to eat dinner, too, so—”

“Go.” Joy shooed her wife on her way. “I’ve got this.” She winked at Luk and got busy with the candy.

Zach dragged Rachel past the herb beds and out to the street. Luk followed, trying to keep pace.

Their usual route for trick-or-treating followed the same path as his morning excursions with Kyn. Hyde Park was a pretty friendly neighborhood. Only a few porches stood dark, their stingy residents hiding behind closed blinds, segregated from all the fun. Laughing and singing, the co-op group worked their way around the first half of their circuit.

Rachel rambled on about Joy’s new position scouting talent for Austin Power’s expanded green energy division, then asked about Luk’s latest game.

He shoved his hands in his pockets. “I’m behind schedule. Surprised my investors haven’t already been hounding me, but I’ll have a chance to work on it more this weekend. That’s—”

A shriek snatched their awareness to the children twenty feet ahead of them. The group had clustered in the shadows between streetlamps, standing over someone seizing on the ground. He and Rachel broke into a run. The other adult in their group, who’d been further along with a few of the kids, ran over from the other side. All reached the cluster at the same time, and the kids retreated.

On the ground, Kyndra trembled and shook, neck arched at a strange angle. An unearthly strangling sound came from her taut, stretched throat. Both arms had drawn in to twitch and jerk near her chest, her fingers frozen into claws.

Luk cried out and threw himself on his knees beside his daughter, ripping the knees of his jeans along with the skin beneath them. Her eyes had rolled back, their whites visible against the black makeup that made them appear even more sunken. Painted teeth drew tight against her real ones. A trail of saliva ran from her mouth, tracing ghostly paths through layers of color. The smeared sunburst on her chin looked like blood, and her cheeks stretched in a frightening rictus made even more macabre by the skeletal image drawn there.

His mind raced, casting about for anything he’d ever read about what to do for a seizure before he grasped some distant detail.

Turn her over.

Without hesitating, he reached across her shaking body, grabbed her far shoulder and hip, and rolled her onto her side. He shouted, not caring who heard as long as someone obeyed.

“Call an ambulance!”

A thousand questions flashed through his mind, none sticking around long enough to explore, let alone answer. He focused on his daughter, watching for any change, any indication that things were getting worse.

Some part of his brain registered the other children weeping, voices muttering behind and around him as other parents came running to see what had happened. He blinked, and his tears dripped into Kyn’s hair. Someone touched his back, said something. He shrugged them off.

“Come on, sweetheart. Come on. Daddy’s here.”

He murmured comfort as much for himself as for her. The seizure went on and on, lingering for what seemed like an hour. By the time the siren approached, she had calmed, but not awakened. Luk pulled her now limp form into his embrace and rocked her.

“It’s okay, Kyn. Help’s coming. It’s all right.”

Paramedics gently pried him away from Kyn. One of them shone a light in each of her eyes. No response in her pupils. Spittle still traced a sticky trail down her skin.

Luk described the seizure to them, his voice halting, aquiver. “Kyn, honey, can you hear me?”

Nothing. Her chest rose and fell in a shallow but steady rhythm. Thank the gods she was still breathing.

One of the medics placed his fingers against Kyndra’s limp palm. “Kyn, if you can hear me, squeeze my fingers.”

She lay still, so still. Like this morning. Luk’s breath caught. This had to be related, didn’t it? Oh, he should have taken her to a doctor right then. “Is she—”

The medic shook his head. “We need to get her to the hospital.”

Luk’s tears came harder. “What is it? Will she be okay? What’s—”

“The doctors will figure that out. Are you her parent?”

“Yes,” Luk said. She still wasn’t moving. “Lukas Behn.”

“Is this the first time she’s had a seizure?”

“Yes.” He gasped out the word, bit off the sob that threatened to follow.

“Sir, I need your permission to take her in for treatment.”

“Yes. Yes.” Luk rubbed his mouth. “Do what you need to do.”

The paramedics slid a stretcher beneath his daughter, then lifted her into the ambulance. Luk climbed in beside her. No one objected.

Rachel finally got his attention. “I’ll call Sadie. Have her meet you there.”

He nodded until the ambulance doors closed, then watched as the paramedic worked on Kyn. Luk couldn’t lose her. She was all he had left.

Come on, babe. Don’t do this. Wake up.

He held her hand, prayed to Ganesh, and let the tears fall.