

# Chapter 1

Eight years after coming to Earth, I sat at the kitchen table in our apartment pretending to do my schoolwork while actually sneaking in some video game time. My only worry was how to beat my new *Zombies V Vampires* game without my mom catching me. If she caught me playing instead of researching my history essay, I'd lose video game privileges for a week.

Every time she glanced over, I clicked my laptop screen back to my essay. As she bustled about the kitchen making dinner, Mom hummed her favorite eighties tunes. Though a bit past middle-age, she was beautiful. She had huge, soft brown eyes, long raven-black hair, high cheekbones and a brick-red tan. Laugh-lines made up her only wrinkles.

Dad came in and took a whiff of the roast cooking in the crock-pot. "That smells delicious." He gave Mom a hug and turned to me. I'd switched to a site on the United Nations for research. "How's your schoolwork going?" he asked with enough humor in his voice to make me think I'd been caught.

The doorbell rang and Dad went to answer it, giving me a wink on his way out. I bowed my head. No more games for me today.

I heard the front door open. The voice of my real father, Colonel Ebon Milette, came from the living room. "I've come for my daughter."

Shock and disbelief gave way to fear. I hadn't heard that voice since being sent into hiding on Earth. Since then, Tina and Bill Splendor had adopted me and given me a home—something I'd never really had before. While I was glad to know my father was alive, the fact his return might mean losing the life I had here with the Splendors wasn't lost on me. And the thought of returning to the hell my life had been scared the crap out of me.

I twisted in my chair to look at my mom, Tina, hoping for some reassurance. She stood frozen, mixing bowl in hand. Her expression showed every bit as much fear as I felt. She and Bill had become my parents when Colonel Milette failed to come reclaim me. I'd arrived on this remote planet with some serious issues, and it had taken them years to win me over. Now my nice, comfortable life with a mom and dad who loved me, and that I could love in return, might be over.

"Where is she?" Colonel Milette's demand resounded from the living room.

Mom's tan face paled to sheet-white. She glanced at the kitchen door and then back at me in panic. "Twyla, stay here," she ordered in a hushed tone. She dropped the bowl on the counter with a clatter. Sauce splattered the "happy yellow" wall. Ignoring the mess, she rushed into the living room.

"I have no idea what you're talking about." Dad sounded pretty harsh for him. "Who are you?" Somehow, I could sense he knew exactly who this guy was, and it terrified him.

"I know Twyla is here," Ebon said.

Despite Mom's effort to hold me back, I entered the living room. Ebon stood at the front door of our apartment with Dad blocking his entrance. I moved toward them with faltering steps. "Father?"

He'd changed. His black hair was now almost completely gray. Dark bags hung under his eyes.

"You...you came," I stammered. "You finally came."

"Of course, I did," he replied with a mix of anger and defensiveness.

"I thought you were dead." I was about to run to him, but he took a step back.

A horrified expression contorted his once handsome face as he looked me over. A wave of revulsion hit me. It wasn't my emotion I was feeling; it was his. My empathic powers had returned.

Suddenly, I knew that he'd come for his little girl. But at fifteen, I now resembled my real mother so much that he recoiled at the sight of me.

Memories of my life before coming to the Splendors flooded my mind, knocking me back to the day my parents split up.

My father had been a brave and decorated officer in the Zartous Regime's military, yet he'd crumbled under my mother's telepathic onslaught. As she ripped through his mind, I'd felt it. At seven, my own mental shields weren't strong enough to block the sensation of the stabbing penetration of her attack or my father's anguish.

Once she'd finished, I'd gone to comfort him. My mother, Cassie, wrenched me from his arms and hauled me out the door. I'd kicked and screamed, begging my father not to let her take me away. But he had done nothing.

My body trembled at the memory as Tina pulled me into her arms, breaking me free from the flashback. She rocked me side to side and whispered in my ear. My adopted mom's soft, sweet voice anchored me back in the present.

I'm not sure which hurt worse: feeling how much my own father hated me, or realizing I was my mother's daughter after all. With my empathic abilities back, was I destined to become a monster like her?

Dad stepped aside to let my father come in. "I'll deal with our guest," he said, giving Ebon a wary glare. Mom started to usher me toward my room.

"I am Colonel Ebon Milette and *that* is my daughter. Hand her over," he demanded, pointing at me. For a second, he became the man he used to be. His sharp steel-grey eyes narrowed. He might not have been wearing his uniform, but his posture and bearing shouted military command.

Revulsion still emanated from him. It wasn't just that I have the same dark auburn hair and pine-green eyes as Cassie, I could have been her clone.

"Why should they give me back to you?" I shouted. "You don't want me!" Mom tried to get me out of the living room, but I refused to go. I broke from her grip and charged at Ebon. "I can feel it, you son-of-a-bitch! I can feel everything now."

"Twyla!" my parents said at the same time and in the same tone. I wasn't allowed to cuss.

I could sense their panic. Their emotions felt completely different than Ebon's. Their love for me squelched my temper's fire. I gave in to Mom's embrace. "Make it stop," I sobbed. "I don't want to be a mutelouge."

She stiffened. Apparently, she knew "mutelouge" was a profane term used for hybrids in the Paraxous Star Cluster, where I was from. A strangled cry escaped her, but it was Dad who spoke. "You are not a mutelouge. You are a Kobbi. It's going to be okay, Twyla. We knew this day would come."

"We just didn't think it'd be so soon, or that your powers would come back so suddenly," Mom said. Then she glared accusingly at Ebon. "You should have warned us you were coming."

His expression changed from disgust to confusion. "What the hell? I don't understand. Are you telling me she'd lost her abilities?"

As Mom led me away, Dad explained in his deep, rich voice, "She was sent to us with all her empathic powers blocked. Seeing you must have somehow released them."

"You mean she could have been normal?" I heard Ebon say before Mom closed my bedroom door.

She sat me on the edge of my bed and knelt in front of me. She was talking, but I was too lost in her emotions to listen. I tried blocking the empathic whirlwind, but it was already inside me, and I had no clue how to get it out.

Mom called to me. I followed her pleading voice like a lifeline. She saw she had my attention again and gave me an encouraging smile. “That’s my girl. You can control it. You just have to learn where your mind ends and where the empathic energy of others begins.”

I understood the concept and tried to separate what was me from what was her. It didn’t work. Her love and fear overpowered me, engulfed me, drowned me. I couldn’t breathe.

“Just go away,” I gasped. “I need to be alone.”

Shouts came from the living room. She glanced at the door and back at me as they intensified. Reluctantly, she told me to stay in my room and left.