



Guardian's Legacy (Space Guardian's Mate #4)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: I was never meant to belong to anyone. But the moment I met her, the universe marked her as mine.

Alice: I survived the Cryon invasion, the terror of captivity, and the chaos of being rescued by an alien warrior with a bad attitude and too many secrets. Xyrek is infuriatingly arrogant, frustratingly bossy, and undeniably gorgeous—not that I'd ever admit that to him. But when strange markings appear on our skin, binding us in an ancient bond neither of us understands, walking away from him stops being an option. I don't believe in soulmates. I don't believe in destiny. And I definitely don't believe that some cosmic force decided this silver-skinned, brooding assassin is my fated mate. But the more time we spend together, the harder it is to ignore the way my heart races when he's near... or how perfectly I fit in his arms. Fate can go to hell—I refuse to be bound to anyone. Especially him.

Xyrek: I was created to be a weapon. I spent decades hunting the galaxy's worst criminals, my past erased, my loyalty unquestioned. Until now. The Ohrurs have been lying to me for years, and the more I uncover the truth, the more I realize I've been a pawn in a game I never agreed to play. Then there's Alice—sharp-tongued, reckless, and completely unwilling to accept what we both know is inevitable. The marks on our skin don't lie. She is mine. And I will cross the entire universe to prove it to her. But there are forces that would rather see us dead than together. The Ohrurs are watching. And if we don't figure out why the past they erased is suddenly catching up to me, the bond we never asked for might be the only thing that saves us.

A reluctant fated mate bond. A warrior with no past. A fiery engineer who refuses to surrender. Guardian's Legacy is a high-stakes, action-packed alien romance featuring a protective, possessive hero, a defiant heroine who refuses to be tamed, and a slow-burn tension that explodes into passionate, heart-pounding desire. If you love brooding aliens, thrilling adventures, and fated mates who fight their destiny every step of the way, this book is for you!

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ALICE

The day the Cryons came, the sky over New York City bled orange. I watched from my hotel window, listening to the TV news announcers' voices, caught in utter disbelief. This had to be a dream, right? This couldn't possibly be happening in real life. An elaborate hoax, maybe?

It didn't seem real until I caught sight of a group of F-20s racing through the sky in pursuit of a large spaceship spitting out a seemingly endless stream of smaller alien ships.

"Get them!" I cheered the jets on, but one by one, each was shot down, crashing into the buildings of one of the largest cities on Earth, creating towering infernos of orange flames shooting straight to the horizon. One crashed into a highrise only a few blocks from my hotel. The explosion was so great that it shook the floor under my feet, rattling my teeth.

I had no idea why I was spared. The jet could have just as easily crashed into the hotel. But it didn't. And neither did any of the hundreds of others that followed. Divine intervention? Fate?

At the time, I didn't care. I spent the next few days in the same hotel in a numb, frozen state, watching the fires die out under steady rain. Another heavenly intervention? I didn't think so. Why would any God extinguish the fires but allow them to happen in the first place? Thousands of people must have died within the first few days, probably hundreds of thousands, if not millions. It was a mind-boggling number. The phrase, a single death is a tragedy, a million deaths are a statistic, ran

through my mind on repeat, but I had a hard time viewing millions of deaths as a statistic. Not while I was in the midst of it.

I was better off than many people. I had no loved ones to worry about, a fact I suppose I should've been thankful for. Still, the death toll was abstract and mind-numbing enough without even taking into account the alien invasion.

Aliens. I saw images of them on TV—while it was still working, which wasn't long at all, not even a day. They didn't look all that scary; they were tall and lean, hairless, with gray skin and large black eyes. Their bodies were covered by white-silver uniforms, and their blasters could kill or stun, depending on how they used them. That was all the information I was able to glean before the power cut out, taking the Wi-Fi with it. I still had some data reception on my phone and iPad, but it was slow, and both died after a few hours, like the rest of the electronics that couldn't get charged.

From the last reports, I found out that the aliens were using drones to locate humans. The ones they discovered were either taken prisoner or killed. As far as I could tell with the limited data, though, they slaughtered indiscriminately. The aliens were just as likely to shoot a twenty-year-old woman and capture an eighty-year-old man as they were to do the opposite, which was almost more frightening than if they were just collecting one specific sort or kind. It showed how indifferent they were about us. How interchangeable we were to them—even in a herd of cattle, cowboys would pick a certain type.

After two days of hiding in my hotel room and living off the expensive snacks in the fridge, the water backing up in the bathroom made me realize I needed to leave.

The question was: leave to where? I was in New York City, thousands of miles from my home in Las Vegas—and what a blessing that was, as I had no desire to figure out how to live in the desert without air conditioning—a strange city currently being

invaded by aliens!

I couldn't stay, though, because not only was the sewer coming up through the pipes stinking to high heaven, but I wasn't about to start peeing into a corner of the room either. I was also down to one water bottle, a Snickers bar, and a bag of nuts. My laptop was as useless as my phone, but I had a few tools on me that I had brought to the conference to show off as my latest invention. I packed those things, as well as semi-clean socks, underwear, and a change of clothing, and made my way out of the room and into the dark hallway. The darkness I hadn't anticipated. Honestly, I hadn't anticipated a lot because my mind was still overwhelmed by the fact that aliens—aliens!—were invading Earth.

A neon green exit sign gave off enough illumination to get me to the staircase, and inside the stairwell, a few emergency lights were still working, so I didn't break my neck as I made my way down.

The moment I opened the exit door to the outside, my senses were assaulted with the smell of burned rubber and flesh, death, decay, and the sound of screams and sirens. I couldn't get past the sight of torched cars, people, and wrecked buildings. I tasted all of this on my tongue and wanted to gag. I was so overstimulated that, at first, the sight of three aliens stepping in front of me didn't even register. But the pain did—pain from their blaster shot brought me to my knees.

* * *

I woke with my arms tied behind my back and my face pressed against cold metal. The first thing I became conscious of was the throbbing pain in my head and the way my tongue stuck to the roof of my mouth.

A small cry to my right caught my attention, and I turned my head. I wasn't alone. There were others here with me, all bound, some conscious and hunkered on their

knees, others lying on the ground like me.

A hard slap to my head was enough incentive for me to force myself to my knees and take in my surroundings. The strange walls, the aliens . My breath stuck in my throat. I was on my way to becoming a statistic . I was on an alien ship, being kidnapped by aliens . I began to hyperventilate; this couldn't be happening. Not to me. This just couldn't be real. It just couldn't.

I read somewhere that denial is the best defense, and for the following weeks—months?—that's what I did. I retreated deep into myself. I denied the reality of having a translator inserted into my brain, denied that I was being kept like an animal. Like cattle, we were fed and watered, hosed off, and herded from one spot in the universe to another. I'm not sure how long my fugue lasted or when awareness of my fellow prisoners penetrated my mind—when their misery became as real to me as mine.

But it happened. I was still alive and breathing, and as long as that remained true, I had to believe there was hope. Maybe not hope to ever return to Earth, but hope to one day not have my arms bound behind my back. Hope that one day, I would be back in charge of my own destiny.

I had been strong enough to escape the destiny fate had predetermined for me once, and I would do so again. I hadn't turned into a drug addict like the rest of my family, although statistically, I should have. I beat the odds, and I would do so again.

I just had to bide my time, be careful, keep my eyes open, and wait for the right moment. Most of all, I needed to stay alive.

I watched when the Cryons came and took some of us from the cells we were kept in. Mostly, they picked people at random, just like they had when abducting us, but now and then, they came just for women. Never just for men.

"Here, let me stuff this into your shirt," Ava, my designated relief partner, sidled up next to me. For the past I don't know how many days, Ava and I had been helping each other with the logistics of using the bathroom—a hole in the ground for our waste. It was hard to balance and aim when your arms were bound behind your back, and you had to get your pants down somehow.

She handed me a small bundle. Quizzically, I looked at her, and she pointed at her protruding stomach. Ava was heavily pregnant—she had been seven months along when she was taken, but like the rest of us, she'd lost track of time. It had been her sobs that ripped me from my stupor. They were so heart-wrenching, I'd moved over, closer to her. I'm not the nurturing type, but her pain was so raw that I couldn't help but feel for her. It might have been guilt that I was the only one here not mourning the loss of a loved one; whatever it was, I sidled up to her. Instantly, she scooted closer. We couldn't hug, but pushing our torsos against each other did awaken some humanity inside me and seemed to help her with her grief.

Ava had lost her entire family, and the only thing keeping her alive was the baby growing in her stomach, even though she wasn't sure why she bothered.

"He will be a prisoner just like me," she sniffed.

I had already decided to find a way out, but taking on the responsibility for another person or two was just the motivator I needed. In that moment, I vowed, "I'll get us out of here, Ava, I promise."

She was desperate enough to believe me.

Now, I turned so Ava could stuff the bundle under my shirt. "Why?" I wanted to know.

"Because they haven't taken me or the other pregnant ladies," Ava pointed out.

Across from us, in a different cell, three Cryons were herding several women out before they turned to our cell.

Fear spread inside me. I didn't need to be a rocket scientist to have a pretty good idea of what happened to the women when the Cryons came for them alone. I had considered that maybe it would be a good opportunity to escape, but in the end, I had chickened every time and hid in the back.

Ava was right, too. The Cryons didn't pick her or me. Not that day. But not much later, they took all of us from the cell and herded us through seemingly endless corridors.

I froze when we passed a window and probably would have stood there until a Cryon prodded me forward had Ava not nudged me on. But the sight of a deep, red planet—not Mars, I was sure of it—surrounded by two moons and stars was surreal enough to bring the message home: I wasn't in Kansas or on Earth anymore.

A shuttle took us down, all five hundred and eighty-three people—I counted because even statistics matter. They took us to the most despairing planet in the universe one could imagine. It was a place straight out of a nightmare. Tall, red mountains surrounded a pitiful, dirty camp filled with alien beings that made the movie District 9 look like a Disney production.

We were herded into one of the barracks, past aliens who regarded us with the hungry eyes of predators. Our arms were unbound, and each of us received a metallic collar around our neck that we were told would explode if we wandered away from the camp. The others were crying, including Ava, but my heart filled with hope. Not only was I unbound, I finally had something I could work with—if I could ever move my arms again. The pain in them was more excruciating than anything I had ever experienced. Quite a few of my fellow prisoners fell into hysterics, only to be hit with an electro-prod and thrown to the ground.

It was eerily disquieting to see my arms, hands, and fingers, but to be unable to move them in any way. My brain screamed at my fingers to bend, but they didn't budge. Had it not been for the pain raging through me, I would have thought they weren't even attached to me any longer.

Several Cryons moved some kind of metallic short stick over our arms, instantly relieving the pain. Then, without further mercy, the Cryons moved us toward a looming crater in the center of the camp. Metallic ladders led down so deep that there was no end in sight, only darkness. Creatures, the likes of which I didn't have the words to describe, moved up and down those ladders, carrying large containers on their backs.

"This is some kind of mine," one of the men, Tom, observed.

We lined up, and the most backbreaking day in my life began. Down the ladder with the empty container strapped to my back. Fill it with rocks that others working down below pried from the mountains. Climb the ladder under the weight of the load. Empty and repeat. For hours. I lost track of Ava for the rest of the day and only saw her again when we broke for dinner, where we were served the same kind of slop the Cryons had filled the troughs in our cells with.

There were no tables or chairs inside the makeshift mess hall—just a line of workers snaking their way up to a humongous square cauldron. Bowls were stacked right on the dirt. Aliens, also wearing collars, filled the bowls and handed them out.

I held Ava back when I noticed some of the alien prisoners fighting with each other over the bowls of food they had received. A snarling one exposed fangs and claws, and the other, a spiked tail. Blue and green blood sprayed the bystanders who got too close and ruined what little appetite I might have had. Not that appetite mattered. We needed to eat. Ava even more than me.

"What do we do?" she asked.

An especially menacing-looking brute with green skin and four eyes walked up to a human man who had rushed forward to get a bowl of slop. The creature was much taller and more massive than the human. The human didn't offer any resistance when the creature ripped the bowl out of his hands. Still, the alien pushed against the man's face, pushing him back hard enough to break his neck.

"Oh my God," Ava turned into me and clung to my neck. "Oh my God," she repeated.

That wasn't an isolated incident. Out of the five hundred and eighty-three humans who shared the shuttle with us down to this hellhole, only two hundred and twenty were left alive the next morning, and I knew that, for Ava and me, time was running out.

"There is nowhere to go here," Ava cried when I told her she needed to be ready for our departure today.

"Whatever is out there can't be worse than what's in here," I pointed out. "At least out there, we'd have a chance."

Her expression mirrored my own skepticism. I was talking out of my ass, and we both knew it. Just like we both knew that I was right. We hadn't eaten last night or this morning, and unless we were willing to risk death just to get a swallow of the slop, I didn't see that we would anytime soon.

"But how? What will you do? And what about these things?" Ava pointed at the collars around our necks.

"I'll create a distraction—a big one," I said in the most confident voice I could muster. I spent the day yesterday observing. There were plenty of tools all around us.

The Cryons didn't seem worried about us using them as weapons, and why would they be? They had blasters, and they didn't care about us prisoners. Besides, most prisoners already had plenty of weapons—horns, scales, tails, claws, and God knows what else.

I had also noticed a path—a path leading up to one of the mountains—and a small fissure in the rock through which I could see the other side. Not that I could make out much of what lay there, but desperate times and all that.

I made sure Ava stayed with me during the day. All I needed was a distraction. Long enough for us to make it unnoticed up that pass and into that fissure. All the while praying our damn collars wouldn't go off and kill us. But by my estimation, we climbed over three miles down the ladder into the crater, so it stood to reason that we had three miles out of this valley of death before our heads exploded.

A distraction and time were needed. I already had a tool. One I snatched up yesterday. It looked like a screwdriver, but its head changed circumference and shape. If anything could get the collars open, this was it. Are you willing to bet your and Ava's lives on it, little girl ? I threw an uncertain glance at Ava's swollen belly and thought of the baby inside. Did I know if I could pick the lock without blowing us to smithereens? No! Did I know if we would find food and water on the other side? No! Did I have any idea what lay on the other side—possibly predators with acid for blood or terrain that wanted to eat us alive? Absolutely not! What I knew with absolute certainty, though, was that if we stayed here, we would die—all three of us. Maybe not tonight, perhaps not tomorrow, but we would. I didn't have the right to make that decision for Ava. I knew I was pushing the boundaries of the trust she had developed for me, but she knew as well as I did what our choices were. And she was following me.

A scuffle broke out by the edge of the crater. One of the prisoners—an alien with glistening black skin and six twisted limbs—lashed out, tearing into another with a

guttural shriek. The second one collapsed, spraying a thick, oily fluid across the crater floor. It hissed where it hit the dirt, steaming like engine grease on a hotplate.

My breath caught.

That stuff—could it be flammable? Was it greasy enough to conduct heat? My brain fired through possibilities as the guards shouted, distracted. I scanned the crater. There! Half-buried in the dust was a jagged piece of metal stuck up like a broken rib. With the screwdriver I liberated yesterday, this just might work. I didn't have time to plan or second-guess. Sometimes, you have to grab the opportunity when you see it and act. I moved.

"Alice, what are you doing?" Ava shouted after me, but I didn't pay her any attention.

I rushed to the lip of the crater, heart pounding so hard I thought the collar might go off from the vibration alone. I jammed the screwdriver between the stone and the metal edge, just like I'd lit campfires with flint in the Catskills.

Nobody was paying any attention to me as more scuffling broke out around me. Probably friends of the dead alien.

I dipped the screwdriver's tip into the dark pool of alien blood, praying it was conductive. If this had been Earth, I'd expect grease to catch fire. To conduct heat. Maybe spark just enough to blow a fuel line if you were stupid or desperate. I was both.

"Please," I whispered. "Please let alien grease act like Earth grease. Please let alien physics work like Earth physics."

I struck the screwdriver against the metal. Once. Twice. And then: Spark.

The blood sizzled. The collar on the injured alien's neck started blinking red. Faster. Shriller. My stomach dropped. It was working! With no time to waste, I turned and ran, grabbing Ava. I had no idea how big of an explosion there would be, or if there would even be one, but I wasn't about to be caught in the middle.

Behind me, the collar detonated. The blast rocked the crater, tossing debris and body parts into the air. It was a lot less than I had anticipated, but smoke followed. Screams. Cryons, shouting orders, came running from all sides. A security siren shrieked through the compound. The chaos was perfect.

"That's it, let's go!" I shouted at Ava, but she was rooted to the ground, staring wide-eyed straight ahead.

While I was busy creating the little detonation, another spaceship had landed. The chaos was so complete that the Cryons hadn't even noticed it or the silver-skinned alien disembarking from it.

Part of my brain screamed at me to run, to go, go, go! But something stopped me. I had no idea who this new alien was, friend or foe. No idea at all, and yet, just like Ava, I stood rooted to the spot, unable to move as the fine hairs on the back of my neck stood up. As impossible as it sounded, the stranger seemed familiar to me. Not only that, but without any reason to think so, I knew, with absolute certainty and without a shadow of a doubt, that he was here to rescue me. Us.

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XYREK

A sudden explosion distracted the Cryons long enough for me to disembark my ship on this gods-forsaken mining planet at the edge of the universe. Here, the Cryons mined ore with slaves collected from all corners of all known galaxies. Only the most brutal and ruthless survived. I had been to planets like this thrice before. Once to free a Hettita who had been abducted from a family wealthy enough to hire a Space Guardian, and twice to find a criminal. Although, in regards to the criminals, I didn't understand why my bosses, the Ohrurs, bothered with it. To me, being on a planet like this was punishment enough. Most of the surviving slaves here were Pronex; their ruthless nature guaranteed their survival, at least longer than the average slave. There always was one younger, stronger, and more cunning to take out the other species of longer-surviving forced laborers. I did see others, though, a few Pandraxians, Melvars, and even some Khatars. Khatars weren't very smart, but they were highly sought-after fighters. Their clubbed tails were deadly, and they didn't have the sense to stop when they went into a rage, no matter the foreseeable consequences. Some believed they were like dimwitted animals, fearless in the face of death because they didn't understand the outcome of losing.

The only explanation I could come up with for why the Cryons had brought humans here was that they were using them as a distraction, stopping the stronger ones from killing each other for the time being. This made a twisted sort of sense if all you cared about was the bottom line.

None of this mattered to me, just as it didn't matter what the explosion was or who created it. My bottom line was that it brought all the Cryons running, making my job of dispatching them much easier. By the time they realized I was in their midst,

killing them indiscriminately, it was almost over.

The Pronex were already banding together to attack me. I kept them back by shooting a few, but it wouldn't be long before the lure of taking my ship and getting out of here became too tantalizing to be held back by fear of me or my blasters. "Humans! I came to rescue you. Get on my ship if you want to live. Now!" I yelled, keeping my blasters trained on the Pronex and a few of the other more aggressive slaves.

I fired a few more rounds at the more daring slaves until I was sure all the humans had followed my invitation, then I backed up on the ramp while more Pronex advanced. Through my comm, I ordered the ship to disperse a blast from one of the pulse cannons to throw the Pronex back long enough for me to enter the cargo hold and close the hatch.

Countless human eyes stared at me, the reddish blinks of their collars reflected in their gaze, and I sighed to myself because I would have to take them all off and toss them out before we could take off.

"Thank you. Thank you, whoever you are," a human male approached me. "I'm Tom, the leader of this group."

I observed the humans—filthy, exhausted, bruised, and clinging to one another. They stared at me with a mix of hope and fear. I huffed. I wasn't a talkative person at the best of times, and this? This didn't even come close to qualifying as a not best time. Hundreds of humans stared at me like I had answers. Like I was a damn welcome committee for intergalactic trauma. But I had to say something, didn't I?

I got the tool out to deactivate and take off their collars while giving what I hoped was a heartwarming speech: "I am a Space Guardian. My name is Xyrek, and you are now under my protection. I am taking you to a planet called Astrionis, where Lord Protector Garth and Lady Silla are establishing a human colony. It will be safe, and

you will have everything you need. There, you can build your new lives.”

They still stared at me, waiting. I had no idea what for. I added, “Until then, you'll follow my orders. You won't interfere with operations. You will not touch what is not yours. You will speak only when addressed, and you will obey immediately. Your cooperation is mandatory. Noncompliance will not be tolerated.”

I paused. The silence stretched. One woman sobbed into her hands. A man blinked at me as if I'd just declared myself a god. I took another deep breath to say something else, but since I didn't know what, I closed my mouth and began taking collars off. I noticed a woman watching me with interest and waved her over. "Here, this is how it's done." I took hers off, then showed her how to do it on another human. "Good. Take them all off and toss them in there," I showed her the incinerator.

Something in her green eyes intrigued me, but the urge to get out of the cargo hold and rush to the bridge was stronger. It wasn't until I reached my destination that I took a deep breath. I was convinced this would be one of my only places of refuge over the next few weeks.

* * *

It turned out I was right. With my cargo bay filled with over two hundred humans, I only had the bridge and my quarters to myself. Inevitably, whenever I walked from one room to the other, I ran into them. They were always there. Everywhere. A constant coming and going, giving me a headache before the doors even opened. Several GTU days had passed, and it wasn't getting any better.

I contemplated sleeping on the bridge tonight—it wouldn't have been the first time since I burdened myself with these refugees. Well, technically, I didn't burden myself with them. My minder, Possedion, did that for me. As a Space Guardian, I went where the Ohrurs told me to go and did what the Ohrurs told me to do. For years, I

had been happy to do their bidding. My job had fulfilled me. I got to hunt down the scum of the universe and terminate it. My ability to read other people's auras allowed me to catch a glimpse of my prey's true evilness. Ridding the universe of them was more of a gift to me than a job.

But lately, I was beginning to question it. Not the job so much, as it was still fulfilling, but my part in the universe. My life. My work for the Ohrurs. It started innocently enough. I had woken up bathed in sweat from the most terrifying but beautiful dream I had ever had. I was out of breath, and my head was pounding as if I had run for days without water. The dream returned a few months later and soon became more frequent. Now, it came every night.

In the dream, I was running through a forest so beautiful and familiar that it unlocked a yearning in me that didn't let go even when I was awake. The longing became so strong that I caught myself dreaming about it during the day.

With the ache, a plan began to take shape in my head. Twenty-five years ago, I went to work for the Ohrurs. I figured five more, and I could probably cash in on the credits the Ohrurs had been putting away for me all these years. I would be well set to go and do as I pleased. Thanks to my dreams, I had an idea of where I wanted to go; I just had to find that place.

A few months ago, I began to search the databases for suitable planets. The list of candidates was growing, but none of the places looked like the one from my dreams. Over time, my restlessness to find that place had grown into a desire I found harder to fight with every passing day. The place from my dreams called to me like a mother to a long-lost son.

That wasn't all of it, though. More than the dream tortured me. Questions I couldn't answer. Like that analogy, like a mother to a long-lost son. Mother? Son? I must have had a mother, but I'd never thought about it before. Once I did, an avalanche of

uncertainty enveloped me. Who was my mother? My father? Where the frygg did I come from? I didn't remember anything of my life other than the past twenty-five years. That was impossible, though. I couldn't have just woken up one day at the age of twenty—or however old I had been—and decided to start working for the Ohrurs. I knew my abilities; I had to have learned them somewhere.

All I had was a foggy memory of a training facility and other males who looked like me, but I didn't know any of their names or how long I had been there. It was mind scrambling. So much so that whenever my brain searched for answers, my head began to hurt. The more I dug, the greater the pain.

I didn't know what exactly made me do this, but a year ago, at one of the space stations, I bought a new comm, one the Ohrur didn't know about. One that I connected to all available networks except the Ohrur's. I even entered a fake name. I used this device to find out more about Space Guardians, but there wasn't much to find other than that we had been working for the Ohrurs for millennia and were an elite force used to rid the universe of its scum. There was no mention of our species or where we came from. That had set me even more on edge.

I was scrolling through more nonsense on my secret comm—I don't know why, but I started watching a stupid holocaust from a holostreamer named Nock who was arguing with one of my fellow Space Guardians about some massacre at a market—when my regular comm announced an incoming call from an Ohrur—Moddekum, an unfamiliar name.

I accepted the call, and Moddekum's form materialized on the bridge with me.

"Space Guardian Xyrek Draalor. I am Moddekum, your new minder."

I frowned. It wasn't unusual to be assigned a new minder, but it normally didn't happen twice in the span of a few months. Not too long ago, my normal minder had

been replaced by Possession, the Ohrur in charge of the Space Guardians assigned to rescuing humans.

"What happened to Possession?" I asked. It was not something I did under normal circumstances; my job was to follow orders, not to question them, but things were changing; I was changing.

"Never mind that. I'm here to give you your new orders."

Frowning, I gestured for him to continue. "As you know, three other Space Guardians were assigned to the human rescue mission alongside you." He didn't pause for my response before pressing on. "All three have betrayed us. They must be captured and brought to justice on Ohrur. From this moment on, your orders and those of every other Space Guardian are clear: bring them in, dead or alive."

A foreboding feeling turned my stomach into a knot. Three Space Guardians had turned traitors? One was unheard of, but three? All my instincts fired a red alert through me. Something wasn't right.

"What about the humans I have aboard? Do I still take them to Astrionis?" I asked to give myself time to digest Moddekum's words.

"You have humans on board?" He looked instantly alert.

"Over two hundred," I filled him in. Possession knew that, so shouldn't he?

"Show me your arms," he demanded, confusing me more.

"What?"

"Show me your arms." His voice had a hard edge to it.

Bewildered, I did as he asked, rolling up my sleeves.

"Good, good." I had no idea why he looked so relieved. His hands busied themselves in the air. He must have pulled up cubes on his comm. "Hold on..." he browsed through what to me looked like thin air before he decided, "Take them to Morrakbarr; I will have a contact meet you there to relieve you of your burdensome cargo. From there, you will find those traitors."

"Morrakbarr?" My frown deepened. Morrakbarr was a trading planet specializing in the highly illegal trade of slaves. I had been there before to terminate one of the most notorious pirates. Moddek dum wanted me to leave the humans there?

"What will happen to them?"

"That is none of your concern; your only concern now is finding these traitors. Their information is being sent to your comm as we speak. There will—" A loud boom made him turn. "You have your orders," he barked before he discontinued.

I hadn't been able to see what caused the loud sound, but it had sounded like an explosion. It wasn't my place to try and comm him back, but my instincts were to do just that. I was a protector. But Moddek dum was my minder, and my job was to follow his orders. If he needed help, he would contact me.

The new orders didn't sit well with me. The ship's course was set to Astrionis, and right now, we were actually closer to Lord Protector Garth's planet than to Morrakbarr. It would be more efficient to go there.

Daryus, the Emperor of the Pandraxians, had contracted the Ohrurs to rescue humans, and they were paying the Ohrurs handsomely for that. So why in the seven suns would Moddek dum tell me to go out of my way to take the humans somewhere else?

Did the other Space Guardians' defection have anything to do with the Pandraxian Empire? Curiosity nagged at me as much as my natural urge to investigate, dig deeper, and find out what was happening. Orders were orders, though. Apprehensively, I changed the ship's course to Morrakbarr. It wasn't that I was fond of my cargo or anything like that. Not even close, they were a pain in the ass, but I had taken on responsibility for them, and I would see it through. The idea that I was taking them somewhere other than where I had promised didn't sit well with me either. I told them I was taking them to a safe place, and now my new minder was making a liar out of me. Morrakbarr was anything but safe.

I was so deep in thought that I left the bridge without remembering my cargo, but I was reminded of their presence the moment I stepped into the hallway, where a group of twenty-five lingered. Some were waiting for their turn in one of the three available bathrooms; the others were just talking, as usual. They were a chipper bunch. Their mouths never stood still.

"I really need to go, Xyrek. Can I please use your bathroom?" A female named Josie begged. There were so many of them, I had no idea why I remembered her name out of everyone.

"Absolutely not," I pushed by her.

"Please, Xyrek?" she clambered after me. The distance to my quarters had never felt that great before. It was only a few paces, but, worried she might simply push inside with me, I detoured toward the breakroom, where a larger group of people was congregating.

A low bang, smoke, and the distinct smell of melting metal turned my attention to the corner where the nutrition dispensers stood. Coughing, a small female emerged from underneath the machine. Large green eyes blinked against the smoke, and a black streak of soot ran down the right side of her face. She looked utterly perplexed. Blond

hair had escaped a high ponytail and framed her heart-shaped face with unruly curls.

"Oh my God, Alice, what the hell?" Josie exclaimed next to me.

"What the frygg are you doing to my ship?" I demanded, taking large steps to stand in front of her. She wiped her teary eyes—the smoke must have gotten to her—and more black smudges appeared, making her look almost adorable.

Unfortunately for her, I was in no mood for adorable right now; I needed to see what she had done to my ship. I pushed her small frame out of the way. Going down, I stared at the opening underneath the food dispenser. Under no circumstances would I fit in there. Using my comm, I called a repair drone. So far, no alarms had gone off, so that was a good sign.

"You're going to blow us all up," a man, Tom, if I remembered correctly, snarled, getting into the female's space and waving a fist in front of her.

Instantly, I was on my feet, grabbing his fist and pushing him back. "This is not your concern."

"If she blows up the ship with me on it, it is," the man insisted. His face was turning red. I had no idea humans could do that.

He wasn't wrong; I had just thought the exact same thing, but strangely, it raised my ire coming from him. I tried to explain it by thinking it was because I didn't like seeing a female threatened, but it was more than that. My stomach, which had been in knots since I talked to Moddek dum, was on fire now, burning all those knots to ashes as illogical anger wiped away all rationality.

His hand reached around me, taking hold of the female's arm, and I lost it. One hard punch of my fist against his chin was all it took. He let go of her and tumbled to the

ground.

"Oh my God, you killed him," another female cried and rushed forward.

"You," I turned on the female who had caused all this ruckus, "What the frygg were you doing?"

She was so short that she had to crane her neck to look at me. Her green eyes were large, slightly tilted, and mesmerizing. They were as green as one of the lakes I had seen in my dreams. I tried to refocus my anger toward her, but it didn't seem to work. All I could do was stare at her.

"I was only trying to see if that machine could produce something else besides unappetizing slime." She defended what she had done.

It took me a moment to make her words make sense in my brain. Mesmerized, I watched her lips move. Full, red lips, lips that did things to my cock they shouldn't. It took a moment for her words to penetrate my mind, because my blood was busy with my cock.

"Unappetizing slime?" I heard myself retort. I wondered why the hell I picked those words when I should have been yelling that she should be grateful to have something to eat. I should have asked her what the Cryons fed her. But none of those words left my mouth.

She crossed her arms over her chest, shifted her weight to her left leg, and doubled down, "Unappetizing slime."

Slowly, I became aware of the growing audience watching us and the hostile glances thrown toward the female. An irrational urge to talk to her alone overcame me. She was such a small little thing.

"Come," I turned, expecting her to follow me.

I was already by the entrance when I realized she was still standing where I had left her. With a huff, I went back, picked her up, and carried her under my arm like a bag of produce.

"Let me down," she squealed. "Right now." She squirmed, but she weighed hardly anything. With my arm firmly around her tiny waist, I carried her to my quarters.

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ALICE

Out of five hundred and eighty-three initial abductees, there were now two hundred and sixty-nine of us left. Of which two hundred and sixty-seven didn't seem to like me at all—Ava was still my one and only friend, which was fine with me. I liked being on the outer fringes much better than smack center like Josie or Tom, neither of whom ever missed a beat to put themselves into the limelight.

I was much happier in the role of a supporting character than being the heroine of a movie or book—all the bad stuff always happened to them. No, thank you. Whenever possible, I stayed in the background. The one and only interaction I had had with the big, hulking, silver alien so far had been enough for me to keep back whenever he was around. I would have done so during that first interaction as well, but the engineer in me wouldn't stay back while Xyrek was working on taking our collars off. Thankfully, he hadn't shown any interest in me that day or the days following—during which time I was more successful in blending into the shadows. But now, the big alien was carrying me down the hall, walking by my fellow passengers, who stared at me in bemusement, some concerned, some with glee. So far, he was nothing to me but an abstract—an alien who rescued us from the Cryons. I was grateful to him for it and for his promise to take us to a planet called Astrionis, where another alien, Lord Protector Garth, and his human wife, Silla, were building some kind of refugee camp for humans. But a small part of me was very much aware that when Xyrek appeared like an avenging angel on that awful planet and killed our captors, he was like one of those superheroes I'd always fantasized about—he even wore a cape! His silvery skin had looked otherworldly on the barren, red planet. At over six feet tall and impressively muscled, he towered over all of us; he truly was a damsel in distress's knight in shining armor.

His closeness to me was more than uncomfortable when he taught me how to use the tool on the collars; it was too unsettling for my peace of mind, which was why I did everything to avoid another run-in.

For the past week of our journey, I hadn't had any interaction with him. Every now and then, he appeared in the breakroom, or I caught a glimpse of him when he walked down the hall. That was it. I had no reason to approach him, and I wasn't like some of the other women who threw themselves at him, competing for his attention. As far as I was concerned, a low profile was the way to go. I was short enough at five one that most people overlooked me, and that was just fine by me.

But now I was hanging underneath his arm and being carried to his private quarters, and I had no one to blame but myself. Obviously, keeping a low profile was hard when you caused a minor meltdown. Oops.

Any regret I might have felt for my snafu disintegrated on the spot when he told me to follow him. It was rapidly replaced by indignity and then by anger as he pulled me under his arm like a ragdoll—or worse, like I had seen some people carry their dogs.

He put me back on my feet the moment the door closed behind us.

"What the hell?" I fumed, marching to the door and expecting it to open for me like it had for him. It didn't. I whirled around. "What do you want?"

He looked as surprised by what he had done as I was, but he recovered first. "Why were you trying to blow up my ship?"

"I wasn't trying to blow up your ship," I sighed. "I was simply trying to understand how that food dispenser works and see if it could produce more appetizing food." He didn't look like he believed me, so I added, "Look, one of the women is pregnant, and the food is making her sick. I just wanted to fix the damn machine."

That was the truth, as far as it went. All Ava had left was the baby growing inside her. It was all she had to live for. The unappetizing mush Xyrek served aboard his ship made her sick and caused her to throw up even more, so I tried to upgrade the damn machine to spitting something out that actually looked edible. I know that sounds incredibly noble, but that wasn't the only reason. My ingrained curiosity about how things worked had gotten the better of me. I was well aware that in order to carve some kind of life out for myself on Astrionis or in this universe, I needed to familiarize myself with the alien tech, and this seemed a perfect place to start.

"She will have to wait for a few more days. Once we reach Astrio—" he interrupted himself. He looked almost stricken.

"What?" I demanded.

"We had a change of plans; instead of Astrionis, I will be taking you to Morrakbarr."

"Why, and what is Morrakbarr?" I narrowed my eyes. He didn't look happy about his new orders, which raised a silent alarm inside me.

"Never mind that. You still have some explaining to do."

"I just told you." My hackles rose.

"That you were trying to fix the nutrition dispenser, yes. I'd still like to know why you thought you could."

"Oh, I'm sorry, does a woman trying to fix things not fit into your world?" I fumed. I had gotten a lot of shit from many people—men and women—over the years. Apparently, a woman engineer didn't fit into our so accepting world. You're a what ? people would ask at parties, dinners, and even conferences for engineers. Most of my peers were happy because I was someone they could hit on when their nerdiness kept

most of the female population away. Think Big Bang Theory ... Comics and ComiCon were only the tip of the iceberg. No self-respecting woman wanted to stay home on the weekends to play video games or theorize about a nuclear chip that might make cars drive without gas. Yet even they couldn't hide their smugness over small female brains. So yeah, I was a bit sensitive when anybody tried to allude that I was incapable of fixing a motor or computer simply because I was a woman.

"Of course not," Xyrek denied my accusation. "Females are good at a lot of things. I meant what made you, as a human, think you could fix our technology."

Well, those words weren't much better. They were just as insulting. "So you think my small human mind can't grasp your alien technology?"

"Yes," he simply answered, his eyes challenging me to contradict him—his black, unsettling eyes. I hadn't seen them this close before; I mean, I had noticed that his eyes were black, like all of them, like there was no white sclera or iris of a different color—there was only black. I just hadn't anticipated how unsettling having those eyes fixed on me would be.

His words, however, didn't sit well with me; they churned my already irritated stomach. "Well, I'll have you know then that it wasn't my fault that the nutrition dispenser short-circuited," I shot back, crossing my arms. "I was working with subpar alien tech that looked like it was designed by a drunk octopus with a soldering iron. Seriously, who thought it was a good idea to run high-voltage circuits next to a fluid injector? That's just asking for a meltdown. If anything, you should be thanking me for saving your entire kitchen from turning into a smoking crater."

I jabbed a finger at him. "And for the record, human engineers do know how to fix things—when the tech isn't held together with what looks like wishful thinking and space duct tape."

His unsettling black eyes narrowed. “Our technology is superior. It has sustained my species for millinias.”

I scoffed. “Yeah? Well, my species figured out how to put wheels on luggage, and it only took us a few decades. So forgive me if I’m not impressed by a machine that explodes when someone tries to make food taste better.”

His jaw tightened. “It did not explode.”

“Oh, right. My mistake. It violently malfunctioned in a completely controlled and non-destructive manner.”

He exhaled sharply. “Do not ever touch anything on my ship.”

“Next time, build something that doesn’t fry itself when you press a button,” I retorted. "Are we done now? Can I go back to the others?"

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XYREK

I had no idea why I brought her into my quarters in the first place. No one had ever been in my quarters. If I had any lingering doubts about why I avoided company, the human female was doing an excellent job of reminding me.

She was exasperating. Irritating. And loud .

I waved a dismissive hand to shoo her away, barely lifting it before something caught my eye—black lines snaking across my skin. What the frygg?

"Ugh, what is that?" the female squealed, flailing her arm, where the same markings were appearing.

Annoyed, I stepped forward and grabbed her wrist, ignoring her gasp. The instant my fingers brushed the black lines, a jolt shot through me like an electric charge. My entire body hummed . The strange sensation urged me to pull her closer.

Instead, she ripped her arm away. "Don't touch me!" she snapped, but her expression betrayed uncertainty—she had felt something too.

The moment she broke contact, the overwhelming pull between us dulled. It didn't disappear, but at least I could think again.

"What the hell did you do to me?" she raged, her green eyes sparked with a mix of fury and... fear?

Ignoring her, I stalked to the wall cabinet and yanked out a healing wand. Whatever this was, I would fix it. I always fixed things. Except this time... I didn't.

The markings remained. I scowled and rolled up my sleeves, only to curse under my breath. Frygg.

Moddekdam's earlier demand echoed in my mind. Show me your arms. At the time, I'd dismissed it as another pointless order, but now it made sense— or at least, less non-sense . This had to be connected to the traitors I was supposed to hunt. Did they have the same markings? It wasn't much of a stretch. Why else would Moddekdam want proof? And if they did, did it mean the humans had infected us with something?

A sharp snap in front of my face yanked me from my thoughts. The female stood in front of me, face tight with frustration, her hand still hanging in the air from where she had snapped her fingers at me.

"Hey! Quit ignoring me!" she barked.

Before I was able to react, she grabbed my arm, twisting it to inspect the markings. The moment her fingers made contact, everything stilled .

At the same moment as a pulse surged through my body, her pupils widened and my cock turned to stone. Literally. It was as hard as it had ever been. It happened so quickly, it made me dizzy.

I glared at her after wrenching away. I wasn't opposed to taking a human to bed—their species was soft, tempting , and exotic in a way I could appreciate. But not while I was on duty. And definitely not her . There was something dangerous about her, something that warned me to keep my distance.

Like before, the pull faded as soon as I put space between us, but it didn't vanish.

"I don't know," I finally answered her earlier question, keeping my voice carefully indifferent. "But I'll find out."

"Well, you better make it quick because... oh shit," she gasped.

Before I could ask what she meant, she yanked up her shirt, exposing a distracting hip. It took me a moment before I noticed it because the sight of her flesh made my mouth water. But then I saw them, more black marks sneaking up her side.

"Oh shit, make it stop!" She panicked, hopping on the balls of her feet and swiping at the markings as if she could rub them away.

I sighed. Humans. They always had to overdramatize everything.

"Hey, easy," I said in a futile attempt to calm her.

"Easy?" She whirled on me, eyes blazing. "Easy, he says! There is no easy here, buster! Make. It. Stop!"

I rubbed the back of my neck, trying to summon the patience I didn't have. She was close to losing it. Frygg. The markings were unsettling, yes, but hardly cause for full-scale hysteria.

"Do you feel unwell?" I asked, listening to my own body. Aside from a mild headache, nothing felt different. The marks didn't even sting.

"Unwell? Unwell ? " she echoed, throwing her arms up. "Yes, I feel unwell! I have black marks appearing on my skin!"

I exhaled sharply. "Are you in pain ? Headache? Nausea?" I clarified, barely managing not to grind my teeth.

She stilled and tilted her head as she did a quick internal check. "No," she admitted reluctantly.

"Good." I nodded. "Let me do some research. I'll tell you if I find anything."

She folded her arms. "And in the meantime?"

"Nothing," I said. "Just let me know if you begin to feel unwell."

She didn't look convinced, but she nodded and headed for the door. Then she paused. "You better figure this out."

I said nothing and breathed a deep breath of relief when she walked through the door after I opened it via my comm. Outside, several humans were lingering, blatantly eavesdropping. My jaw ticked. Josie, one of the more irritating ones, stepped toward me, but I ordered the door shut before she could cross the threshold. Right into her face.

Frygg.

I ran a hand through my hair. None of this was a coincidence. Not the marks. Not the traitors. Not the human female. I considered reaching out to the other Space Guardians assigned to the human detail. But they were being hunted as traitors, so they wouldn't answer a comm from me unless I tracked them down first.

Which made me think... if the Ohrurs were monitoring my activity, they wouldn't think twice if I started searching for the traitors. That would buy me time to figure out what the frygg was happening.

I spent the rest of the day combing through data cubes, losing myself in the hunt until hunger finally drove me out of my quarters. The breakroom was dim—the ship's

night cycle was already activated—and thankfully, only a few humans remained.

"Xyrek," a voice called.

I ignored Tom, the self-proclaimed leader of the group I'd rescued, and made my way to the nutrition dispenser. Right after entering the required commands, I realized something was off. The food took longer than usual to come out, and when it did, it came in heaps—small, oddly shaped balls of different colors.

Tom made an annoyed sound. "You really need to stop Alice from tinkering with the ship. It's dangerous," he said, nodding toward my plate.

I should have been irritated. Instead, something like pride swelled in my chest. Interesting, was my first thought.

Followed by another, her name is Alice.

I repeated it in my mind, liking the way it sounded.

"Hmm," I murmured, scooping up one of the food balls. The consistency was thicker, but it wasn't unpleasant—just different—more bite than the usual nutrient mush.

Tom huffed. "She could blow the whole ship up."

I grabbed a cup of water and walked off without responding. Humans talked too much.

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ALICE

Let me do some research. I'll tell you if I find anything , he said. That was two days ago. Two! In the meantime, more marks appeared, slithering up and down my arm, side, hip, and thigh.

I wasn't a tattoo girl. I wasn't against it. I had just never wanted ink that would be permanent on my skin. Markings that would be there for the rest of my life. And look at me now. My entire left side was filled with swirls and lines that made absolutely no sense to me.

To stop myself from losing my mind, I took one of the cleaning drones apart to figure out how it worked and then put it back together—mostly; only three parts were left when I was done. Oops.

It still worked, though.

The hardest part was keeping the damn marks hidden from my fellow passengers. We were all crammed together like sardines in a can. There was no reprieve. Anywhere. The ship had seemed so large when it came to our rescue, but it had shrunk a little more with every passing day. The only place for solitude was in one of the three bathrooms, but it was hard trying to take advantage of it when there was always a line of people waiting for their turn.

After some altercations, Tom put a twenty-minute limit on the time spent inside. How he figured he could keep track of it, I didn't know. Nobody had a working watch. But it worked for the most part.

It wasn't only the lack of privacy, there was also a lack of clothing. Had I not been wearing a long-sleeved shirt when I was abducted, I would have been shit out of luck right now.

I lay on the cold, metallic floor like most of the others, with no pillow, no blanket, and nothing but the clothes on my back. At least your arms are no longer bound , my cheerful side piped up. Yay, me , I snarked right back.

My head rested on my arms, and I closed my eyes, trying really hard to ignore the press of over two hundred bodies around me. Someone snored, someone farted, someone was crying. Always noises now. After several weeks of it, I still wasn't used to it. Ever since I worked my way through college taking shifts in a garage, I had become extremely noise-sensitive, making it nearly impossible for me to get a full night's rest with all these people.

It wasn't just the noise, either. Anytime I managed to get comfortable, someone would step on my toe, hair, or hand and kick me in the kidney on their way to the bathroom. The days weren't much better. Most of us were tired and grumpy from our ordeals and restless nights. Even the lucky few who seemed unfazed by the crowded conditions couldn't escape the nightmares. The human mind is a fascinating thing, but it has an inherent flaw; it tries to work through your trauma at night, thereby increasing your overall anxiety.

With a sigh, I turned on my side, just to have Ava, who was lying next to me, take advantage of the few inches I had just vacated and scoot in. Great, now I was completely wedged in. A foot kicked me in the head from the person lying above me. I scooted down, only to kick whoever lay at my feet—resulting in a curse being sent my way—just another night on this damn ship.

It wasn't like I wasn't used to being crowded. I had six brothers and sisters, and we all lived in a tiny apartment. But even that hadn't been as crowded as this ship.

Thinking of that place made me think of my family, something I usually avoided. But once my mind drifted there, unpleasant memories took over. My parents were meth addicts, and so were my six siblings. Lying and thieving were second nature to them. I cut ties with them when I was fifteen. I slept at shelters, on benches, and sometimes, when I was lucky, at high school friends' houses. I made money by repairing anything and everything from cell phones to computers. I fixed motors, small machinery, bikes; you name it. Luck was on my side when I took an engineering class in high school and caught Mr. Morton's eye. He enrolled me in STEM classes and even got me into a private high school on a scholarship that focused on STEM. From there, it was a straight scholarship ride to Georgia Tech. Not far from campus, I found a part-time job at a local garage. That paycheck, plus what I earned from doing the odd repairs here and there, paid for what the scholarship didn't cover. I finished college and got my first job within a week at VegaTech Innovations in Vegas.

The company paid for my relocation, a house, a car, and a salary that exceeded all my dreams and expectations. Here I was, a twenty-two-year-old making over eighty grand a year without housing or car expenses, doing what I loved to do. I didn't think life could get any better, but in the back of my mind, I always feared something would happen to bring me back down. And it did. Not even two years later, the Cryons invaded.

At least I was safe now, albeit uncomfortably cramped. In the dim light, I carefully rolled up my sleeve, remembering all this had distracted me from the black lines, which I noticed were still growing. Two days later! Thankfully, they hadn't spread past the one side. My left side was all the canvas it seemed to need. Or so I hoped. I had no idea when they would stop or if they would spread.

Tomorrow. I promised myself once again, like I had last night, that tomorrow I would go talk to Xyrek if he still hadn't sought me out. I liked that plan; the only problem was that I didn't particularly look forward to talking to him again. I wasn't a coward by any means; I had never backed down from a challenge or verbal disagreement, but

Xyrek unnerved me on too many levels to make talking to him a pleasant undertaking, from the hero worship syndrome to him being a cold ass. I was simultaneously attracted to him and wanted to rip his head off whenever he opened his mouth. And with those damn marks spreading over our bodies now, it made the entire situation only worse. Like... like there was a connection of some kind.

Hah, a disease, more likely, my snarky side interjected.

Unfortunately, I was a logical person—that came with the trade—which was probably the reason I had been able to cut ties with my family more or less easily. Anyway, the logical part dictated that if these marks were indeed due to some alien disease, I wouldn't be the only human affected by it. There were over two hundred other people on this ship with me, and we all shared very close quarters. So why was I the only one getting those marks?

Maybe the others are hiding them, just like you. Hmm, good point. I would keep my eyes peeled in the morning.

Xyrek hadn't explained this whole morning/night thing in space to us yet. Only said that it was bedtime when the lights started dimming and get up time when they began to illuminate again. I didn't know much about space, but for sure, there wasn't a sun to tell us the time of day. Making it a logical conclusion that the ship dictated it.

With those thoughts, I finally drifted off into another night of interrupted sleep.

XYREK

Mating marks? What the frygg?

But that was the only logical explanation. Over the last four days, I had scrutinized every single human aboard my vessel, and none of them had shown markings like Alice and me. That ruled out disease—a theory supported by the healing wand's inability to make them disappear—and neither of us displayed any actual symptoms of sickness.

Yes, I had kept a close eye on Alice, making sure she didn't notice. Not because I cared. But because I needed to understand what was happening, and she was a part of it. If I also happened to be hyperaware of her scent, her voice, and the way she never shut the frygg up—well, that was purely incidental.

Two days ago, while watching her, one of the other human males had barged into her hard enough to knock her off balance. The violent urge to tear that male's head from his body had been so overwhelming, I'd had to force myself to walk away to keep from terminating him on the spot. As it was, the urge still burned hot inside me. She hadn't been hurt; I heard her cussing him out as I retreated to the bridge.

I had never felt violent urges like this toward someone innocent before. The ones I hunted were criminals—the worst of the worst. They were fugitives who had slipped through the cracks of the GTU: evading capture, hiding on planets so dangerous no GTU soldier dared show their face, or walking free thanks to some flaw in the judicial system. Most of the time, surviving loved ones of their victims—people with enough wealth or desperation to take justice into their own hands—hired the Ohrurs

to send hunters like me. Unless the bounty was substantial, we didn't get involved. The Ohrurs didn't work charity cases. But this? This was something different.

This rage was personal. It was tethered to Alice alone. A compulsion to protect her. To keep her in my sight. To find her when she was out of reach. It was unnatural. Unacceptable.

With a growl, I ran a hand through my hair—so different from the hair in my dreams. That damn dream. Again. Only this one had been different from the others. The same forest. The same clear pond where I always stopped. But this time, before I jumped in, I saw my reflection. And my hair... it had been long. When I ran my fingers through it, it felt right—natural, very different from the short cut I wore now.

I woke up with a pounding headache that hadn't fully left me since—as if I didn't have enough shit to deal with.

I needed distance from Alice. Needed to figure this out before I did something I would regret. And I wasn't about to deal with another round of female hysterics, which I was sure would come if I told her what my comm had already confirmed.

She was my mate. My fated mate.

The absurdity of it made me laugh. A mate had never been part of the plan—never something I wanted or needed. My retirement was within reach, and my future was already mapped out: find the planet from my dreams, settle down, and finally have peace. And nowhere in those plans was there room for a mate.

Of course, I enjoyed female companionship on occasion—preferably for less than a Galactic Standard Time—GST—hour or two. Most definitely not forever.

With a huff, I stomped down the gangway as the ship settled on Morrakbarr's

spaceport, weaving through the milling humans.

"Did we land?"

"Where are we?"

"What's going on?"

Questions pelted me from every direction.

"Stay!" I barked, glaring them all into silence.

"Is this Astrionis?"

I ignored them. I hadn't mentioned the change in destination, and I wasn't about to do so now. They would figure it out soon enough—and good riddance to them. I could hardly wait to have my ship to myself again. But I also had a decision to make. One I'd been avoiding for days. A decision that had everything to do with Alice. I ground my teeth. She was a problem, a complication—a disruption to my carefully controlled existence.

I needed to figure out what to do with her. Leave her here with the others, or take her with me? As irritating as the mating marks were, they were mating marks! That meant something, even to a cold-blooded Space Guardian like me who had never asked for this. I cursed my life. When and why had it become so damn complicated?

I watched a Pronex approaching me, his face twisted in something resembling a grin. I hated Pronex. They were ugly, violent, and unpredictable as a dying star.

"Space Guardian," he greeted, his voice all wrong—too jolly for his black-as-death aura. "I'm Khuf. Moddek dum informed me you have cargo for me."

Cargo . Not humans. Cargo! I bristled. It wasn't that I liked my charges. I didn't. But they were my charges . The moment I had rescued them, I had become responsible for them. For their lives. For their safety. I would be damned if I changed that now.

"How many do you have?" Khuf asked. He was so excited that he was all but rubbing his hands together.

I crossed my arms. "What are your plans for them?" Cursing myself all the while for my sense of responsibility for these humans. Which was in stark contrast to my employer's direct orders. Orders I normally followed without hesitation.

Khuf chuckled. "Oh, they'll fetch some good credits. Humans are in high demand. The Pandraxians pay handsomely for them. And the Mmuhr'Rhong?" He licked his teeth. "Developed a sweet tooth. The human thigh is a delicacy, you know."

He laughed, oblivious to how close death lingered. I forced myself to stay still. To listen instead of reacting right away. I didn't like where my thoughts wandered, but I had to know, "How long have you and Moddek dum done business?"

"Oh, years. The Ohrurs are nearly as good at trading as the Cryons. With them gone, the Ohrurs are thriving."

Why was he telling me this? And why did I care? Why did this new information sit so wrong with me? The Ohrurs were merchants. I had always known that. They bought and sold cargo. Cargo, not people . I hated that little voice inside me. As if I hadn't already been pondering questions about my employers, I didn't need this added information or the added complications.

"So you're going to sell them?" I jerked my chin toward the ship.

Khuf clapped a hand on my shoulder. "Moddek dum has already been paid."

My muscles coiled. Not yet . Wait and play it smart . "Can I see what else you have?"

Khuf's eyes gleamed. "Ah, of course! Looking for a warm body for the journey? Did you test the ones on your ship?"

My skin crawled. I balled my fist, fighting the urge to introduce it to his ugly mug. And I wouldn't stop there.

"Until recently, I was under orders for a rescue mission," I stated flatly.

"Pity. I'm telling you, those females..." he trailed off into deep laughter. Laugh it off. It'll be your last, I promised myself. I didn't have orders to save more humans. Moddekum had nullified those orders, but the Ohrurs be damned, I wouldn't stand by and watch this pitiful species being auctioned off by the likes of a Pronex. My hand coiled over the handle of my blaster as we approached a hangar not too far from my ship. Two guards stood by the gates, cradling blasters to their chests. When the doors opened, I noticed a handful more guards and the stench of too many bodies cramped together. Straight ahead of me, my eyes fell on an array of cubes stacked on top of each other, blacked out. They were supposed to keep the stench contained, but some must have been leaking.

"You want to see all of them or just the humans?" Khuf asked.

Frygg! Well, you started this, my mind admonished. "All of them."

He opened his comm, and the black film over the cubes lifted, exposing the insides of twenty of them. My stomach turned. Those cages were meant to keep five people at the most, but what was inside at least doubled that number. Two hundred more refugees, my mind calculated. My ship was already at capacity. Unfortunately, seeing those poor creatures crammed into the cubes tugged at my deeply ingrained protective instincts. Not all of them were humans; I noticed a few Pandraxians,

Hettita, and even a couple of Moggadesh. Shit, I would rather fly my ship into a sun before I took a Moggadesh aboard it. They would have to stay here. The thought of them fighting with the Mmuhr'Rhong was slightly amusing.

"Which one do you want? Take your time." Khuf offered magnanimously.

"All of them," I answered him, tracking the guards as they made their way through the cages. Now and then, one of them hit his palm against the see-through wall, startling the pitiful inhabitants.

"All of them?" Khuf laughed, irking me because I had promised myself his last outburst had been his last.

"Space Guardian, you are amusing. Do you have that many credits?"

The Ohrurs were more than generous when it came to my spending. My credits were unlimited to buy whatever I needed, and the thought of using their money to purchase from Khuf was actually as tempting as spending a night with two Taysars—the most ethereal being the universe had to offer. But taking down Khuf would be a lot more satisfying.

"You misunderstand me. I'm not paying for them." I informed him.

He opened his mouth for more laughter, but I had endured more than I was willing to take. My only regret was that death came way too swiftly for him when my blaster fire hit. Before his body reached the floor, I eliminated three more of the guards patrolling. Two managed to find cover behind the cages, instantly firing at me.

I threw myself to the ground and rolled until I, too, was covered by a crate. From there, I returned fire. Alerted by the commotion, the two guards from outside stormed in. I had been expecting them. Two well-aimed shots terminated both.

My patience for this fight was running low as my mind threw useless information at me about what I would have to do next. Chase the Moggadesh off, bring the additional nearly two hundred refugees aboard my ship, make sure they get cleaned and fed, and... frygg. I would need to order some supplies. What was supposed to have been a quick trip to Astrionis had turned out longer than anticipated. I wasn't a complete asshole; all these refugees would need things. Clothes, blankets, pillows, comms, food besides the nutrition dispenser...

Yeah, I definitely didn't have the patience for a long, drawn-out fight with these Pronex.

I came out from my cover, blaster blazing, firing at the remaining two hostiles, forcing them to stay behind cover while I jumped on the first crate. It was soundproof, so I didn't hear any screams, not even muffled, but the terrified expressions of the occupants didn't leave much to the imagination. Same with the second crate.

The third brought me above my prey. One tried to scramble, and the other shot at me, but his angle was awkward, and he missed. I terminated him first, then jumped to another crate. The last remaining Pronex fired over his shoulder as he tried to get out of the hangar. He didn't make it.

I retrieved Khuf's fallen comm and deactivated the locks, keeping my blaster trained on the Moggadesh. I told them to scram.

"All you others, I have a ship waiting that will take you to Astrionis, where you will be safe. Or you can stay here. Your choice." Without waiting for an answer or giving the perplexed ex-prisoners a chance to reply, I marched out of the hangar, certain they would follow me. All the way to my ship, I cursed under my breath about the mess I had gotten myself into. I half hoped these new refugees wouldn't follow me, but they were all behind me when I opened my cargo bay.

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ALICE

He's such an asshole !

Even for him, this latest stunt was a total dick move. We all knew we had landed on a planet. Why couldn't he just tell us if we had arrived at our destination? Was this Astrionis or not? If it was, I wanted to know. I was more than ready to pick up the pieces of my life and start over. Waiting on this ship was like being stuck in Limbo. I needed to know if I was going to Heaven or Hell. I hated this emotional back and forth, wondering if things would get better or worse. I was getting tired of being stuck on this ship with no idea what kind of life awaited me. And if that wasn't bad enough, he left without a word and locked us in like petulant children.

Clenching my jaw, I stalked toward the hatch. The controls sat there, mocking me, blinking in a dull rhythm that screamed, You are not authorized to leave .

Yeah? We'll see about that .

I crouched beside the panel and studied it. Unlike Earth tech, there were no obvious screws. The entire system was modular, almost organic in the way its components connected. Luckily for me, I'd been quietly collecting parts from the ship's cleaning and repair drones. Xyrek might be a bastard, but his ship was a goldmine.

I pulled my makeshift tools from my pocket—a thin metallic rod bent into a wedge, a coil of flexible tubing with a sharp edge, and a flat disc that worked as a universal circuit trigger. My best approximation of a screwdriver was a thin, pronged clamp that slotted into the panel's seams. I wedged the clamp into the edge and wiggled it

side to side, trying to pry the cover loose.

"What the hell are you doing?" Tom hovered behind me, arms crossed like a disappointed father figure.

"Getting us out of here," I muttered.

"You think you can open the hatch?" His voice was laced with skepticism and a hint of hope.

"I know I can," I responded confidently.

"That's a bad idea," Josie snapped, striding over like she had some kind of authority here.

I didn't look up. "Oh, look, the alien's biggest fan has entered the chat."

Josie ignored me. "You have no idea what that thing is wired to. You could short out the oxygen supply or depressurize the whole damn ship."

I rolled my eyes. "Wow, big words! Way to go, Josie," I replied sarcastically, but then added under my breath, "If it's wired that badly, we have bigger problems."

"You're just mad Xyrek didn't let you sleep in his room," Ava said, stepping up beside Tom, one hand resting over her pregnant belly.

Josie's eyes flashed. "Excuse me?"

"You heard me," Ava shot back. "You act like he's your personal alien boyfriend, and you're pissed he left without telling you his plans."

"This isn't about me!" Josie snapped. "I trust Xyrek. Unlike her—" she jabbed a finger at me "—who's about to fry the whole ship because she thinks she's some engineering genius."

I clenched my jaw and yanked at the panel harder. "I am an engineering genius, thanks. And if you're so in love with Captain Asshole, why don't you call him and ask nicely to be let out?" I pretended to think about that, then snapped a finger, "Oh, right. My bad. You don't have his phone number."

"So mature, Tinker Bell," Josie spat.

"Then maybe don't worship the guy who locked us in like cargo," I shot back, ignoring her well-placed barb. All my life, I had been compared to that stupid pixie, and I hated it. But with my looks and my fondness of... well... tinkering...

"Maybe he has a good reason!" she countered.

"A good reason to treat us like prisoners?" Tom interjected. His voice was laced with righteous indignation. "We don't even know where we are!"

"I don't see you saving us!" Josie snapped.

Tom turned red. "Because I don't have alien hacking skills! But if I did?—"

Ava groaned. "You two are exhausting."

I pried a corner of the panel loose and peeled it back, revealing the inner components—glowing filaments and suspended nodes instead of neatly contained circuits. I grabbed my coil tool and carefully nudged one of the nodes.

"Wait, wait, wait," Josie barked. "You don't even know what you're touching!"

"Would you shut up and let me work?" I hissed.

"This is his ship," she sneered. "You think Xyrek won't notice?"

"Pretty sure he has bigger problems than me right now," I muttered. My mind automatically moved to the stupid tattoos, making me wonder if he was even giving them any thought at all.

"Or maybe he left for a reason," Josie countered. "Maybe he knows something we don't."

That made me pause. I hated to admit it, but... he wasn't stupid. If Xyrek locked us in, it wasn't just because he didn't feel like babysitting humans. Either he was protecting us... or he was protecting something else from us. The thought sent a chill down my spine. Before I could answer, a small spark jumped from the panel to my hand. I yanked back with a curse.

"Shit," Ava muttered. "That's not good, right?"

The filaments inside the panel pulsed, and the hatch light flickered once before returning to its usual dull glow.

I gritted my teeth. "No. I think he's returning."

Josie smirked. "Oh, great. Can't wait for him to see what you did and throw you in a cage."

"Yeah, well," I muttered, shaking the sting from my fingers, "if he does, at least I'll know how to break out of that too."

A heavy thunk echoed through the ship as the hatch unlocked, followed by the

unmistakable hiss of the ramp lowering. I barely had time to scramble to my feet before the ship shuddered under the weight of multiple people stomping aboard.

Xyrek, in all his silver-skinned, infuriating glory, marched up the gangway with a crowd of refugees in tow, made up of a mix of humans and other aliens I had never seen before. They looked terrible—bedraggled, dirty, beaten, starved. They were in an even more pitiful state than we had been. Still, I tried to count; there were nearly two hundred of them, adding to our nearly three hundred number. The ship, already overcrowded, was about to feel a whole lot smaller.

What the hell had he done?

His uniform was dirty, and he was bleeding from his side. He looked like he had been in a fight. Did he free these people like he had us? For a second—just one stupid, fleeting second—I almost liked him for it. Because despite his asshole tendencies, despite locking us in like children, he hadn't just abandoned us to whatever fate awaited outside. Instead, he went out to save more people. Thankfully, the feeling didn't last long.

Because right then, I was sidetracked by the erupting pandemonium inside the cargo hold. My fellow passengers had noticed the new arrivals trickling in.

"What the hell is this?" Tom shouted, his arms thrown wide in outrage.

"You've got to be kidding me!" Josie screeched, her eyes nearly bugging out of her skull.

Ava looked stunned and placed a protective hand over her belly as if trying to shield her unborn child from the sheer stupidity unfolding around her. My fellow passengers weren't taking the new additions in very well.

"We barely have enough space as it is!"

"Where are these people supposed to sleep?"

"This is complete bullshit!"

The voices blended together into a wave of complaints, all directed at Xyrek, who took a step forward.

"Enough!" He bellowed, and the entire ship fell silent. It wasn't just the deep rumble of his voice but the energy he carried. That deadly, predatory stillness that warned everyone in the room that he was one bad moment away from snapping.

A ripple of unease moved through the humans. Even Tom, huffing like an angry bull, hesitated to open his mouth. The silence didn't last long, though. "You just shoved more people onto an already packed ship!" He complained.

"Last I checked, this was still my ship to do with as I please," Xyrek responded. A vein ticked by the side of his neck, proof that he wasn't as cool and collected as he appeared to be.

A smart man would have realized it wasn't a good idea to challenge the alien right now. Tom wasn't a smart man. "We don't even know where we are! How is this supposed to work?"

Xyrek's black eyes narrowed. "You don't need to know where we are. You only need to know that you're still breathing because I allow it."

Josie sighed dreamily, as if his being a complete tyrant was attractive instead of a major red flag.

Tom, however, was not buying it. "That's not an answer," he growled.

"No, but it's the only one you're getting," Xyrek shot back.

Tom opened his mouth to argue, but Xyrek cut him off with a snarl. "Let's get one thing straight here: you're aboard my ship. You're my guests for as long as I so wish. You have no rights, no say, and you shouldn't harbor any illusions that you do."

He moved a step closer to Tom, "You don't like it? Feel free to step outside. See how long you last out there."

Tom visibly shrank into himself.

Xyrek added a curt, "Deal with it."

The silence that followed was thick enough to choke on. Until Josie huffed dramatically, flipping her hair over one shoulder. "Fine, whatever. Just make sure these new people understand the pecking order around here."

Her eyes flicked to me, and I had the strongest urge to punch her. Before I had a chance to act on that brilliant impulse, Xyrek turned his attention to me. "Alice."

My name, spoken in that deep, commanding tone, sent an unwanted shiver down my spine. I folded my arms and glared up at him. "What?"

"We need to talk."

I blinked. "Excuse me?"

He jerked his chin toward the hallway. "Come with me."

Oh, hell no . "I'm kind of busy," I said, gesturing vaguely at the hatch panel. "Maybe later."

Xyrek tilted his head as if amused by the idea that I thought I had a choice.

"Now," he ordered.

Before I could tell him to go fuck himself, Josie's high-pitched screech cut through the moment like nails on a chalkboard.

"You've got to be kidding me!" she shrieked, stepping between us like some kind of alien guard dog. Xyrek barely glanced at her, which she didn't take well. "You ignore me for days, but the moment she—" Josie spat the word like venom "—messes with your ship, she gets a private meeting?"

"It's none of your concern," Xyrek retorted flatly.

"None of my concern?" Josie gasped. "I trusted you! I defended you!" She turned to the rest of the group, gesturing wildly. "You all saw it! She's been messing with things she doesn't understand, and now he's rewarding her for it!"

Nobody looked at her. Even Tom turned his head as if this had nothing to do with him. But Xyrek finally noticed that I had been working on the panel. Before he could comment on it, I vented my exasperation at her. "Josie, I swear to whatever alien gods are listening?—"

"This is bullshit," she cut me off. "You don't even like him!"

I snapped my fingers. "Exactly! I don't like him! Finally, something we agree on!"

Xyrek let out a low growl as if deeply offended by that statement and turned his

attention to the exposed panel beside the hatch. His already foul mood curdled into something darker. A slow, dangerous silence stretched between us.

Then, in an eerily calm voice, he asked, "What. The. Frygg. Is. This?"

Oh, shit.

I resisted the urge to take a step back. "Uh?—"

His jaw clenched, his hands balling into fists at his sides. "You tampered with my ship?"

"Tampered is a strong word," I hedged.

His head snapped toward me, and his black eyes blazed like actual flames. "And yet, the panel is open, the casing is missing, and I see tools that look suspiciously human-made wedged into my controls."

He bent slightly; his large frame towered over me as he plucked one of my makeshift tools from the wiring with two fingers. He examined it, then flicked his eyes back to me. "Explain. Now."

The entire room held its breath. This was the perfect time for them to find out how Xyrek would punish disobedience. Not one part of me rejoiced at the prospect of being the guinea pig.

Josie crossed her arms, fully pleased with herself. "See? I told you she was messing with things she doesn't understand."

Xyrek's broad shoulders rose and fell with a slow, measured breath, his posture radiating barely contained fury.

I held up my hands. "Okay, first of all, I completely know what I was doing. Second, you locked us in. What did you expect me to do? Sit around and wait for you to come back with zero information?"

His upper lip curled. "Yes. That's exactly what I expected. Because this is my ship—not some human scrap heap you can tinker with like a junker."

That pissed me off. I pressed my fists into my hips and matched his glare. "Well, maybe if you actually told us what the hell was going on, I wouldn't have needed to do some problem-solving of my own."

His nostrils flared. "Problem-solving?" He turned the tool over in his fingers, then, with a sharp snap of his wrist, crushed it like it was nothing but cheap plastic. I was proud that I managed to hold back a flinch.

"That's not how things work here," he said, his voice deadly quiet. "Let me make this clear, human. You do not touch my ship. Ever."

The way he said human like it was an insult made my fingers curl into fists. But self-preservation made me bite out, "Noted."

For a long moment, we just stared at each other. I would not be the first to look away, no matter how intimidating he was.

Finally, he exhaled sharply, tossing the crushed remains of my tool to the floor. "We're done here."

Then, without another word, he turned and marched toward the hallway. Right before stepping out, he jerked his head toward me. "Let's go."

"You're not actually going with him, are you?" Ava whispered in concern.

"I don't think I have a choice," I whispered back, passing Josie on the way.

"I hope he locks you away and throws away the key," She snarled. She looked jealous, as if I'd been chosen for some sacred alien ritual instead of being dragged into another round of Xyrek being an ass.

Xyrek let out an exasperated sigh. "Are you done?"

I threw my hands up. "Not my circus, not my monkeys. Let's get this over with."

I followed him out, ignoring Josie's seething glare boring into the back of my head. Xyrek walked ahead, his posture stiff, his entire presence radiating barely contained irritation. I probably should have worked harder to control myself, but I couldn't stop. "So," I muttered, "is this the part where you murder me?"

Xyrek didn't stop walking or acknowledge my words at all, but I swore I saw the corner of his mouth twitch.

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XYREK

She tried to sabotage my ship for a second time!

I should have been outraged. Instead, I felt... amused. Something I hadn't felt in a very, very long time. As exasperating as this female was, she was also utterly endearing. I liked the way she was standing up to me, how she didn't cave even under my most intense glare. One that had made grown males weep. Tom, for example. The male had been about to shit in his pants. Not her, though. Oh no.

She was wary of me and scared, but she wasn't backing down. I admired the fire in her; it spoke of a strong character. As a result, I found myself looking forward to talking to her. Something else that was new to me.

I didn't have to say anything to her. But I wanted to. I wanted to fill her in on what I had discovered. She deserved to know and make up her own mind.

In a few days, we would reach Astrionis, and there, our paths would lead us in different directions. But until we reached our destination, I wanted to spend some time with her, if only to figure out why the universe had decreed we were fated mates.

From everything I read, I thought being fated to each other was supposed to come with a big boom, like being hit by a lightning bolt. Well, the lightning bolt was there, but only when we touched. I would like to at least unravel this puzzle before I work on the others. It seemed more manageable.

In order to do so, I needed to get to know her better, which suddenly seemed less of a hardship than I expected.

For once, nobody hovered in the hallway to my quarters; they were all still piled up in the cargo hold. I hoped they would band together and take care of the newcomers or, at the very least, direct them towards the stocked nutrition dispensers and let them know which of the three bathrooms they could use.

The door to my room opened, and I waved Alice in ahead of me. "Take a seat. I'll be with you in a moment."

"What do you mean, you'll be with me in—" She broke off when I opened a few cubes in front of me, staring at them incredulously.

"Are those computer screens?"

Her fingers hovered in the air. She touched one, and it flipped. "Incredible!"

Amused, I watched her as she browsed through the screens. I knew she couldn't read a word. It was all in Pandraxian, the general language of the universe. Maybe later, I would give her some translation contacts, or I might even change the comms settings so she could read it in her language; for now, I had work to do.

I let her amuse herself with one of the cubes while I pulled up another to ready a large order. Something I should have done a long time ago, but I hadn't anticipated that my guests would be with me for so long and hadn't wanted to make a stop. At least I could rectify that error now. This planet offered everything we needed; I just had to make sure I bought from reputable sources and not slave traders.

"This is really amazing." Alice kept turning the cube.

"What else do you need besides clothes, pillows, and blankets?" I asked as I filled in the items to order.

"What do you mean?" She was still distracted.

"For comfort. I should have had those things aboard earlier, but I didn't know there would be so many of you. So what else do you need?"

That finally stopped her, and she stared at me. "Are you serious?"

I nodded.

"Why now?"

I closed my eyes, channeling my inner patience. Always with the questions. So many endless questions. "Because I haven't had a chance to do so before. Now we're here, and I can, so what else?"

"Where exactly is here?"

That made my patience meter overflow. "Do you need other things or not?" I growled.

"Whoa, Mister Short Circuit, keep your pants on. Give me a sec. You can't just throw this at me and expect me to be ready."

I had no idea what most of her words meant, but I gathered she needed some time to think. We weren't technically in a hurry, but I would like to be far away from Morrakbarr before somebody decided to retaliate for the dead Pronex. I was sure Khuf had some friends here.

"We need hygiene articles," Alice said after a moment's pause.

"Hygiene articles?" I echoed. "There's soap and?—"

She waved her hand in the air, and her face turned red, a most appealing look, "For when one of us women menstruates?"

"Menstruates?"

"Oh my God," her face turned redder. "You know that women bleed once a month, right? Or wait..." she scrunched up her nose, "do alien women not do that?"

I had no idea what she was talking about. "We have healing wands and bandages."

"Fuck me. I'm about to give an alien a female anatomy class," Alice mumbled to herself. "Fine, look." She took a deep breath. "Earth women," she stressed both words, "bleed once a month from their vaginas." She stared at me. "You know what a vagina is, right?"

I nodded; of course I knew what a vagina was; I just... oh!

"You mean during fertility season?" I finally understood.

"Yeah, something like that," she nodded. "So we need something to... to catch the flow of blood."

"How often are human females in season?" I wanted to know, not that it mattered, but I was curious.

She sighed as if she took affront to my words, but kept her voice even. "Once a month."

"Once a month?" I asked incredulously. "Once a month? Are you sure?"

"Well, I'm a woman, so yeah," she inhaled and added louder, "I'm sure!"

And then, "How often do... alien women... go into... season?"

"It depends on the species," I tried to recall my faint knowledge of female seasons; it wasn't something I'd ever dealt with. "But most, like, once a year?"

"Once a year?" She looked dreamy. "That must be nice."

I thought about it for a moment. "I suppose if that happens, I could make one of the rooms available for the female so she can choose her partner and breed."

"What?" Alice glared at me.

Now what did I say? I thought that was a generous offer.

"Well, if they need to mate, they can use one of the rooms. How long do their seasons last? Do they all have it at the same time?"

She stared at me as if I had lost my mind. But then something must have clicked in her head because her features softened. "Oh."

"What?"

"You think that... when you say females going into season... you actually mean they're fertile and need to... breed?"

I didn't understand why she looked so put out when saying those words. Was she embarrassed? This was a normal, natural way of life. Then again, I had never heard of

females being in season that often. How many offspring did they have, anyway? And how long did the gestation last? It couldn't be long if they were in season every month. They must have... Wait, if that was the case, there should have been more children around. I was missing something.

"What am I missing?"

"Okay, so first, human women don't go into heat like an animal. We ovulate, which means our body prepares us for pregnancy, offspring, young ones, or whatever you call it. We don't need to mate during that time. When we bleed, it's actually too late. Anyway, ninety-nine percent of the time, we don't get pregnant during a monthly cycle, so then we bleed. For that bleeding, we need hygiene articles, like tampons or pads, to catch the blood."

I made a face. "Tampons?"

She lifted her little finger, "It's like cotton. It goes up into your vagina to catch?—"

I raised both hands and made a loud humming sound. "Uhm, thank you. No, I don't think we have that."

"Fine," she huffed, "how about pads then?" Before I had a chance to ask what those were, she elucidated, holding up part of her shirt, "Just some absorbent material we can put into our underwear would suffice. Something there's a lot of, that we can throw away. I guess we can wash it if we need to. Oh," she looked up, "and underwear. We need a lot of underwear. Please."

I searched the database for something that would suffice and nodded when I put the orders in. "Anything else?"

"Well, there are some kids here. Do you have some toys?" She squinted her eyes at

me. "You do have toys, right?"

"Of course, we have toys. I'll get some comms, too, for all of you; that should help pass the time."

"We wouldn't be able to read it." She objected.

"I can fix that." The words were out before an idea occurred to me, and with a sardonic grin, I added, "Or maybe you can."

"You're funny," she smiled widely, actually smiled, and she looked very beautiful doing so. "I'm an engineer, not a computer programmer."

"You're admitting a weakness?" I teased.

Her smile deepened, doing something strange to my heart; it felt as if it was swelling.

"Maybe," she teased right back. Frygg. She was amazing.

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ALICE

It turned out that going into Xyrek's quarters hadn't been too bad. I had been prepared to be yelled at, but he didn't. It actually had been quite nice and quiet. Something I really envied him for. At this point, I would have given a kidney to be able to have a room to myself, even if only for a few hours.

With the additional refugees Xyrek had picked up, the already sparse space was filled even more. People had taken to sleeping in the hallway, and yes, even in the three spare quarters, but with open doors so we could still use the three bathrooms. Some even camped out on the breakroom floor.

"How much longer until we reach Astrionis?" I waylaid Xyrek a couple of days later, after waiting for him to exit the bridge for hours. I needed to know. I needed to know how much longer I would have to put up with this cramped space. That way, I could estimate if I would go crazy before then or not. I was getting pretty close.

"Alice," he acknowledged me. His dark gaze moved over the thirty or so people camping in the hallway.

"Well?" I pushed.

"Not here," he ordered, pushing through four men and two women to reach his quarters. The door opened, and all heads moved to catch a glimpse inside. He whisked me inside just as the door closed, and it was... heaven!

So peaceful!

I took a deep, calming breath. "Wow!"

He nodded, his face still set in a grim mask. "It's like a market out there offering free stuff."

I couldn't have agreed more, yet—"We were already bursting from the seams before you added more people." I couldn't stop myself from scolding him.

"And what would you have had me do? Watch them being sold?" He demanded. His black eyes landed hard on mine like he was testing me.

"Of course not," I admitted with a sigh. "It's just a lot."

"It'll only be for a couple more days," he said, his tone shifted, making him sound... friendlier? I wasn't sure, because friendly was the last thing I would accuse him of being.

"Two days then?"

He ran a tired hand over his neck and nodded. My gaze moved over his large, empty room—well, empty of people. There was a bed, a table, and a very, very comfy-looking chair that reminded me of an oversized beanbag—a very comfortable-looking oversized beanbag.

He really didn't have anything to complain about. He had this whole room to himself. My gaze moved back to the beanbag chair. How humiliating would it be to beg to sleep on it? At this point, I didn't even care what the others would say. Just a night alone, well, alone with him, sounded tantalizing.

"Was there something else you wanted?" He asked.

I sighed, very aware that I would never degrade myself like that, not even for a few hours of peace. Two more days. I could do that. I could deal with two more days.

"What about the black lines? Did you find anything?" I stalled. Since yesterday, they had stopped growing. Thank God. Intricate lines and swirls moved up and down my entire left arm, left flank, and thigh. "Did yours stop growing too?"

"They did." He sank down on one of the chairs by the table and indicated for me to take a seat also.

I shook my head. "I'm good."

"Trust me, you'll want to sit for this."

Oh shit. With a heavy chest, I took a seat. "Are we dying?"

"What?" He looked perplexed. "No!"

I still didn't feel relieved, though. "So what are they?"

"They're mating marks."

"Mating marks?" I parroted, blinked a few times, and stared at him, trying to decide if it was him or me who had lost their ever-loving marbles. "What do you mean?"

"Mating marks, as in our bodies have recognized their fated mates in each other and marked us."

I snorted. My hand flew up to my mouth, and I laughed despite this not being funny, even if he was making a joke. "That's not funny," I managed.

"No. It's not."

One look at his stony expression stopped any more laughter in me. "You're serious?"

"I don't joke."

Fuck!

"Is that even a thing?" I stalled because, honestly, my mind was a bit overloaded right then. Mating marks? Fated mates?

"I take it humans don't have fated mates or mating marks?" He checked.

Slowly, I turned my head left to right and then right to left, never stopping to stare at him. He had to be crazy, right? Maybe he wasn't rescuing us after all; maybe he was taking us to some godforsaken planet for some sinister games? Because this... this had to be a mind game. This wasn't real. Couldn't be.

Except, you have the marks .

Yeah, but that doesn't mean shit. I mean, we're on a spaceship. How hard can it be for someone like him to... to... dye my skin?

Sure .

Sometimes I hated myself when I had these internal debates.

"So... your people..." I fished. "They have that kind of mating marks?"

"I wouldn't know," he answered mysteriously.

"What do you mean?"

He stretched his arms in front of him and interlaced his fingers; his entire posture suggested that he was uncomfortable talking about this. Thanks to my very volatile parents, I was quite adept at reading other people. "I mean, I don't know who my people are."

My eyes narrowed, and my forehead creased as my mind worked through his words. The best I could do, though, was ask the same question again, "What do you mean?"

He sighed and stared off toward a window that didn't show anything but blackness. It was weird; I had always imagined there would be millions of stars, suns, a comet—something other than this endless blackness in space. But it was all I ever saw whenever I looked through one of the windows.

"Why is there only blackness?" I wanted to know.

He gave me a funny look, as if surprised by my change in questioning.

"Because we're in hyperspeed. We're going so fast that you can't see anything besides the universe's blackness. You'll be able to see more once we slow down."

"Okay," I nodded as if that made perfect sense, just like everything else he'd said so far.

"I'm a Space Guardian," he picked up our conversation—maybe that wasn't really the right word, but I didn't know what else to call it, so I went with that—back up. "I work for the Ohrurs. They give me missions, and I fulfill them."

"What kind of missions?" Little alarm bells went off in my head. Was he going to tell me he was some kind of assassin for hire? No, that was just my imagination running

wild with me. Had to be, right?

He shrugged, "Anything from protecting people like you or high-profile beings to terminating criminals."

"Terminating... as in..." I moved my hands back and forward, unsure of how to finish that sentence. I didn't want to make a gun with my fingers and say pew, pew.

"As in permanent termination," he nodded.

I leaned back in my chair and closed my eyes. This day wasn't at all what I had pictured it would be. Then again, the last time I pictured how a day would go had been right before the Cryons invaded Earth. Nothing had gone to plan since. And now it seemed I was the fated mate of an intergalactic assassin. Yay me !

I read enough sci-fi books to know what being a fated mate entailed. I tilted my head when one word, well, actually two, came to my mind—incredible sex.

Surreptitiously, my gaze wandered over to the alien hunk across from me. His tight uniform didn't leave much to the imagination. He was exceptionally well-built. I wasn't a sex addict, but I hadn't had sex in... let's say a long time. Not that I was contemplating having sex with Xyrek; it was just something my mind went to because of the fated mate stuff.

"That's who I am, who I always thought I was," Xyrek continued the conversation, hopefully clueless as to where my internal monologue had taken me. That was good. However, his expression and tone of voice suggested a deeper secret, and I found myself intrigued.

"Who you thought you were?"

"I have no idea what species I belong to?" He admitted.

I blinked a few times. "You're not an Ohrur, I take it?"

He got off his chair so fast that it nearly tipped over. "Didn't I just say that?"

"Grouchy," my head bopped up and down, "and touchy."

He glared at me.

"Okay, so I still don't see why..." I trailed off because suddenly I realized what he was saying. "Oh. You have no idea what species you are, or if your species typically has this mating marks fated bond?"

His glares didn't intimidate me as much as they had at first. He was very much like the Pitbull my brother Damon had for a while. The beast was used in dog fights; he was all scarred up, one of his ears was bitten off, and he had a large tear over his snout and eye. The dog would bark and growl something fierce, but he never bit me, probably because I was the only person who would sneak outside where Damon kept him and bring him food and water. Without me, he would have starved to death. Anyway, Xyrek reminded me of that dog: all bark and no bite. Unless you counted the Cryons, he terminated ... now that had been a massacre; not that Xyrek had any scars... alright, I was rambling again.

Oh, the dog? As far as my brother knew, he vanished one day. Damon was livid. He was supposed to go to another big dog fight that night. Lucky for the dog, Damon never spent any time with me. Otherwise, he might have known that my one and only friend's parents were dog rescuers. They found a family for him, and I smuggled him in the middle of the night to his new home, where for the first time in his life, he got to go inside a house, sleep on a bed, and guess what—he got a sister, Chihuahua.

"Yes," he pressed out an answer to my question.

"Shit, that must be..." I searched for the right word, "unsettling, not knowing where you came from."

He sat back down, put his elbows on the table, and rubbed his neck again.

"What's wrong?"

"Headache," he mumbled, massaging his temples. "I get them whenever I think about my origins."

I didn't even like the guy, but he looked pitiful enough for me to get up and walk behind him. I swatted his hands to the side and massaged his neck. An ex-boyfriend told me I had magic fingers ; It could be because my hands and fingers were stronger than normal people's from all the work I did with them. Whatever it was, it allowed me to dig deep. It seemed alien physiology wasn't that different from humans.

"I think I would get headaches, too, if I didn't know where I came from," I sympathized.

He allowed me to minister to him for a few moments before he turned, ending the session. "Anyway, I thought you should know."

"You're not going to kick me out after dropping this bomb on me." I pushed my fists into my hips. "No way."

"What do you want?" He drew his brows together in honest puzzlement.

"Well... it impacts me too, thank you very much. I mean, I'm going to have to tell people about these sooner or later. So what am I going to say ? Oh, they're mating

marks. My fated mate? He's gallivanting through the universe, terminating the bad guys ?"

Before he could reply, I kept going. "I mean, aren't people going to... to expect us to be together or something?"

In obvious frustration, his hand moved through his hair. "It doesn't matter what others say."

"Probably not," I admitted, "but I would rather not start my new life with a scarlet letter on my chest." This is another one of the many reasons why I preferred to be a side character instead of the main heroine. I just wanted to get to Astrionis and live a peaceful life without any drama or big adventures.

"Scarlet letter?" He asked.

I waved my hand. "Never mind that. Do you think the people on Astrionis might know how to get these off us?"

He shrugged, "Perhaps. Maybe. Hopefully."

After thinking it over, his gloominess lifted some. "That might not be a bad idea."

I should have been affronted, but I wasn't, because Xyrek wasn't really the type of person I wanted to be around that much. Yes, he had saved me and the others, but his unpleasant nature left a lot to... be desired. If I wanted to be around poisonous people, I would have stayed with my family or adopted the damn Pitbull myself. I didn't need that kind of toxicity around me.

Then why did my stomach sink and my heart feel so heavy at the thought of not seeing him again after the next two days? Had I somehow come to enjoy our little

banter? I worried I might actually miss it.

XYREK

"I need to talk to you." Josie stormed into my quarters as the door ticked open to let Alice out.

"You are not welcome here," I told her, moving my arms to shoo her back out.

"Too bad. We need to talk. Close the door."

Was this female for real? Who did she think she was giving me orders?

"The only way this door closes is once you leave."

She changed tactics. "Please, Xyrek?" Her full lips turned pouty, and her eyelashes fluttered. I didn't think I could take this for two more days. This female was hunting me. No matter how many times I told her that she wasn't going to share my quarters or bed, she wouldn't stop.

A sudden idea hit me. "Alice! Wait up!"

I rushed by Josie out into the corridor, where I pushed through the throng of people. The same throng of people that had made it hard for Alice to make much progress to the cargo hold. When she heard her name, she stopped and turned.

"What?" She looked confused in such an adorable way that I paused—momentarily struck by how alluring she made confusion look. I liked the way she blinked up at me like I had something worth saying—like she actually wanted to hear it. No one had

ever looked at me like that before. I bent low to whisper in her ear when I reached her, "What would you do to stay in my quarters until we reach Astrionis?"

The crowd pressed around us, and Alice huffed out a long breath. "Anything."

"Good."

I pulled her into my arms, lifted her up because she was so frygging short, and pressed my lips to hers. The idea was to give these humans a show, carry Alice to my quarters, and make them think I made my choice. Hopefully, to give me some peace. However, the moment our lips met, my body developed different ideas. The sensations of bliss that ran through me were beyond anything I had ever experienced before. This wasn't just a kiss. It was like a coat enveloping us, sealing us into a bubble and fusing us together. Her arms slung around my neck, and she pressed herself closer to me; I felt her breasts push against my chest, which caused a fire in my loins that I instantly knew I would never be able to extinguish.

"Whore," Josie hissed as she pressed by us, ripping me out of my bliss. Had she been a male, I would have beaten the life out of her, but she wasn't.

"I think you've got that all wrong; a whore is someone who keeps pushing herself on someone who doesn't want her." Instead of my fists, I used words. I supposed there was a first for everything, and honestly, Josie's paling face was rewarding in its own right.

Josie hissed while Alice buried her head against my chest, shaking it. I readjusted my arm around her and carried her through the now-parting crowd to my quarters.

The moment I sat her down and the door closed, she whirled on me with blazing eyes. "Just to be clear, I'm not having sex with you."

That hadn't been my intention when I chased after her. All I had wanted was a reprieve from Josie and other females like her, hoping they would back off once they realized I'd made my choice. But after my body's unexpected response to a single kiss, I realized that instead of gaining peace for myself, I had just made the situation overwhelmingly worse. I had no idea what to do with the emotions and sensations warring inside my body, heart, and mind. Most of all, her words hurt me. Had she not just experienced the same wonder I had?

"No worries, this is strictly for show, so these skrevas —vipers—will leave me alone."

"Good," Alice nodded, crossing her arms over her chest, but not before I noticed her pebbled nipples. Hah, so she wasn't quite as immune to me as she liked to pretend to be. Now, that boosted my battered ego some.

"Okay, so what are the rules?" she wanted to know.

"Rules?"

"Yeah, rules. We're going to spend two days and two nights in here, right?" She waited for my nod. "I only see one bed."

"I'm not giving up my bed!" I blustered.

"Didn't think you would. No worries, I'll take that beanbag chair; that looks comfy enough."

What did she mean by didn't think you would? Did she mean she acknowledged it was mine, or... was I supposed to let her have the more comfortable sleeping spot? I had been on my own for nearly thirty years. How was one supposed to act around other people?

"Next rule: you want me to pretend to be your girlfriend when we're outside this room, right?" She continued; meanwhile, I hadn't even caught up with her first point yet. Girlfriend ?

"It's only a couple of days. As long as they know you're here, we shouldn't have to make a public appearance together. And I'll take the chair." I would? When did I decide to sleep on the chair?

"It's no biggie, really," she said, confusing me about what we were talking about now: the chair or public appearances... wait, that would mean I could kiss her again...

"We should probably go out and eat together," I suggested, congratulating myself that my brain finally seemed to be functioning again.

"Okay. So, holding hands and stuff?"

"And stuff." I nodded vigorously, too vigorously, probably, because she narrowed her eyes at me.

"No funny stuff."

"Sure," I agreed, having no idea what she meant. But the prospect of holding her hand and kissing her appealed to me. She was like a Black Abyss, drawing me in with her pull, making me curious to find out what was on the other side.

"You're sure about the bed?" she asked while simultaneously throwing herself onto it. The moment she landed, she groaned. "Oh my God, this is heaven!"

I couldn't tear my gaze from her face. Her eyes were alight with happiness as she rolled on my bed, quietly moaning. My cock, which had already been erect from our kiss, hardened even more at her sight. Made worse by the tiny sounds she was

making. I rubbed my face. This had been a bad idea. A very bad idea.

ALICE

Seeing Josie's annoyed face made up for the quiet whispering around us and the glares directed at me when Xyrek and I made our way to the nutrition station. True to our agreement, he was holding my hand. And damn, it felt good.

Not as good as the kiss... nope, I had sworn to myself I would not think about that kiss again. Not ever. Because... fuck! That kiss!

I grinned to myself when Josie entered Xyrek's quarters the moment I left. Contrary to Josie, everybody aboard the ship knew that Xyrek wasn't interested in her. He surprised me when he came after me, and I won't lie, he surprised me even more with his question, but the moment I said anything, I had an idea of what he was asking. I would like to say I knew he was going to ask me to be his fake girlfriend, but I didn't. At that moment, I was just weak. Trying to move through the dense throng of people grated on me. I hated crowds. I hated confined spaces, and I meant it when Xyrek asked me what I was willing to do. Anything. I would have done anything for some space. For some quiet. At least until we returned to his quarters, that's when I realized that I wasn't willing to do that. No matter how much his kiss had aroused me. I crossed my arms to hide my puckered nipples because, damn! That kiss had been beyond hot. He had literally swept me off my feet. Not only that, but when he held me, I had gotten a feel of his immense muscles, and boy, had that been a turn-on.

Not in a million years would I have assumed he would truly let me have the bed, but after our little conversation, he made himself comfy in the bean bag chair while I luxuriated in lying on a mattress for the first time in months. Had he not kissed me just before, I would have said the experience was orgasmic, but he had turned my

body into a yearning mess that craved an orgasm with every fiber, so no, it wasn't quite as orgasmic as it could have been.

He excused himself not long after and went into the bathroom for what seemed a long time. Had it not been him, I would have suspected he was taking care of business in there, but this was Xyrek, an arrogant asshole who wasn't fazed by anything.

I must have fallen asleep while he was still in the bathroom because when I woke later, the lights were already dimming, and my stomach was grumbling.

So now here we were, weaving our way through people who were trying to find a spot for the night. A small rush of guilt moved through me that I would be spending the night in a bed while the others... that was as far as my regret went because I wasn't about to give up my good fortune.

Tom had finally seen some sense and allowed Ava to use one of the beds in the other three rooms because of her pregnancy, so I didn't have to feel any guilt about her. Three of the newcomers were in bad shape—even after Xyrek used the healing wand—so they too received a bed, well, two shared one. But at least I didn't have to feel guilty for them either. The rest of them? Even if I had thought Xyrek might go for it, I wouldn't have traded with any of them. Selfish? Maybe, but I deserved to be a little selfish right then.

More people lingered in the breakroom, lining up like spoons on the ground, not leaving much room to navigate to the nutrition dispensers.

"Wait here," Xyrek let go of my hand by the entrance and forged his way forward. Contemplative, I stared at his muscular back. He had surprised me twice now with his chivalry. First, the bed, and now, he was getting me food. I didn't like the idea of him being nice. That made it too easy to truly fall for him.

It was bad enough carrying these damn mating marks on my body and wondering what they meant, why they chose me and him. As a rational person, I was still grappling with the possibility that something like a higher will might exist. Or destiny, or whatever. All my life, I have been a logical person, a realist. I forced myself to see my family for what they were, forced myself to leave them behind before they would take me down with them. It helped that I wasn't the nourishing type and didn't have a good Samaritan complex. Otherwise, I would have stayed and probably become addicted to meth as well, just like my siblings. I rationalized that my leaving wasn't condemning them in any way; they chose their own paths. I just refused to be dragged down with them. It had taken logic to leave. And now I was being confronted with something that defied all logic and rationality—I still preferred to think the black lines were just a disease. A strange disease for sure, but that was easier to digest than the alternative.

Two days , I told myself. In two days, you'll be leaving him, or he'll leave you, whatever . The fact of the matter was that in two days, we would land on Astrionis and not see each other again. Ever. So there was no sense, absolutely none, to pine for him. My traitorous body could go to hell for all I cared as long as my heart remained mine.

I tried to entice myself with the idea that in two days, I could pick any man and have all the sex my body needed. Any man, as long as it wasn't him . Just hold out , I promised, just a few more days. Please don't fall for the hunk bringing me food right now. Please! He was main character material, and I really, really didn't want to be the main character.

"Let's eat in my quarters," he said, balancing the food on a tray with one hand and placing the palm of his other on my lower back to guide me.

"Whore!" the whispered sound was loud through the quiet of the room. I stiffened. It wasn't that the word hurt or even stung; it was the hateful tone in which it was

pressed out that sent shivers down my spine.

"Who said that?" Xyrek exploded.

He pressed the tray into my hands and marched through a group of people sitting on the floor. They quickly scattered to get out of his way.

"Xyrek, it's okay," I tried to call him back, but he had already homed in on his target. Tom.

I was more surprised that Tom would have called me a name like that than anything. I knew he didn't like me. Hell, the feeling was mutual, but the way he said it dripped with hate.

Xyrek reached him and picked him up by his collar, and I mean up. All the way into the air. "Do you want to repeat to me what you just said?"

Tom was choking, the collar pulled tight around his throat. He made an attempt to shake his head, but only coughs escaped his lips.

"Xyrek, really, it's okay," I tried one more time, making my way through the groups of people staring in shock while balancing the damn tray.

Xyrek shook Tom. "If that's your opinion, I can let you off on the next asteroid we cross."

"N-ooh," Tom coughed, while his feet helplessly kicked in the air.

"You're nothing but a piece of space trash." Xyrek shook him some more when I reached him.

"Please, Xyrek, stop. You're killing him."

"He deserves to die," Xyrek snarled without looking at me.

"He's not worth it," I pleaded, unsure why. It wasn't as if I gave a shit about Tom, or any of the others, besides Ava, but he sure as hell didn't deserve to die like this. Not for saying something we had manufactured to make him believe.

Xyrek's gaze turned to me; his black eyes glowed, and I could have sworn I saw flames dancing inside them. His jaw was clenched tightly; he was furious. I had never seen him this mad before.

"Nobody calls you a derogatory name and lives," he pressed out.

"It's only derogatory if we allow it to be," I reasoned.

"Little frygg. You better acknowledge who just saved your miserable life," Xyrek spat and flung Tom against the wall as if he weighed nothing, instead of being a two-hundred-pound man built like a linebacker. People scrambled to the side. A crack announced that he had probably broken something, but his screams announced that he was still very much alive.

"Get a healing wand," Xyrek snarled at no one in particular, then he took the tray from my hand and replaced his hand back at the small of my back, so incredibly gently, as if nothing had happened.

We made it back into his quarters, where he put the tray on the table.

"Why did you do that?" I wanted to know as soon as the door shut behind us.

"Nobody gets to call you derogatory words," he repeated his earlier statement.

"How do you know they weren't talking about you?" I thought putting some humor into the discussion might lighten the mood.

I was wrong.

He spun around, his features tensed in anger. "Don't try to make excuses for the little frygg, and don't try to humor me."

"Alright," I raised both hands in the air to show I didn't mean any harm.

He ran his hand through his hair, stopped at the top, and moved it down to rub his neck. "I didn't mean to frighten you."

Now, that was funny. "You didn't frighten me. I just didn't want to watch you kill someone."

He cocked his head to the side, "That's what I do."

I shrugged, "I know. I watched you kill plenty of Cryons."

He stepped closer to me; his face was still set in an angry mask. My heart hitched slightly, but I refused to let him see that he intimidated me.

"How come you're not scared of me?"

"Who says I'm not?" I countered.

He leaned in closer, and his eyes pierced mine as he studied them hard. I swallowed but forced myself not to take a step back.

"You are a strange creature," he finally decided. He walked to the table, sat down,

and began digging into his food. "Come, eat."

I wasn't hungry anymore, but I sat down, not wanting to aggravate him any further. Nothing about the mush on my plate did anything to bring my appetite back, but I dug my spork into the mess and forced myself to chew and swallow. No matter what, it was still food and nourishment.

XYREK

A murderous fury still raged through me the next morning when the lights began to brighten. I hadn't slept much, and that made me even angrier. I wanted to blame it on the padded chair, but it was comfortable enough. Not even the human female who had taken my bed could be blamed for it. No, this was all me.

I didn't even understand myself any longer. I had nearly killed a human male last night for using a filthy word. Alice didn't seem to care, so why had it worked me up so much?

Tom didn't have a dark aura around him; it wasn't white and innocent, but he was a far cry from the type of person I usually was sent after on a job. Last night, I would have terminated him just for the pleasure of it, and that thought didn't sit well with me. Not at all. It made me no better than the other criminals I had dealt with all my life.

The rage that had fueled me, though, was beyond anything I had ever experienced before. Still was. I worried if I laid eyes on him again today, I would give in to my murderous desires.

Only one thing calmed me—Alice's steady breathing on my bed. I wasn't even mad anymore that she was in it and I was not. It was the opposite. It soothed me, just like her steady breathing in and out, a sound I thought I could get used to.

My comm activated. I had set an alert for any new messages or information on the networks. Curious, I activated it. On my feed, Nock, the holostreamer I had watched

before when I was bored, appeared. He could be entertaining, especially when he went off on a rant about Space Guardians. For whatever reason, we had this little Kred truly riled up.

I didn't understand why his new holocast would alert me, though. I fiddled with my settings and missed the first part, but when he mentioned the words Space Guardian , I stopped and focused on the stream.

Don't mind him. He's a bit shy today. It's not every day that he's being called a hero! But that's what he is. You all know I'm not a big fan of the Space Guardians, but Zaarek has opened my eyes to the fact that these brave males are more than just extermination machines. We just returned from Astrionis, where we unloaded eight humans Zaarek rescued. Eight! Zaarek was one of the traitors I was supposed to be hunting down right now.

Let me tell you, the work Lord Protector Garth and Lady Silla are doing is invaluable. Those poor humans are being used for slavery and medical experiments, and the gods only know what else.

Is this live? A voice demanded in the background . A voice I had never heard before, but for some reason, knew belonged to Zaarek.

Unperturbed, Nock continued, from what I understand, Emperor Daryus has not shied away from paying a fortune to hire four Space Guardians to rescue even more of these humans. We should all follow this shining example of Emperor Daryus. As entertaining as this was, I was about to turn it off when Nock mentioned mating marks.

Something completely unrelated. I want to follow up on my mating marks show, especially the ones that emerge unexpectedly. What did Nock know about mating marks? My interest was piqued, especially by the mention of unexpected . I sat up to

listen. Zaarek has offered me a ride to UX938, where I heard of an outbreak of unexpected mating marks affecting the most unusual couples. Couples of different species! You know me, I need to investigate this a lot further. I'll be sorry to leave Zaarek, but this new development is calling me, and this holostreamer has to go where fate takes him .

The screen went blank. I checked the time and date of the holocast. Strangely, it didn't give me a location. Not so strange, it was a few days old; our paths must have, unbeknownst to me, crossed somewhere in the past few hours. Otherwise, I wouldn't have received this message at all. UX938 was a few days from where we were.

Unexpected mating marks , I mused. A coincidence?

I wanted to put it off as such, but I had a nagging feeling that it wasn't. Nothing that had happened since I took the humans aboard had been a coincidence or random. I wasn't a believer in a greater power or gods, but something was happening that defied regular logic. For some reason, I was also sure that it was related to my strange dreams. Dreams that had become more intense over the last few days. I wasn't simply running through a forest any longer or seeing myself reflected in the water of a lake. No, there was a town, almost a city, with many people who looked just like me, though dressed in clothes I didn't recognize. Same silver skin, same black hair, just longer.

I wasn't sure what I would do after I dropped the humans off. I had defied Moddekdam's orders—a crime I was sure would not be magnanimously overlooked. Which reminded me, I hadn't heard from him since the last comm.

"Good morning," Alice said, stretching on the bed. She looked beautiful, even when sleepy, with tousled hair.

"Good morning," I heard myself repeat the strange combination of words. I had an

idea what it meant, but nobody greeted one another like this. A stupid smile pulled my lips up, and my cock twitched.

She rose off the bed, wearing some of the new clothing I had ordered on Morrakbarr before we left. The new shirt was short-sleeved, exposing her mating marks, and seeing them on her did something to my insides. It was an undefinable sensation of heat spreading through my chest as if I were internally bleeding, but it made me feel good. Very strange.

"I hope the chair wasn't too uncomfortable?" She stretched again, and her perky little breasts poked straight through her shirt, hardening my cock to a near-painful level. Frygg.

"It was... fine," I managed to reply, watching her as she walked to the bathroom. Her hips swung enticingly. Why hadn't I noticed that before?

"For what it's worth, your bed is really, really nice," she smiled at me before entering the bathroom, leaving me to stare at the now-closed door.

I readjusted my dick because I couldn't sit like this any longer. Frygg. I wondered if there were any pleasure houses on Astrionis. My body was in desperate need of relief, but just the thought of having sex with someone else deflated the body part in question.

"Are you frygging pouting now?" I hissed between clenched teeth.

"What?" Alice called from the other side of the wall.

"Nothing," I yelled, banging my head against the table.

Why was I being tortured like this?

To have something to do besides imagining the human female in my bathroom, naked and soaped, I pulled up several cubes. I checked if there were any new Holostreams from Nock, but if there were, I hadn't received them yet. To occupy myself, I browsed through his older casts, including the one he had mentioned about mating marks.

Not much later, Alice came out of the bathroom, freshly dressed in a shirt with long sleeves, I noticed. Part of me didn't like her hiding the mating marks, but it was probably the sensible thing to do. I had no idea how the humans would react if they saw both of us marked like this.

The comm pinged, a request from an Ohrur, Callopea, another minder. I had worked for him before. I motioned for Alice to return to the bathroom and stay quiet. It seemed like a small miracle when she did.

This was my third minder in a very short amount of time for the same mission. Highly unusual.

"Callopea, did you miss me?" I asked sarcastically.

"As pleasant as always, Xyrek," he responded as his form materialized in my quarters. "I've been ordered to take over for Moddekdam. Before we begin, I need to see?—"

I knew where this was going and decided to go on the attack to get him distracted, "What happened to Moddekdam? He was supposed to replace Possession, who also just up and vanished. What's happening on Ohrur? Some kind of disease I should know about?" I kept my tone aggressive.

"That is none of your concern, Space Gu?—"

Again, I interrupted him. "I beg to differ. When two of my minders have been replaced within a few short months, it is very much my business. Where are they?"

Callopea glared at me, "We're handling it."

"You're handling it? Funny, that's exactly what Moddek dum said right before there was some kind of explosion and he had to get off the comm."

For a moment, Callopea looked nervous, but then he pulled himself back together. "You seem to be forgetting who the minder is in this relationship, Space Guardian."

"Trust me, I'm not," I gritted out. I had never liked any of my minders, least of all Callopea, who enjoyed reminding me of the power balance between us. This time, though, I asked myself, what power? What is he holding over me, and why do I feel the need to listen to his orders? Strangely, I didn't feel it like I had before.

"I've been sworn to protect the Ohrur, so if they start vanishing around me, I have a vested interest in finding out what is happening," I explained.

Callopea stopped his pacing and regarded me thoughtfully. "I understand your point," he surprised me, "but you have to trust me. We have everything under control. You just need to follow your mission."

"I'm on my way to Astrionis to deliver the humans." I pretended that Moddek dum hadn't changed my orders—a gamble.

"Moddek dum was supposed to inform you that your orders changed."

"He was?" I widened my eyes. "That must have slipped his mind after a bomb went off in his living quarters." I didn't know that for sure, but that's what it had sounded like, that or a missile hitting his house.

It turned out Callopea wasn't as smart as he liked to make me believe, because he fell for both of my bluffs. "It wasn't a bomb, just an unfortunate experiment gone wrong. Moddek dum should have never allowed a scientist to use his house for a trial."

Callopea was blatantly lying to me, but I didn't mind since it diverted his attention from my ignoring of Moddek dum's orders and the mating marks. Or so I thought. Because, with his next words, Callopea proved that he was more cunning than I had given him credit for. He had done the same while I was busy trying to snare him.

"Why were you on Morrakbarr?"

So, he found out about that.

"My orders are to free as many humans as possible, and Morrakbarr is a known slave trading harbor," I stretched the truth.

"Funny, since it is the same planet Moddek dum was supposed to send you to."

That was funny. When I spoke to Moddek dum, it sounded more like he was just making contingency plans after I told him about my human cargo.

"He never mentioned it," I deadpanned.

"So you want me to believe it is a coincidence then that you were on the same planet Moddek dum was supposed to send you to and terminated the very same person Moddek dum was supposed to arrange to meet you?"

I shrugged, "How many slavers providing human slaves are there on Morrakbarr?"

He didn't believe me, but a small tick around his lipless mouth said he was willing to play this game. Since I was interested in his ulterior motives, I played it with him.

"I acknowledge your point and will take it under consideration. Here are your new orders. Get rid of the humans and meet me on Ohrur."

"We're only a day away from Astrionis. I will leave them there and come straight to Ohrur."

"I don't think you understand me, Space Guardian," he stopped right in front of me, but since I had programmed his holocast to be on the smaller side, he barely reached my hips as he stretched to his full height to look intimidatingly at me, or at least what he thought would intimidate me. "Drop your cargo and turn around, straight for Ohrur."

"Drop my cargo? As in out into space?" I clarified.

"I don't care if you drop them in an asteroid belt right now!"

"As you wish, I'll see you soon." I ended the comm. A small gasp from Alice told me that she had overheard the conversation.

"I won't do that," I felt compelled to assure her. "I will take all of you to Astrionis as promised."

"That was your boss?"

"One of them," I nodded.

"But... what will they do to you if you don't follow their orders?" She asked, and her voice's true concern touched a place in me I hadn't realized was alive.

"I don't intend to follow their orders and go to Ohrur," I replied, hoping to ease her mind, another thing I had never considered before.

She frowned, "I don't understand. What will you do? Are you quitting your job?"

"This is not really a job you simply quit," I explained. "But this," I rolled up my sleeve to indicate my mating marks, "is a mystery I intend to figure out."

"Oh," her face lit up, "you're going to find out where you came from."

"Yes," I said because it was simpler. I would try to chase down the other Space Guardians who had been assigned the same mission as me. It didn't escape me that both Moddekum and Callopea had asked to see my arms; well, Callopea had tried to ask. At least I had been able to distract him from that. I was sure both of them had been checking for mating marks. It left me wondering, if the other three Space Guardians had defected after being in contact with humans, did they also have mating marks? Were they searching for our origins? There was only one way to find out, but first, I had to find them.

ALICE

I couldn't stop thinking about Xyrek. Watching him talk to his minder had been eerie as hell. The alien had materialized from out of nowhere in the middle of Xyrek's quarters. He walked through furniture like a ghost. Their conversation, however, soon distracted me from this incredible alien high-tech.

It took me a moment to digest that Xyrek had been supposed to drop all of us off at that mysterious planet we had landed on, and instead, had freed more slaves and killed the men responsible. A few months ago, the thought of someone killing anybody, let alone a good amount of somebodies, would have freaked me out. But an alien invasion and my consequent kidnapping had turned me into another person—one who no longer flinched at the idea of taking a life.

Suddenly, I saw Xyrek in a new light. Behind his usually asshole demeanor was a person who cared about others. Enough to risk his career and whatever other consequences he might face to do the right thing. This new light I saw him in was dangerous to my well-being. I was already physically attracted to him, something I had been able to keep at bay because... well, because he was a royal ass, mostly. Now though?

Shit.

I thought I might start caring for him.

And then there were the mating marks. And the mystery surrounding him.

A deep sigh escaped me. Mysteries had always held a deep allure to me. I couldn't stand walking away from something that I hadn't figured out yet. One of the reasons my employers loved me so much and paid me so well. I spent many nights on the couch in my office, only sleeping when I could no longer hold my eyes open or think straight.

Alice, let it go, my boss used to say, but once my curiosity was piqued, I never could. The ECHO-9 project was my obsession. It was a mystery that wouldn't leave me the hell alone. That damn circuit had nearly driven me insane. I'd spent weeks debugging it, chasing an answer that shouldn't have even existed. Self-repairing circuits didn't redesign themselves. They didn't learn. They didn't think. But ECHO-9 had. It had started as a tiny inconsistency in our lab tests—harmless, almost fascinating—until the first medical prototype returned with a flagged report.

A pacemaker running ECHO-9 had altered itself.

It should have been impossible. The circuit wasn't supposed to change its configuration after deployment. But when I looked at the data, I saw it plain as day—the pathways had shifted, optimizing for efficiency in a way that no human had programmed. It had adapted on its own.

The problem? The changes had improved conductivity... but the shift could have just as easily killed the patient.

I only had a short window to figure out why before that possibility became a reality.

Management wanted to recall the devices quietly, slap a fix on them, and move on—but that wasn't good enough for me. I couldn't just leave it alone. If I didn't fully understand what went wrong, how could I be sure it wouldn't happen again?

So I did what I always did when I couldn't let something go—I worked for three

nights straight, pushing past exhaustion, fueled by caffeine and sheer stubbornness. I isolated the circuit, ran tests, and watched it change in real time. It wasn't a software bug. It wasn't faulty wiring.

It was the chip.

Something deep in the architecture of the processing unit—something in the way it handled error correction and power distribution—was subtly corrupting its own logic. The ECHO-9 chip had been designed to reallocate resources dynamically, a way to prevent catastrophic failure in high-risk environments. But no one had accounted for the fact that, under very specific conditions, it could start over-correcting itself.

The pacemaker hadn't just repaired a failing connection—it had found a better one.

This sounded great in theory, except in the process, it overrode safety limits and bypassed voltage caps, meaning it could have overloaded at any moment and fried the patient's heart from the inside out. With the help of a computer programmer, we got it fixed—pushing the limits of the deadline, but we did it. We shut down its self-optimization functions before it could make another improvement that might turn deadly. The company signed off on my fix and sent me the next mystery to solve.

Now, whatever was going on with Xyrek was stirring the banked fires of my obsessive curiosity. I could feel the compulsion to figure out the secrets surrounding him creep under my skin. I could no more let this go than I could ECHO-9.

"I need to go to the bridge," Xyrek said, moving toward the door. I waited; every other normal person would have added an Are you gonna be okay , or something along those lines, but not him.

I stopped him. "Why?"

"Why, what?" he turned by the door, looking adorably confused. Adorably ?

"Why do you need to go to the bridge? The ship is flying itself, right?"

"Right," he nodded. "I need to make sure the Ohrurs don't alter our course."

"They can do that?" I was instantly intrigued. I mean, come on, we were talking long, extremely long distances here.

His eyes challenged me to question him further. Instead, I asked, "Can I come?"

It was his turn to ask, "Why?"

"Your tech intrigues me. I want to learn and might even be able to help."

He scoffed but waved me on. As always, the hallway was packed with people. Standing, sitting, lying down. Some were playing with the comms Xyrek had generously given us; others were talking or sleeping, ticking the time away until we finally reached our destination. Nobody said anything or tried to approach us. They even moved out of our way. The door to the bridge opened, and I stepped in and stopped dead in my tracks.

Holy. Shit!

I wasn't sure what I had expected—I mean, I had watched a lot of sci-fi movies, so I had an idea—but it wasn't the seamless, organic flow, dark metal, and sleek design with soft blue lighting embedded into the walls like glowing veins that greeted me. The control panels were smooth, integrated surfaces, responsive to motion and touch commands, and no doubt they were running a system so advanced I couldn't even begin to wrap my head around it.

But what really caught my attention were the windows . Three massive, triangular frames stretched across the front of the bridge, positioned at precise angles that should have given a panoramic view of space. But instead of the cold abyss of the void, all I saw were glowing displays of raw data.

Real-time schematics of the ship's inner workings, I assumed. Some areas showed hollow wireframes of the vessel's exterior, tiny diagnostic markers blinking as they reported on shields, structural integrity, and engine performance.

I had never seen anything like it. My brain was already racing to understand. Why display information here instead of on a console? Why put diagnostic readouts where the stars should be? I took a step closer, aching to reach out and interact with the interface—because it had to be interactive, right?—when a voice rumbled from behind me.

"Don't touch anything."

Xyrek was busy browsing through cubes he had called up on his comm, not even looking at me. I scowled. "You think I'm going to break your fancy alien ship?"

"I think you have a dangerous habit of sticking your hands where they don't belong." His fingers danced over one of the cube screens.

I turned my attention away from the rows of blinking consoles and frowned at a set of glowing glyphs etched into one of the overhead panels. They pulsed slowly, in a pattern I couldn't quite track—almost like a heartbeat.

"What do those mean?" I asked, nodding at the symbols.

Xyrek didn't stop whatever he was doing, fingers gliding over a cluster of translucent cubes. For a second, I thought he was ignoring me—or hadn't heard—and I was just

about to repeat the question when he said, “Environmental integrity readings. Oxygen saturation, hull pressure, shield strength. That panel alerts me before anything else does.”

“Oka—y?” I dragged out the word, hoping he’d take the hint and explain further.

He sighed and glanced over. “It glows red if we’re about to die. Otherwise, it stays calm.”

“Charming,” I muttered.

He returned to his cubes.

I tore my gaze away from the hyperspace madness and refocused on something safer—the two captain’s chairs at the center of the bridge. They didn’t look like just seats. They were command thrones. Raised slightly above the rest of the bridge, positioned perfectly for control, they looked like they had every function at their fingertips—from navigation to combat systems.

I lifted an eyebrow. “Let me guess. One for you, one for your second-in-command?”

Xyrek snorted. “No second-in-command. Both chairs are mine.”

I turned to him, unimpressed. “Oh, of course. Because why wouldn’t you need two seats for your giant ego?”

His smirk widened. “They serve different functions. One is for standard operation. The other is for—” he paused, and his expression shifted ever so slightly, “—when things get serious.”

I narrowed my eyes. The way he said that... Something about it sent a thrill through

me. He winked, and I realized he was pulling my strings. Wow, the alien made a joke. I mentally clapped for him, seeing a side I had missed so far.

Xyrek redirected his attention to his screens. He worked fast now, faster than before, as his fingers flew over the cubes. The screens flickered, and I wondered if it was in warning. The alien script glowed in an ominous red.

"They're rerouting commands through my navigation relays," Xyrek growled, his voice taut with frustration. "They're using my ship's systems against me."

I watched over his shoulder, absorbing everything—the flickering lights, the shifting energy readouts, the error spikes. Then I saw it.

"Are these the power levels?" I asked, pointing at a readout.

Xyrek barely looked up, only grunted in response. I took that as a yes and scrutinized the readouts. If I wasn't wrong, it looked like the power levels to the ship's primary control relays were fluctuating. Something was happening.

"I think the Ohrurs are trying to overload your circuits. My bet would be that if they succeed, we'll lose manual control of your ship."

Xyrek ignored me. I was convinced I was right and whipped around, scanning the bridge. "Where's your main power junction for the bridge relays?"

Xyrek barely spared me a glance, too busy fighting a war on his cubes. "Why?"

"Because I think they're overloading your primary circuits. You're about to lose everything if I don't cut the right connection."

That got his attention. He snapped his head toward me, his black eyes narrowed.

Then, with a sharp jerk of his chin, he pointed toward a recessed panel near the base of the captain's chairs. I didn't wait for permission. I dropped to my knees, pried open the panel, and nearly swore out loud at what I saw.

Behind the panel was a complex energy distribution board, sleek and far beyond anything I'd ever worked on before—but at least the design principle was somewhat familiar. The Ohrurs' hack was pulling power directly from the ship's core, funneling it through these relays in a way that would eventually fry them.

"Tools, I need tools," I pressed out.

Xyrek cursed under his breath, then reached under the captain's chair and pulled a black case out, pushing it toward me. I had no idea what those tools were, but one looked like a knife, and it would have to do. I started pulling open the power nodes.

Xyrek noticed. "What the hell are you doing?"

"Saving your damn ship!" I snapped, working fast. "You have an emergency bypass for this, right? A hardline switch that lets you manually cut bridge power from everything except primary control?"

His jaw tightened, but I could tell he was impressed I even knew to ask that.

"Right side, second module." He pressed out.

I reached for it—and jerked my hand back as a sharp arc of energy snapped toward my fingers.

"Shit!" My heart slammed against my ribs.

The overload was getting worse. If I cut power too soon, I could short the whole

bridge—but if I waited too long, the Ohrurs would take full control.

No time for finesse.

I gritted my teeth, yanked my jacket sleeve over my hand, and grabbed the module. A sharp jolt of alien energy surged through my arm, making my fingers tingle—but I held on and ripped the relay free. The result was instantaneous.

The bridge shuddered, and lights flickered as the ship's power grid rerouted itself, forcing manual control back to Xyrek's command chair.

The screens flashed—and suddenly, all the Ohrur overrides vanished. I sagged against the panel, chest heaving, fingers numb from the residual shock. Xyrek exhaled hard, running a quick systems check. Then he turned toward me, his eyes gleamed with something that might have resembled reluctant appreciation.

"You could have killed yourself."

I smirked, still catching my breath. "Yeah? Well, you could've lost your damn ship."

Silence stretched between us for a few moments. Then, to my shock, Xyrek huffed a low, dry laugh. "Maybe you're not completely useless after all, engineer."

I shot him a mock glare as I pulled myself back to my feet. "High praise, Captain Asshole. Truly."

His smirk lingered for half a second longer than usual before he turned back to the controls. I rolled my aching shoulder and glanced at the still-smoking power junction. Yeah. I wasn't useless. And something told me Xyrek wouldn't forget that anytime soon.

XYREK

Damn, that female managed to impress me. Nobody had ever done that, not like her. The evidence of the tinkering I had seen so far had been mediocre at best, but what she pulled earlier today? I was still shaking my head when I thought about it.

Never in a hundred years would I have thought it would be that hard to override the Ohrur's programming. It seemed like they already had experience doing it, as if others had... a thought occurred to me. Of course, others had. Every ship belonging to the Ohrurs was equipped with recall orders. I should have thought about it when they sent me on the hunt to find the traitors . If that's what they really were. The deeper I got into this mystery and the more I discovered, the more convinced I became that they weren't traitors. It was more than likely that we shared a common goal.

"Here," I shoved the kit of tools into Alice's hands. "You've earned it. Just don't dismantle my ship."

She opened the box, and her entire face lit up in pleasure. "Thank you!"

I grunted a response and threw myself on the chair, calling up several cubes I had open from previous searches, only peripherally aware of Alice chasing down one of the cleaning drones and beginning to dismantle it with her new tools.

Earlier, I had watched Nock's stream about mating marks, but it hadn't given me any information I didn't already know, except that I couldn't find anything on unexpected or interspecies mating marks as he had claimed. My mind worked furiously; the more I thought about it, the more convinced I was that Zaarek must have experienced

something similar to what Alice and I shared. Nock was with Zaarek—for whatever unfathomable reason—and he had more or less put out an open invitation for every Space Guardian to go to UX938.

I ran a quick analysis to see if I could make it there in time, but every scenario the computer played out told me I would get there days after them. Zaarek was a Space Guardian; he would never risk hanging around the space station long enough for others to catch up with him. When Nock broadcast his stream, he must have been in relatively close range.

He had been looking for someone!

The more I thought about it, the more sense it made. He must have been looking for the other three Space Guardians assigned to the Pandraxian mission. He was trying to get all of us together.

It made sense, but unfortunately, that didn't help me. I would never make it to UX938 in time, and wherever they went from there, it would be like trying to find a particular star in a cluster.

Tomorrow, we would reach Astrionis, and I would be rid of my cargo. Lord Protector Garth might know something that would help me if I were lucky. The others must have crossed paths with him. We had all followed the same orders, and if they had fallen into the mating trap, it was only logical to assume they had more than one human aboard. And if they did, further logic dictated they had wanted to get rid of them as badly as I did.

A small curse from Alice ripped me from my thoughts. I followed her line of sight to the cleaning drone she had taken apart, which was now banging its case repeatedly against the wall. My lips curled up in amusement. I should have been annoyed that she destroyed another drone, but I wasn't. Not a bit. Instead, I watched her face crease

in concentration as she looked over the bits and pieces that had been left over after she put the drone back together.

I wasn't sure what possessed me, but I got up and walked over to her, kneeling in front of her. I picked up a small part and held it up to her. "That's the stabilizer."

"Oops," she laughed.

Her hands searched through the assorted tools and produced the Master's Pin. Holding it up, she tried to insert it into the stabilizer, but it didn't fit—it never fit anywhere. I hadn't seen a Master's Pin in years and took it from her, thoughtfully looking it over. A strange sensation moved something deep in the recesses of my brain, but before I could analyze it, Alice asked, "What is this tool?"

I held it out to her, with my eyes locked on the very tip of it. It resembled a cluster of stars, shaped unlike any other tool, and proven to be useless as such. "It's called a Master's Pin. As far as I know, nobody has ever used it, but it's become a symbol of your trade."

She smiled, "A symbol?"

"Yes," I nodded. "It's kind of strange, really, but every kid knows what it represents and that the person who holds it can fix anything."

"Oh, I like that," she beamed, turning the Master's Pin this way and that.

I wasn't one to believe in legends or tales, but I thought Alice might enjoy this little story. "It's said that it's hundreds of thousands of years old and that one day, an engineer will use it to open the gates to Heaven or Hell." I grinned. "So be careful with it."

Her mouth formed a perfect O . My cock responded immediately as my body remembered the kiss we had shared. Frygg. My entire being hummed with the desire to taste those lips again. Why did I have to get this close to her? Now, I could smell the sweet scent emanating from her, making me dizzy. The scent was like nothing I had ever smelled before, and yet it called to a deep-buried primal instinct in me.

Arousal!

I swallowed at that realization.

The little human female was as aroused by my presence as I was by hers.

Distance. You need distance. Now!

"I need to check on something," I mumbled, basically running from the bridge. I felt her gaze bore into my back, but I didn't care what my hasty retreat looked like; I was running away like a coward.

I would have loved to be able to lean against the wall as soon as I left the bridge and take a deep, steadying breath, but with all the humans beleaguering the hallway, it had to wait until I reached my quarters.

Once there, I was able to do just that and try to get the hard beat of my heart and my traitorous cock under control. What the frygg had just happened?

You're horny , my mind informed me.

Well, thanks for that brilliant observation, asshole , I retorted.

This was the most useless information my brain had ever conjured. I hoped to the stars that there would be a Fighting Pit on Astrionis, because the balled-up emotions

inside me needed an outlet, and what better way than to fight? Yeah, I liked that idea. I would ask for two Pronex and... a chatyr—a dangerous predator. No, make that three Pronex and two chatyrs. That sounded like a good plan. That would exhaust my pent-up emotions.

How will you spend a night without her in your room ? My mind countered.

Frygg. The bastard was right.

I slammed my palm a few times against the wall. The stinging helped some. Not enough. When had she burrowed herself that deep under my skin? Or was this just something the mating marks made me think and feel? Did they, by any chance, release some kind of pheromones? One that made me react to her like this?

I considered the possibility and liked it. I liked it very much because it would mean that as soon as I was away from Astrionis and her, I would be able to return to my normal life. Well, not quite, I still had things to investigate, but at least my mind would be distracted, and my cock wouldn't be constantly yearning for her.

Fighting Pit! And spirits.

That would numb my body until I was far enough away from her to stop craving her with an irrational fervor that bordered on being possessed.

I pulled up information on Astrionis and searched for the closest option to where I would land.

Frygging old school Pandraxians!

No Fight Clubs! No spirits!

Damn, those backworlders. I might understand the lure of hunting with a sword and spear instead of a blaster. But these damn traditionalists took it several steps too far. They shunned spirits and, it seemed, fight clubs.

Frustrated, I expanded my search for nearby places that would offer me the relief I craved and found several not too far: Pandrax. Of course.

Fine, that would do.

I could do that. I knew I could wait another day or two. I would have to. And as far as the sleeping alone part was concerned... I would give her a comm. So we could talk to each other every now and then. I liked that idea, too. She had grown on me, like... a friend... Yes, a friend. One I didn't want to fuck. Not at all. Once we had some distance between us, it would be nice to just... talk to her.

I smirked at that. I was almost convinced that I had convinced myself.

ALICE

Astrionis wasn't at all what I had expected. Even Tatooine offered more tech than Astrionis did. Xyrek's spaceship was the only thing that screamed advanced technologically.

Don't get me wrong, the planet was breathtaking in its own right. Beautiful beyond anything I had ever seen before. Gnarly, humongous root-like branches arched out of the ground and rose up high into the sky. People were coming and going out of them, making me wonder if they lived inside them. Grass, taller than Xyrek, surrounded the spot where we had landed.

A tall man with metallic shimmering skin stood a few feet away from the gangway we used to disembark. Next to him stood a human woman, and I couldn't help but gape at her. She was beautiful, dressed in shimmering clothes that had a medieval quality to them. What struck me more, though, was how she leaned into the alien man, how he had his arm around her, and how much they obviously loved each other. A pang of regret and envy ricocheted through my heart, constricting my chest. I risked a quick glimpse at Xyrek as he approached the couple. In a few hours, I would never see him again.

Somehow, I had gotten used to his abrasive nature and asshole-ish ways, and the thought of never seeing or talking to him again hurt. I tried to tell myself that it was only the familiarity that I would miss, that I wasn't attached, but deep down, I knew that wasn't true.

"Good to see you, Space Guardian..." the metallic man offered his hand to Xyrek.

"Xyrek," Xyrek said, taking the man's arm by the elbow and gripping it, just like the other did to him. "Lord Protector Garth, I presume."

"That's me, and this is my mate, Lady Silla." The other alien introduced the woman by his side. I still wasn't over how good the two of them looked together, like a perfect power couple. Besides the strange skin, he was a very handsome man, especially with that long, black hair with highlights that shimmered in the same tones as his skin. "I see you brought us more refugees."

"As requested," Xyrek agreed, nodding at Lady Silla, who sent a sweet smile at him, which caused a strange resentment to grow in my stomach.

"Well, I'm glad one of you is still fulfilling the emperor's orders," Garth sounded a bit bitter.

"I heard there were some disruptions," Xyrek allowed.

"So you haven't found your Soulweb Glyph mate yet?" Lady Silla asked, almost looking sad.

"Soulweb, what?" Xyrek asked, his eyes paused on me as I made my way down the gangway with the others.

"The mating marks? You haven't gotten them yet?"

Xyrek stiffened, then pulled up his sleeve. "These?"

"Oh," Silla clapped her hands together. "Yes. Who is she? Where is she?"

I tried to melt into the group of the others, supporting Ava, but Xyrek called for me, "Alice."

With a sigh, I smiled apologetically at Ava, who looked surprised but nodded as I walked over to where Xyrek stood.

"Show them," he instructed.

My hackles rose at his command, but I figured this wasn't the time to cause a scene about his bossiness or lack of manners, and I rolled up my sleeve enough so that Silla could see some of the strange markings.

"Oh," Silla exclaimed again, clapping her hands before pulling me into her embrace. "Another sister. Isn't that wonderful, Garth?"

"I'm delighted," Garth replied dryly. "Does that mean you're no longer going to work on the rescue mission either?"

"Oh, leave him alone. Daryus will just have to take it up with the Ohrurs and hire more Space Guardians." Silla said, and it didn't escape me how easily she used the name Daryus while referring to the Emperor of the Pandraxian Empire, who I'd learned from Xyrex was one of the most powerful men in the universe.

"I'm so happy for you two."

From the corner of my eye, I noticed others approaching my group. Pandraxians and humans alike. None looked as bedraggled as our group. They looked healthy and well taken care of. Garth's eyes moved over our group for the first time, and his brows creased. "Where did you get Pandraxians? Don't tell me from the Ohrurs?"

Xyrek startled. "In a way. Some are from Morrakbarr, others from the Cryons."

Garth ran a hand through his hair, and Silla grabbed his arm, sending a this is bad look at me.

"We need to talk," Garth pressed out.

"I need to take care of the refugees," Silla looked torn between her stated duty and the need to stay close to her husband. "Are you alright?"

"I'm fine, cinna." He lightly kissed her forehead, and there was so much love and tenderness in that kiss that my insides heated. God, I want this . So much . I had never thought about a husband and family, but on the rare occasions I had a boyfriend, I liked the easy camaraderie and familiarity. My problem was that I hated the dating part with a passion. I hated the initial Do you like your coffee white or black questions. Inevitably, my relationships broke, mostly because of my inability to commit to investing deeper feelings. Sometimes, I thought I was broken. That I would never be capable of loving another person or even truly caring. I feared I'd damaged a piece of myself beyond repair when I shut out my family—even though cutting them off was the only way I knew how to survive. But deep down, I had always wanted what Silla and Garth seemed to have.

"Well, that's it then." I moved the tip of my foot through the dirt on the ground and noticed how different it was from Earth, but I couldn't bring myself to analyze or contemplate it further. My heart constricted at being forced to say goodbye to Xyrek. "Thank you for everything."

"Don't get all emotional about it, engineer. Try not to break anything without me around to fix your messes," he replied, and a smile tugged at the corners of my lips. My heart was heavy; somehow, I had hoped for something more meaningful, something maybe like he'd miss me. Get real , Alice. I straightened my shoulders, nodded at him, and followed Silla, who gave me a strange look.

"Ah, hold on, I almost forgot," I turned at the sound of Xyrek's voice, who held out a comm to me, while Garth frowned. "I added some streams for you about our tech, how it works, how to fix things..." for a moment he looked lost, like adding the next

words caused him physical pain, "and I thought maybe now and then we could talk to each other... in case you need anything or... just want to... uhm, talk."

For some stupid reason, my heart flip-flopped when I took the comm from him. He had already given me the tools; this was more than I could have expected, and tears threatened to well in my eyes. My throat constricted; there was no way I could force out a coherent word without breaking down, so I plastered a smile on and nodded in gratitude. I swallowed, needing to say something. Xyrek was already turning back to Garth.

"Thank you. I would like that. And I really hope you'll find what you're looking for," I managed, swallowing a few more times, but proud that my voice didn't break.

He didn't look at me again, but I knew he heard me. With a sigh, I rushed after Silla, who frowned at me. "What was all that about? You two are not leaving together?"

I shook my head, "No, why would we?"

"Ahm, the mating marks?" she looked confused.

I shrugged, "They're just something that happened. We have no idea why; he's going to find out, though," I added with more conviction than I felt.

"And then he's coming back for you?"

"I don't think so. We don't exactly... we're not... It's complicated."

"Oh honey, it always is with these aliens," Silla laughed, startling me. "Trust me, they're big oafs, but putty once they admit you're the one."

"Yeah, not us," I doubled down.

"It's interesting, though," Silla continued as if I hadn't said a word, "you two don't have any problems being apart?"

"Why would we?" I stopped.

"Well, it's really none of my business, but the others?—"

I interrupted her right there. "What others?"

"You don't know?"

"I don't know anything," I admitted.

"It's a long story. Let me take care of the refugees first, and then we'll have a chat?"

I was burning to find out what she meant by the others , but she was right. My fellow refugees looked like they'd been through hell. I probably didn't look much better, but at least I had been able to have a small break for the last two days.

"Oh, this is Ava," I pulled my friend out of the line, "she's pregnant. Do you have a doctor or someone who can take a look at her?"

"Of course. Hi Ava, I'm Silla," Silla introduced herself. The rest of her words were lost on me as my gaze moved to Xyrek and Garth, standing by his ship, talking.

XYREK

Alice followed Silla, deep in conversation, and my eyes followed her. I hadn't seen much of Astrionis, and I didn't intend to, either, but it looked like a place she would fit in. She might not be able to fix any high-tech machines, but the Pandraxians here needed engineers for various projects. They diverted water to the fields, used primitive machines to bring it up to their homes, and so on. She would have plenty to tinker with.

Then why was my heart so frygging heavy?

"Explain," Garth demanded the moment the females were out of earshot. I liked him; he was straightforward, without any of the small talk most people liked to add to their words.

The only question was how much I was willing to divulge to him. Since I wasn't working for him and most likely would never see him again, I decided to be as straightforward as he was. I hoped that by filling him in, he would return the courtesy. I had a feeling that he knew more about us Space Guardians than I did at the moment.

"I freed several hundred humans as instructed from the Cryons, from one of their mining planets." I filled him in. "On my way here, I received different orders. I was told some of the Space Guardians assigned to the same mission had turned traitors, and I was ordered to apprehend them."

I watched Garth. He didn't seem at all surprised. I would press him on that later. "I

was told to go to Morrakbarr, where I was supposed to leave the humans I had aboard, then focus on my new mission."

"But you didn't?" Garth asked.

"No. But I was curious enough to make the detour." There was no sense in telling him that, at that point, I had still been a good Space Guardian and had every intention of getting rid of my cargo. But even then, I hadn't been willing to sell my charges into slavery. "When I figured out the male I was to meet was working with the Ohrurs selling slaves, including humans and Pandraxians, I decided to interfere."

"Good," Garth nodded appreciatively. "I also received information that the Ohrurs have been experimenting with humans, Pandraxians, and other species."

That was news to me, and I was glad I had decided to be open with him.

In the distance, a giant koloch let out one of its soul-crushing calls and ran toward a herd of its peers, but I was only peripherally aware of it. "How did you find out?"

"Another Space Guardian, Vraax, visited us recently. He brought many of these poor people here."

Vraax?

I didn't think I had caught that name before. He wasn't one of the four assigned to the human rescue mission. Unfortunately, since I aborted the Ohrur's recall attempt, I lost access to their database and wouldn't be able to find out who Vraax was and how he fit into the picture. I also wasn't about to ask Garth. I doubted he knew. Plus, it didn't matter in the grand scheme of things.

"You don't happen to know where he left for, do you?" I asked because that

information was much more important than any other.

Garth grinned wryly, "I do. They all went to Darlam."

"All?"

He nodded, "Every single one of the four Space Guardians assigned to this mission and then some."

Darlam?

I had never heard that name before, but it shouldn't be too hard to find out where it was and why my fellow Guardians felt compelled to seek it out.

"Thank you," I told Garth, meaning it. He had given me more information than I could have hoped for.

"I've already informed the Emperor of the atrocities the Ohrurs are involved in. And I told Raasla to let me know if you need any help from the Pandraxian Empire."

Shrewd, I realized. The Pandraxian Empire, already strong to begin with, had gained power after usurping the Cryons. If any renegade Space Guardian started working for them, their power would outmatch that of the entire GTU. I didn't think for one tick that Emperor Daryus would help us out of the goodness of his heart. But aligning himself with Space Guardians would increase his power, even if it were only one or four.

I was also aware that the Emperor took any injury to one of his subjects extremely seriously. If it was true that the Ohrurs had experimented with Pandraxians, it was as good as a declaration of war. A war he couldn't start as long as we Space Guardians fought for the Ohrurs.

Political intrigue was never anything that interested me or anything I would have ever stuck my nose in, but it seemed that I was somewhat involved in it now, like it or not. It would be stupid to alienate a possible ally.

"Thank you," I held out my arm.

He shook it. "Thank you. If you have an hour, I'll have your ship loaded with supplies. Silla will never forgive me if I don't."

I didn't really need any supplies, but I wasn't stupid enough to say no. It didn't even take that long. While we waited, we talked a little bit more, and when the ship was ready and I was about to leave, Garth drew his eyebrows together as if looking for something or someone.

"Let me send someone to find your mate. She seems to be late," He said.

I shook my head, "She's not coming."

"Not coming?" He echoed, perplexed.

"We might share these marks," I held up my arm, even though the marks were covered again, "but that's it."

Garth looked even more puzzled than before. "That's strange, the others... they couldn't bear being apart."

"What do you mean?" I asked. Despite myself, I was curious.

"They said it physically hurt them to be apart even a few paces." He explained.

"Strange," I rubbed my chin, but his words only reinforced my opinion that the

universe, or whoever was behind these mating marks, had made a mistake. "We're not like that, but if you don't mind, I would appreciate you keeping an eye on her. She's very good at fixing things."

"You have my word," he agreed and waited by the platform until I gave the command to retract it and close the hatch.

I rubbed my hands in glee. Fighting Pit and spirits, here I come . I hurried to the bridge. Already, the feeling of leaving a vital part of myself behind was threatening to tear me apart. I could hardly wait to exorcise Alice out of my mind with a good, hard fight. A feeling of dread knotted my gut. Frygg. The more distance I put between her and me, the better.

ALICE

"None of you has to stay here," Silla promised all of us while we sat inside what looked like a great hall from medieval times. "The Pandraxian Empire is made of two factions, one that adheres to the old traditions and is governed by Lord Protectors, like my mate, Garth, and the other that embraces the high-tech lifestyle. Many citizens alternate every so many years, wanting to live one way for a time and then switch."

Silla's gaze moved over our ranks as if trying to guess who would be more comfortable where. "There are also other planets kept by Lord Protectors if Astrionis isn't to your liking. There won't be any judgment from us. You've been through enough and deserve to make your own choices.

"And then there is Rottvan, a brand-new planet we are colonizing and developing. It was meant to become a planet for human refugees, but after the mating bond was discovered, it was thought better to try and integrate our species more."

"Mating bond?" Josie asked.

"Yes, the easiest way to explain it is that it's like finding one's soulmate. I know," she raised her hands, "I didn't believe in it either, but trust me, the Pandraxians and some others showed me proof, and honestly, it's the most magical thing that can happen to you." Her smile was so warm and dreamy that nobody voiced any arguments. There was a lot of new information to digest anyway.

Servants entered, bringing very Earth-like food. Bread, soups, rice, spaghetti, meat, it

was too much to name. Many groans of appreciation rang out as we began to eat, filling our stomachs with real food for the first time in months.

Garth walked in, putting an arm around his wife. They looked at us with affection, but my heart grew heavy because I knew Garth's presence meant that Xyrek had left.

It was stupid, really. I had known he would. What had I expected? That he would return with a declaration of love and claim he couldn't possibly live without me? I scoffed. I wouldn't have known how to respond to something like that. It wasn't like I had any feelings for the guy. Right?

No. I mean, I liked him. But I liked Ava too. And I liked Silla and Garth. If any of them left, I wouldn't be too upset. I might be sad, but it wouldn't hurt. So, there. I was just sad that Xyrek had left. Nothing else.

After a long meal, more people, mostly humans, appeared, moving from table to table and inviting my fellow travelers to follow them. Undoubtedly, to show them where they would be staying.

To my surprise, it was Silla who approached me. "Garth said you had a talent for fixing things?"

I nodded, "I do."

"We have a problem at the forge. Would you mind taking a look at it in the morning?"

"I can look at it now," I offered.

"I don't want to put you out. You need to get acclimated here first, see your quarters, and make it homey."

I shook my head. "What I need is to feel useful. Show me."

Her smile was so wide and sweet and contagious that I reciprocated it instantly. It had been a long time since I smiled this honestly back at someone, and my jaw hurt. The last time was at Xyrek when he... damn him, why did he always have to sneak back into my mind?

I followed Silla outside, still a bit awed by how they lived inside a freaking, hollowed-out root and how it looked absolutely medieval, complete with a fireplace— inside the root. We even walked over a drawbridge that stretched over a real moat. More than a moat because it looked like it was lava or a swampy mess. Heat rose from it, reaching me even on the bridge. This entire place was impressive and utterly unreal. Even the sky, with its barely visible planet or moon sitting on the horizon, proclaimed that I wasn't on Earth any longer.

I wasn't sure how long living inside a root, with candles and fireplaces, would be intriguing and at what point I would start yearning for a TV or whatever the other Pandraxians had, but for now, I thought I could live here.

We entered the forge, and the sweltering heat from the fires immediately enveloped me. It was a relentless heat that clung to my skin, thick and suffocating, like standing inside a wood-burning oven while someone kept throwing logs onto the fire. Sweat dripped down my back, soaking into my shirt and making it stick to my skin.

The air reeked of metal, hot iron, sweat, and soot, and it truly felt as if I had stepped through a gate into the past. The steady clang of hammers against steel, the hiss of metal being quenched in water, and the low murmurs of workers filled the space around me. In a way, it reminded me of the garage I used to work at before my fancy job in Vegas.

This was medieval in the most impossibly real way. I turned in place, taking it all in.

Everywhere I looked, weapons gleamed under the firelight. Swords, spears, axes, and rows upon rows of arrowheads stacked neatly in wooden crates, ready to be fitted into shafts and sent flying into someone's chest. But there were also tools—many, many tools—and household items. I didn't see any type of machine. No conveyor belts, no automated efficiency.

Everything was made by hand, shaped by fire and sweat.

I thought Xyrek was built like one of those guys on muscle drinks and magazines, but these Pandraxians were just as muscular. Their bodies were sculpted and their muscles honed—without an ounce of softness among them. Their metallic-looking skin gleamed in the firelight—purple, yellow, aqua, green.

What I mostly noticed was that the forge was dying, along with all of the blacksmiths' patience. I didn't need to know much about alien or ancient tech to understand the problem. The fire was too weak, and the embers barely glowed beneath half-melted iron. The smiths hammered away at their stations, but the metal wasn't fully pliable. I creased my brows; they had to have known that the bellows were shot.

I walked over to the bellows to take a closer look, my lungs burning from the heat. How could these men stand this? The massive, wooden-and-leather contraption that fed air into the flames—the literal lungs of the forge—was nothing more than a sagging, useless heap. It wheezed pathetically every time one of the workers yanked on the pull chain, but there was no strength left in it. No pressure, no force, and without that, the fire wouldn't get hot enough to smelt properly.

I crouched beside it and ran my hands over the damaged leather, the warped frame, and the tangled pulley system. My engineer brain was already piecing together the why behind the failure.

The smiths had tried to fix it, but they obviously didn't have the right tools or understanding of load distribution. Their attempted repairs were rough—layers of mismatched stitching where the leather had torn, splintered wood reinforcing already warped beams. They'd done what they could, but patching something without knowing why it failed in the first place only delayed the inevitable.

It wasn't just the leather. It was the entire system.

The wooden support beams had warped due to uneven weight distribution, which meant the bellows couldn't expand or contract properly—they were misaligned. The pulley system was tangled because the counterweights weren't functioning correctly, making it impossible to pump enough air.

No air, no fire. No fire, no forge.

I wiped the sweat from my forehead with the back of my hand and turned to Silla, who was watching me with the kind of expectant patience that only someone in charge could pull off.

"Can you fix it?" she asked.

"Yeah. But I need a few things." The blacksmiths exchanged doubtful glances with each other, but I ignored them. "First, I need rope. Sturdy, thick rope."

A few hesitated, still unconvinced I wasn't about to make things worse. But when Silla simply lifted a brow, the smiths scrambled to get what I needed. A few hours later, I had it fixed. I pulled on the pulley, a rush of air blasted into the struggling fire, and suddenly, the flames roared back to life. The forge exploded with even more heat, licking at the iron, turning the dim orange embers into a raging inferno once more.

I exhaled hard, wiping soot from my face with the back of my sleeve. "There," I said. "That should hold."

"Impossible," one of the smiths muttered, eyeing the now-functional bellows like it was some kind of miracle. Every face was filled with gratitude and excitement. It reminded me of when I used to work in the garage and fixed a car whose owner had been sure this was their last visit before they would have to buy a new car they couldn't afford. The same strange sensation of warmth creeping through my chest I experienced then ran through me now and brought a genuine smile to my lips. Yes, I could live here, and I would like it too.

"Thank you," Silla said, pressing my shoulder.

I smiled deeply at her, "No, thank you. This reminded me of how useful my work used to be."

She grinned. "I think you'll fit right in. Come, let me show you your new room; you can get cleaned up there too. I'll have clothes brought up and whatever else you might need."

To my surprise, she took me back to the palace . I wasn't sure why I called it that, probably because she and the Lord Protector lived here, or maybe because it was the biggest root around. Either way, it was getting dark, and I saw many other Pandraxians and humans going into their smaller root houses.

"Am I staying with you?" I asked.

"I have a feeling your work here will be very important to us. So yes, if you don't mind, you'll be staying with us," She replied, and we walked over the moat.

"So, this moat..." I drifted off.

"We have some nasty critters come out as soon as it gets dark. That's why we have all these precautions. They can't enter the rootrocks, but the moat provides a second layer of defense and will keep other enemies out, too, if they ever come."

"Reassuring," I muttered.

She laughed. "Life here isn't easy sometimes, and it can be dangerous, but it's also very rewarding."

"I'll take your word for it."

She grinned and led me back inside and up a set of stairs, so many, my legs ached for the last part of it, and I had to take a break.

XYREK

The ship was quiet. Oh, so perfectly quiet. The cleaning drones had already cleaned every last reminder of the humans away, and I was finally alone with my course set for Pandrax. The ship moved steadily through hyperspeed. It was familiar and reliable—nothing like her.

I should have felt relief leaving her and the others behind. And I did! But something felt off about being alone. Especially in my quarters, where my bed— my bed! Finally, I was able to lie in my bed again—and it still smelled of her .

Alice.

The female I absolutely, without question, did not miss. I scowled and shifted uncomfortably on the mattress. Tomorrow morning, I would be in Pandrax's orbit. Then, I would let loose. I would get drunk and fight, probably for days. I would celebrate finally being free again.

I closed my eyes, only to see green orbs float in front of me. I groaned and turned around. I needed to focus on something else, something that mattered—like Garth's intel about the Ohrurs and the secrets they'd been keeping—most of all, about Darlam.

I had already read up on it. According to the records, the planet belonged to the Ohrurs but had been placed under quarantine for the past twenty thousand years. That's a long time to keep a planet under quarantine , I mused. A very long time.

According to the GTU database, a deadly disease had broken out soon after the Ohrurs began inhabiting it—there was no mention of any aborigines—causing over fifty percent of the Ohrur population to die out. Strangely, only the Ohrurs got sick with whatever the disease was—it was never named. Stranger yet, the disease never reached any other species in the universe, which was surprising and suspicious. The Ohrurs were merchants; they were always in contact with other species. The likelihood of them not spreading a disease that killed fifty percent of their population was slim to none, yet... That was, unfortunately, all I found. There was nothing that would give me a hint on why the other Space Guardians were headed that way.

I was sure I would find out as soon as I connected with them, but first, I had a few days of letting loose ahead of me. I deserved it.

My eyes closed one more time, but another question kept bothering me. The other Space Guardians couldn't be apart from their mates further than a few paces—as if some unseen force physically tethered them together. But not Alice and me. That had never been a problem for us. She was on Astrionis. I was here, alone, perfectly fine.

Except...

My body didn't feel fine. My cock didn't feel fine. My mind sure as a starbane didn't feel fine.

You just need a really good, sound fight. Sore muscles will exorcise her from your mind, I soothed myself. Then everything will be fine. Despite that reassurance, my mind wouldn't give it a rest. Why didn't Alice's and my mating marks act up more? Was it because it wasn't the same kind of bond? Or have the marks, for whatever reason, not fully activated yet?

I tossed and turned and couldn't help wondering how Alice was faring. Did Silla find a nice place for her? Would she be able to work her trade? Was she comfortable? All

those thoughts were driving me crazy.

Just a quick comm , my mind tempted, soon you'll be out of range anyway . That sounded reasonable. I had taken on responsibility for her and the others when I took them in, so why not check up on her?

I pulled out my comm and connected it to hers. Ticks later, I found myself standing in her new room. Candles burned on several surfaces, a simple bed stood in a corner, and Alice sat on it. At the same time, I sat on my bed and watched her hovering, seated form in my room.

"Hey," she said with a small smile, "can't sleep?"

I looked around her room, it wasn't big, but it had a homey quality to it—as much I could define the word homey .

"Are you all well taken care of?" I asked, ignoring her question, needing to distract her and me from the fact that I commed her. I wanted it to at least appear somewhat like professional curiosity and not me missing her already after only a few hours. But seeing her there, so close, it was almost like a drug addict finding his fix.

She tilted her head. "We're fine. Silla's already found me something to do with my hands. Said I looked like the type who gets dangerous when idle."

I let out a soft exhale. "She's not wrong."

Her smile widened, then softened. "You didn't answer me. Can't sleep?"

I focused on the flickering candlelight behind her instead of her face. "Sleep is... inefficient when the mind is unsettled."

“Unsettled,” she echoed. “Sounds serious.”

“It isn’t,” I said too quickly.

A pause stretched. She didn’t push. That was one of the things I found so... maddening about her. She knew exactly when not to dig. Which, of course, only made me want to talk.

“You’re adjusting well,” I said, which was the truth. But it wasn’t why I’d commed.

She nodded, tucking her legs beneath her. “It’s quiet here. Peaceful. You’d hate it.”

“I never said I hated peace.”

“No,” she said, meeting my eyes. “But you never said you liked it either.”

My hands curled around the edge of the bed, trying to find something to ground myself. This had been a bad idea. Now, I had to watch what I said. Instead of admitting that I missed her, I lied, “I just wanted to make sure the transfer went smoothly.”

I wasn't sure if she believed me or not, but her voice sounded kind of heavy, too, or that might have just been wishful thinking. “Well... thanks for checking in on me, Commander.”

The title stung more than it should have. “Good night, Alice.”

I ended the comm before I could do something stupid. Like tell her I’d slept better when she was on the ship. Or that the room already felt too empty.

At some point, I must have finally fallen asleep because when I woke up, I was

already missing her again . It took some willpower, but I managed not to comm her in the morning. I made it to the evening before I succumbed.

The comm connection pulsed softly before stabilizing; her image flickered into clarity. She sat cross-legged on her bed again, hair tied back, a faint smudge of oil on her temple. She looked tired. She looked like herself.

“Hey,” she said. “Didn’t think I’d hear from you again so soon.”

“I had... a systems update to discuss,” I replied, too fast. Her eyebrow arched, but I didn’t elaborate.

Instead, I let the silence stretch while I observed her. The lines around her eyes were softer tonight. She wasn’t guarded. That made it harder.

She tilted her head. “You always do that.”

“Do what?”

“Stare like you’re trying to calculate the tensile strength of my bones.”

“I already know that,” I said without thinking.

She laughed, and the sound landed somewhere beneath my sternum and stroked my cock.

“I had dinner with Silla and Garth,” she said after a moment. “They asked if I wanted to go to Rottvan.”

“What’s on Rottvan?”

“They’re still building the settlement. It’s rough terrain—new systems, no infrastructure. They need engineers.” She hesitated, then added, “They asked if I’d consider helping establish it.”

“You just arrived on Astrionis,” I pointed out. I didn’t like the idea of her going to another planet, but had no idea why. It shouldn’t matter to me if she was on Astrionis or Rottvan. Tomorrow, I would be on Pandrax, and a good fight and plenty of spirits would exorcise her from my mind.

“I know.” She glanced down at her hands, then back up at me. “But they’re offering full autonomy. I’d get to build the colony’s systems from scratch.”

I forced my expression to remain neutral. “It sounds like a challenge.”

She grinned, “Exactly.”

Of course, she would like that.

“They want you to leave right away,” I said. It wasn’t a question. It was an ache.

“No,” she said gently. “They offered. I haven’t decided.”

I wanted to tell her not to go, that she was better off on Astrionis, and that it wasn’t worth the risk. But I had no claim, no right.

“Then decide carefully,” I said instead. “Don’t let them push you into it.”

Her smile softened, small and unreadable. “You’d miss me.”

I didn’t answer, but I knew I would. Because I already did. She let the silence speak for both of us this time.

“Goodnight, Xyrek.” She finally said.

“Goodnight... Alice.” I replied, already dreading the stillness of my quarters and the ache I knew would spread with the loneliness. Frygg. I had never felt lonely in my entire life before. Then she was gone again, and the echo of her voice lingered like static through the comm line.

* * *

Excited, I woke the next day in Pandrax's orbit. I requested permission to land, and within an hour, I set foot in the Fighting Pit I had selected. The air inside was thick with heat and scent—the kind that sank into your skin, your blood, and your bone. I had been in places like this before. Places where things were brutal, simple, and uncomplicated. Just what I needed.

Before I had a chance to find the Fight Master, a tall, dark-skinned female with shimmering eyes slinked toward me. She assessed me from head to toe. "You look like a male in need of a distraction."

"You could say that." I grinned like an idiot, anticipating the fight that would physically exhaust me enough to give my mind the break it needed.

She gestured smoothly toward one of the private chambers. "I can help with that," she purred suggestively.

Her suggestion shouldn't have taken me by surprise, but it did. She wasn't here to welcome me to a fight; she was offering her body. She was pretty and looked clean. But I didn't feel the slightest stirring from my cock. No desire. None. I could have been talking to anybody, not someone offering me mind-blowing sex.

The memory of how my cock had deflated at the idea of looking for relief in a

pleasure house returned full force. Followed by green eyes and a wide smile appearing in front of my vision. Damn her. Damn Alice.

Frygg!

Instinctively, I knew that it wouldn't matter how many Pronex I fought, how much damage I did or received, or how much distance I brought between Alice and me. I wanted her. And only her. That's why I had commed her the first night after I left Astrionis, and last night, and nearly again this morning.

"Come on, handsome, let me show you a good time," the female enticed, her hand reaching for my cock. I swiped it away. Just the thought of her touching me sent shivers of revulsion down my spine.

Again, green eyes and milky skin danced in front of my vision. I slapped my hand to my face and drew it slowly down. This couldn't be happening. It just couldn't. Was this what the Lord Protector had been talking about? Maybe the others hadn't been able to get their dicks up when they were separated, and the Lord Protector, stifling that he was, had worded it differently.

It didn't matter, because it seemed I was cursed.

It wanted Alice.

It was Alice's voice in my head that made my blood burn. The way she argued, the way she smirked, the way she glared at me like she was two ticks from throwing something at my head. Infuriating, irritating, absolutely impossible, Alice.

She was the one I wanted, the only one I wanted.

A growl rumbled deep in my chest, not from desire but irritation.

The female in front of me hesitated and watched me carefully. "Is something wrong?"

Yes. You're not her! "I'm not in the market for sex; you'll have to find someone else." Irritation jolted through me for the slight wave of guilt washing up in me. What did I have to feel guilty about? You could have said it nicer, a voice that sounded suspiciously like Alice popped up. Great, now I was having internal debates with her.

Frygg.

It had been a mistake coming here.

Because my cock wanted Alice.

My body wanted Alice.

My mind wanted Alice.

Maybe it was the stupid mating marks. I nodded to myself. Yes, that had to be it. There must have been some pheromones, hormones, or cosmic juice in them that anchored me to her.

I returned to my ship, but as soon as I entered the cargo hold, my mind projected Alice by the hatch, fumbling with the damn controller. And just like luck would have it, the cursed cleaning drone she had never been able to fix appeared and kept running its head into the wall. Over and over. "Yeah, buddy, I know how you feel," I snarked, then wanted to slap myself. Now I was talking to myself? Frygg.

I kicked the stupid drone so hard that it shattered against the wall. Serves you right, I thought, but my quick burst of violence did nothing to clear my head. The moment I entered the hall, I saw her again. Alice. Staring at me.

I banged my head against the wall, just like the damn drone. Unfortunately, I couldn't kick myself.

Two days we had spent together. Two frygging days. There was no way in the universe that I couldn't part from her after only knowing her for two days. I entered the bridge—big mistake. Her face looked up at me from the panel she had worked on while saving us from the Ohrurs overwriting our course. She had looked so damn proud. So pleased with herself. And well she should have been. She was a frygging genius.

I rubbed my neck. Two days. There was no way to fall for someone in two days. Well, maybe it had been a few more than that, but she had only stayed in my quarters for two days. Before that... before that, she had already driven me insane.

It had not been necessary to kiss her that day. I could have simply led her by her hand back to my quarters, and the humans would have received the same message just fine. But I didn't, because I wanted to kiss her. Wanted to feel those pliable lips underneath mine.

And now I wanted more. I wanted her.

I didn't even know how that would work. I had some credits stored away because it had never sat well with me that the Ohrurs kept my part of the payments. It was as if part of me had always known they would try to cross me, but I had enough credits to last Alice and me for a lifetime. That wasn't where I was headed, though. I was going to Darlam to find out what was happening with the mating marks, about us, and who we were.

It occurred to me that maybe Alice had a right to be on that journey with me since, for whatever reason, she carried the same mating marks. Whatever it was, we were connected.

What would I say, though, if I returned to Astrionis or Rottvan or wherever the frygg she was? It wasn't like I could declare my undying love for her. Neither could I tell her that I missed her.

That's when I realized that my fingers had been busy the entire internal debate, setting a course for Astrionis.

Okay, for a few days, I'll go there , I told myself. Just for a few days...

ALICE

The first day and night went by quickly. My new room was cozy, and best of all, I had it all to myself. It was a luxury I had taken for granted on Earth, but I would never do so again. Sleeping with candles was a little bit weird, just like having to carry one to go to the toilet, but at least there was a toilet and not a chamber pot. There was even a bathtub. No shower, though.

I told myself I would get used to this medieval living, and if not, Silla kept assuring me that I could go to Pandrax anytime I wanted to. She even promised to put in a good word for me with the Empress. The Empress! Heather. Who also happened to be a human. Whatever I decided to do, wherever I went, things were looking up for me.

That night, sleep wasn't far when I closed my eyes, reliving the day, especially how happy the smiths had been after I fixed their forge. That had been something else, too. It had been a very long time since I had actually seen the happiness my talents could bring people.

The one thorn in my side was that after I fixed the damn forge, I turned to beam at Xyrek. But there was no Xyrek. I had only known him for what, a week? Two? Yet, somehow, he had managed to embed himself into my mind so deeply that I wanted nothing more than to share that moment with him.

The moment his name crossed my mind, all sleepiness left me. I was wide awake. Damn him. I wondered what he was doing right then and hoped he was as sleepless as I was. Petty? Yeah, probably.

I pulled out the comm and started watching some of the streams he had downloaded for me. That had been such a sweet gesture. I sighed until I realized that I was acting like a teenager in the eighties whose crush made her a mix tape.

Damn him!

To make matters worse, he commed me. We didn't talk about anything deep, but it was enough to make me realize how deeply he was already ingrained in me and how much I wished we were in the same room. I even missed his huffing and puffing when he tried to get comfortable on that stupid beanbag chair.

* * *

I woke groggily the next morning, wondering what time I had finally fallen asleep. The room was getting lighter, not by artificial lighting, but by an actual sun, whose rays were filtering through the curtains that I had only partially closed last night. I stared at the uneven walls; they would take some getting used to. They were pretty in their own right, but strange. Like living inside a cave, which I supposed I was. Silla had explained to me that the building— I'm using the term lightly—was, in fact, made up of a root, but not a root from a tree, but a rock. They called them rootrocks. They grew, too! It was amazing and strange, like so many other things.

Silla had also advised me to keep the comm hidden. These kinds of technological gadgets were frowned upon on Astrionis. She told me to think of Astrionis like an Amish outpost, except that they didn't live like this because of a God they believed in, well, partially, but mostly, it was a reminder to all Pandraxians to remember where they came from and never forget their traditions.

This, too, was a strange concept, but hey, I wasn't one to criticize. The food was good. I had a warm bed and a room to myself. I liked Silla, and it looked like I was going to like my new job as well. What more could a girl want? Silla was the epitome

of a main character; she was forceful, adventurous, and always ready. I was all too happy to be her little sidekick. She told me about the other human women she had met who had become Soulweb mates of Space Guardians and how they couldn't be separated without physical pain, and I was glad, once again, not to be the star in this show. I didn't need to be. Sure, there were some moments of envy when I saw Silla with Garth, all lovey-dovey. It would be nice to have that someday. And maybe then I could be a main character in my own story.

Xyrek's image popped up in front of my face, and I groaned.

Really, Alice ?

I got dressed in one of the flowing medieval dresses Silla gave me last night; yeah, these, most of all, would need some getting used to. Silla said I could wear pants when and if my job demanded, but she advised me to stick to dresses at all other times.

It was a long hike down a lot of stairs. So many, I gave up counting after a hundred, already dreading having to go back up there tonight or, God forbid, the possibility of having forgotten something in my room.

Loud voices and laughter greeted me. The great hall was packed with humans and Pandraxians enjoying breakfast together. Just like in medieval times, Silla and Garth sat at the head of the table like a lord and a lady, which I supposed they were. It was already in Garth's title, Lord Protector.

Silla waved me over, and reluctantly, I walked to her side, well aware of the stares from the others as they undoubtedly wondered who I was and why I was standing in such high favor. I spied Josie, of all people, urgently whispering to two other humans I hadn't seen before. Great. I contemplated finding out if she was staying here, and if she was, I probably should ask Silla to send me to Rottvan. The idea of colonizing a

new world appealed to me. There would be hundreds of things that needed an engineer.

"Good morning," Silla greeted me when I reached her side.

"Good morning," I replied, taking the seat she indicated next to her, which had been occupied by another woman, who graciously smiled at me and found a new seat further down.

"We wanted to talk to you," Silla indicated to her husband, who studied me.

"You're the one who fixed the forge?" He asked.

"I'm not sure about fixed; it still needs a new bellows, but for now, it will do," I answered truthfully.

"I'm very impressed. Silla told me you are an engineer." The word sounded strange coming from him. The Pandraxians probably had a different title for my job. I nodded, since I didn't think he required an elaborate answer or my resume. "We are in the middle of building a new colony, Rottvan. Did you hear about it?"

It seemed like he had read my mind when I walked in. "I have. Actually, I was just thinking of it this morning. You'll probably need a lot of engineers there?"

"We would hate to lose you here," Silla said, placing her palm on my arm to show me how much she hated the idea, which warmed my heart. She was a good person. "But we really need good engineers there. So much needs to be done."

"When do I leave?" I asked, beaming.

"Well, you just got here—" Silla started, but Garth interrupted her.

"Actually, a ship is leaving tomorrow. But if that is too early, another will depart in two weeks."

Will Xyrek find me there ? I hated that thought, but it was the first to pop into my head.

Xyrek is already gone to wherever he was going, Alice. Deal with it .

"I can go tomorrow," I heard myself say. The further away I was from Xyrek, the less I would think about him—hopefully. Talking to him over the comm was nice and all, and I wouldn't have minded keeping him as a friend, but the universe was so much bigger than Earth, and I had no idea if I would ever get to see him again. It wasn't good for me to get attached to him now; I needed to stand on my own two feet and prove that I could make it out here. By myself.

"You don't have to," Silla's eyes bored into mine.

"It's okay, I want to," I assured her.

"Good, you'll be my new chief engineer," Garth held out his hand to me, and I shook it. Silla looked all proud, and I was sure the handshake thing was something she taught him.

"I'll get things packed for you. You need so many things. Nothing is being produced on Rottvan yet. I'm afraid it's still very much an outpost," Silla fretted.

"It will be okay." I smiled at her. I was sure of it.

That night, Xyrek commed me again, and we talked about Rottvan, but I never got a chance to tell him that I would be leaving for it the next day. He didn't seem too thrilled about me going there, but the more I thought about it, the more it appealed to

me. Soon, he would be out of comm reach anyway, and I would have to let go of the crutch he was becoming to me. No, crutch wasn't the right word. He was becoming more than that. If I wasn't careful, I would fall for that alien—I was well on my way, already.

XYREK

Several times, I was close to changing course. I needed to go to Darlam, not back to Astrionis, but this urge to see her was relentless. It might have been my imagination, but I could have sworn the damn mating marks were burning. I was pretty sure it was only my imagination, though. I hadn't felt anything like it before Lord Protector Garth mentioned that it had been like this for the others.

On top of that, I hadn't been able to reach her last night. The night before, she indicated she might go to Rottvan, so there was a possibility she was just out of range. The stars only knew what kind of backwater planet Rottvan was. They might not have any reception relays there at all. But not having been able to talk to her didn't sit well with me. With the added worry about her well-being, I was slowly working myself into a frenzy the likes of which I had never experienced before.

And if that wasn't enough, the dreams of that strange world—during what little sleep I caught—were gaining in intensity. Not only that, but there were times I felt Alice's presence in them. I didn't see her, but it felt like she was there. With me.

I had no idea what any of this meant, but it brought the urgency of how much I needed some answers to the forefront of my mind. I hoped that Darlam or the other Space Guardians would provide them. But first, I needed to see her. Speak to her. Assure myself that she was okay.

Damn her anyway.

And damn the mating marks.

And whoever was responsible for them.

I didn't like anybody fucking with me, but when it extended to my emotions ... —I hated just thinking that word. I was livid. Furious. As soon as I found out who or what was responsible for it, I would send them straight to B'Rtrix—a planet covered in lava and volcanoes. I would dangle them on a rope from my ship and watch them slowly roast.

Planning various versions of this demise made the time go by faster, but it still felt as if the ship was flying through a morass instead of slicing through space at hyperspeed.

I had no idea what I would say or do upon returning to Astrionis. Frankly, I hadn't planned on anything beyond finally laying my eyes on her again. Breathing the same air as her. Frygg. I was totally losing it. And the powerlessness behind it drove me mad.

It was late afternoon when I landed on Astrionis. Just like before, Lord Protector Garth and his mate Silla waited for me at the end of the extended platform. I stomped down it, my head turning left and right to catch a glimpse of her , but she was nowhere to be seen. Would it have been too much to ask of the insufferable female to be here? She had to know my ship had landed—stubbornly, I refused to believe she had indeed left.

"You didn't bring me more humans this quickly, did you, Space Guardian?" Lord Protector Garth asked, but there wasn't much hope in his expression. He looked more resigned.

"Unfortunately not," I confirmed his statement.

"She's not here," Lady Silla said, coming forward and hugging me. Hugging me?

What the frygg? Like we were long-lost friends.

"Where is she?" I pressed out after I waited some excruciating ticks for her to let me go again.

"She went to Rottvan a few hours ago. She is my new Chief Engineer." Garth proudly filled me in.

It was the pride in his voice that threw me off for a moment. But it wasn't hard to realize that Alice would be an asset to anybody, especially a new colony. I wondered what she had done to impress the Lord Protector this much.

Frygg, I should have known. Her talents would be in high demand at the new colony. Anywhere, really. She would be doing exactly what she was best at. This new job was just what she needed. My hand moved through my hair to ground me.

I didn't have anything like this to offer to her. I repeatedly watched her take cleaning drones apart and put them back together until she had it right and things worked as they had before. I didn't fully understand her desire for it, but it was obvious that she loved doing things with her hands, fixing things, building things. She had been formidable, saving all of us from being returned to the Ohrurs. What could I offer her? An unknown future, danger, and a grumpy Space Guardian who hadn't done anything to earn her favor.

"You should go to her," Silla said, pressing my arm with her small fingers.

Her light honey eyes looked at me as if she could see to the bottom of my soul, as if she had read every single thought that had just run through my mind. I'd never been the type of male to pour my heart out to others. Frygg, I had never had any others to pour my heart out to. But for some reason, I felt close to this female—the Lady of Astrionis.

"I'm sure she will be happy on Rottvan. She loves fixing and repairing," I said.

"She did an outstanding job on my forge," Lord Protector Garth agreed, earning himself a reproachful glare from his mate.

"What?" He turned to her, shrugging. "She did."

"They have mating marks," Lady Silla chided.

"I told you we can get matching tattoos if you want to," Garth replied, looking exasperated. I felt like I was missing something in their conversation, but honestly, it was slightly amusing.

"That's not the same, and you know it." Silla pouted.

"It's not my fault that Pandraxians don't have this particular trait. You're still my mekarry," he said, pulling her into his arms and kissing her forehead.

This display of affection should have made me nauseated, should have made me run the other way. Instead, I stared. As impolite as it was. I had never seen a couple like them before. The love between the two was obvious and deep. Was that what fated mates did? Felt like for one another?

I remembered the urge that had made me kiss Alice. It had been for show, and yet it hadn't. Not from the moment our lips touched. The need to do it again had never left me. Was that fated mate stuff?

I didn't want to interrupt their moment, so I took a step back to the platform, ready to get back on my ship. From there... Rottvan? The planet lured me. No, not the planet. Her. Alice. Still, she was where she undoubtedly would be happy—needed—where her talents would be valued. Again, what did I have to offer her?

Nothing!

Not a thing.

"Listen to your heart, not your brain," Silla suddenly said.

"Silla," Garth warned.

"I'm sorry you are going to lose your new Chief Engineer, Garth. But really? They have mating marks. They belong together." Silla's eyes were shooting flames at her mate. When she turned to me, she softened. "I'm serious, Xyrek. Whatever is going on with you two, it's the heart that matters, nothing else."

I rubbed the back of my neck, slowly moving my head from side to side as if in denial of the words coming out of my mouth. "I don't have anything to offer her."

"You have plenty to offer her. You." She spoke with so much conviction, it was hard to argue with it. For the second time, she grabbed my arm and gently squeezed. "Listen, for whatever reason, the universe decided you two belong to each other. You owe it to yourselves to give it a chance and uncover what fate wants you to discover. Like it or not, Alice is part of this, just like the others who have been bonded to your brothers."

Brothers!

I nodded.

Yes, brothers. That's what they were to me. Space Guardians had always had a brotherhood. We might not get along with each other, but anyone threatening one of us threatens all of us. Now, though, for the first time, I wondered if this brotherhood ran deeper than I had ever imagined. Not only because it sounded like we were all

wearing matching mating marks, but because of something else. The dream. I remember vividly running through the forest and seeing the town. Deep down, I knew this was home and that I was meant to find it. A slight headache spread through my brain as I thought of it, but I ignored it.

"I'm sorry, Lord Protector," I said to Garth, meaning it.

He closed his eyes as if praying for patience. "I understand." He sounded resigned.

Silla rose on her tiptoes, and her hands moved my head down so she could reach me before she planted a kiss on each of my cheeks. "Go get her."

A rare smile spread my lips, and I gave her a tight nod. "I promise we will come back when this is all over."

"Don't make any promises yet, Space Guardian. You know I would love nothing more than to have you and the others here, but I won't take any promises until you know what your destiny holds in store for you." Lord Protector Garth said. Wise words.

It felt strange leaving them, as if I was leaving a family I had never had. But the thought of seeing Alice soon made me nearly run up the platform back to my ship. With dread, I realized it would take three days to reach Rottvan. Frygg. It not only meant that it would take much longer than anticipated to see her again—and I had no one else besides my stupid, stubborn nature to blame for that. I should have never let her go—but it would also take us three days further away from Darlam.

ALICE

With every passing day, the deep ache in my chest grew in intensity. This missing him was entirely out of proportion for someone I had only met a couple of weeks ago and only known well for a few days. It was like a piece of me had been ripped out. I caught myself over and over thinking and wondering what Xyrek would say or do. It was infuriating. Why was I missing this alien so much? I hadn't even liked the man. Well, I liked his kiss. He was a good kisser. But let's be honest, you simply didn't build a relationship with someone just because they knew how to kiss.

Unless you were a lonely psychopath... And, well, some of my traits might have qualified me as such. The way I had just turned my back on my family, or how I had left my friends without regret once I scored the job in Nevada. I had always known something was wrong with me, deep inside me. I just didn't develop the kind of attachment normal people did. Or so I had thought until I began missing the freaking alien. I refused to think of his name because the moment I did, my stomach did this stupid, fluttery thing. I also missed Silla. She was by far the nicest, most genuine person I had ever met.

So, me—forming attachments. Which left me with the question of whether having been abducted by aliens might have changed my personality. Or was it the damn mating marks? I didn't think so because I was missing Silla too, not just Xy—the alien.

But then again, Ava cried when I left. Cried. Yes, I had been sad to leave her behind, kind of, but crying sad? No. What kind of person did that make me?

The kind I wouldn't want to be around.

Tired of analyzing myself, I forced my mind back to the alien . How long would it take him to get to Darlam? What would he find there? It was strange, but I felt invested in this secret around him. It was like binge-watching a show that suddenly stopped in the middle of the season or on a cliffhanger without ever making another episode.

Silla told me it would take three days to get to Rottvan. Three endless days, and it seemed I would be haunted by the alien the entire time.

The ship we were on was large and comfortable. Again, I had my own quarters with an adjoining bathroom, making me happy as a lark. Four hundred other humans and several Pandraxian crew members were aboard. I met some of the others in the breakroom—which thankfully served better food than the alien's nutrition dispenser. I sat with a group of them and listened to their stories, which all started off very similar to mine and all the others I had heard before. The Cryons came and took them bla-bla-bla; after the abduction was where most stories varied. Some people had managed to escape and make their way to Astrionis; some had been rescued by Space Guardians or even other alien species who cared enough to want to bring us all back together.

The most interesting stories were the ones that starred Space Guardians as the heroes. I learned two names, Tharaax and Zaarek. I also caught the names of the women who stayed with them; Tharaax was Hannah's mate, and Zaarek was with Nova. Interestingly, the people I talked to didn't seem to like either Hannah or Nova very much. Which kind of reminded me of the group I had been with. Coincidence?

After a while, I left. I felt like a lurker. Like one of those fans who hang around, greedily absorbing gossip about friends or acquaintances of their idols just to feel near them. I didn't care what Xyrek—shit, I thought his name, and my stomach

somersaulted—was up to or where he was. He left me behind!

He never even asked me to stay with him!

Yeah, I was salty about that. I wasn't sure what I would have picked, but it would have been nice if he had asked me. I know, totally illogical, but here we were.

To pass the time, I watched more of the streams the alien had downloaded for me. They were informative; I was learning a lot about alien tech. His sweet gesture was beginning to mean more and more to me because he had given me the means of supporting myself in a world/universe I knew nothing about.

"Hey, you alright?" a woman, who looked about twenty-four, asked.

I wasn't about to pour my heart out to a stranger, so I said, "Yeah, I'm fine."

"You look so sad sometimes," she observed, grating on my nerves and making me wish she would go away. I knew she was just trying to be nice. But frankly, I just wasn't in the mood to make friends or to be nice.

"Yeah, aren't we all." I tried not to sound flippant and regretted my words immediately.

"That's true. I'm Daisy, by the way." She held out her hand. I supposed manners hadn't died with the end of the world.

"Alice." I shook her hand.

"Are you looking forward to this new place?" She continued the conversation, following me as I refilled my drink.

No . "Yes, of course. New start and all." I forced a smile.

She sighed deeply. "Yeah, me too. Have you found anybody... friends, family?"

I didn't have the heart to tell her that I hadn't even tried. Who would I look for? I supposed if anyone from my rotten family had survived, they'd be off their meth addiction by now, but I really hadn't felt the urge to take Silla up on her offer to search the database she was building. I had lied and told her that I had no one.

"Not even friends?" Daisy asked with pity in her eyes.

I shook my head. The only people I would have ever called friends, I left behind when I moved to Nevada. I hadn't bothered to make new ones there. I had a job that kept me busy and coworkers to socialize with; we even went for the occasional drink. And now and then, a boyfriend. I didn't need anything else. After years of living with my chaotic family and later in a noisy dorm, I was all too happy being by myself.

"No, I didn't have anybody," I told Daisy.

"Silla is looking for my parents and brother." She confided with so much hope in her eyes that I didn't have the heart to tell her that the odds were stacked against her.

"Where were you when... the Cryons came?" Daisy continued the conversation as I made a beeline for my quarters. I obviously wanted to be alone, but she walked into my room right beside me.

Apart from kicking her out or being downright rude, I had no idea how to get rid of her, so I watched as she took a seat and resigned myself to an afternoon of girl chatter.

At least I didn't have to think about the alien while she was there. So, that was a big

plus.

I quickly learned that Daisy used to be a social media influencer and that she wasn't on her way to Rottvan but to Pandrax, where she planned to restart her life.

"I don't know anything besides reporting, finding stories, talking to people," she sighed. "It can't be that much harder here, except that these are... aliens." She reasoned.

Who was I to judge? I was going to Rottvan to pick up the pieces of my former life as well. Granted, engineering was probably a little different than building a new social media following, but then again... she might just be alien enough to the aliens to make it. Either way, I wished her luck and hoped it would work out for her.

XYREK

Rottvan was very different from what I had imagined. When I heard about the new colonization project, I expected some remote, desolate planet. Well, it was remote but not even remotely desolate—no pun intended.

The landscape before me was unlike anything I had ever seen. Nestled among winding rivers and towering rock formations, the settlement looked like it had grown organically from the land itself rather than being built. The structures were rounded, smooth, and gleamed with a metallic sheen, yet somehow, they didn't clash with their surroundings—they blended, reflecting the golden light of the setting sun in a way that made them look almost alive.

Circular and unevenly placed windows glowed warmly from within, casting light across the water's surface. The domed dwellings stretched across the valley, each connected by thin, winding, soft earth and vegetation paths.

It was... peaceful—a stark contrast to the worlds I was used to.

No towering metal cities, oppressive neon lights, stale recycled air, or bustling of many feet. Just water, rock, and golden-hued homes that pulsed with life.

It was strangely idyllic... a word I would have never thought to use. A small pain pierced my heart because it reminded me of... something... home? It didn't resemble the town in my dreams at all, and yet it did. Not in the looks but in the atmosphere of it. Idyllic. Again, that word.

I disembarked my ship and was welcomed by eight Imperial Forces soldiers pointing their blasters at me. Forming behind them was a small but growing group of spectators.

"State your business," one of the soldiers demanded.

"I'm looking for someone," I declared.

"Not here, Space Guardian. There are no criminals here." The same Pandraxian informed me.

"I don't want any trouble." I narrowed my eyes at him since he seemed to be the leader.

"Then be on your way." He snarled.

My hackles rose. I could have disarmed and dispatched him and his ten soldiers in less than a few ticks. The only reason he was still breathing was because he was a member of the Imperial Forces, and I was reluctant to start a war. But if he knew what was healthy for him, he would get the frygg out of my way.

"You have no jurisdiction here," he continued, oblivious to the danger he was in.

"I'm not here on business. I'm looking for a human female, Alice," I pointed out.

"Take it up with Lord Protector Garth," he recommended, stretching my already thin patience to the breaking point.

I was about to show him how easily I could break his neck when I heard a voice. Her voice. "Xyrek?"

And there she was. Looking even more beautiful than I remembered. The last rays of the sun highlighted her blonde curls, dazzling me. She wore one of the old-school Pandraxian preferred dresses, and damn, she looked hot. The material flowed around her as she walked by the Imperial Forces without giving them so much as a glance.

I did, though. "Lower your frygging blasters," I snarled, not liking how Alice walked right into their line of sight. "Before I take them from you."

"What are you doing here?" Alice asked; her green eyes sparkled, and a smile tugged around the corners of her lips.

I pushed her behind me to shield her body. "Now!" I yelled at the soldiers.

"You have no rights here. Lady Alice, please come over here."

That was it. With a snarl, I jumped forward. I heard Alice call out my name in fright but didn't allow it to distract me. Within ticks, I had all eight males disarmed and on the ground. Two had broken arms, and one had a broken leg. All of them glared at the blaster I was pointing at them.

Alice rushed forward and grabbed my arm. "Xyrek, what the hell are you doing?"

"They wouldn't let me come visit you." I shrugged as if this was the most normal thing in the universe.

Shouts rang out as more Imperial Forces ran forward, blasters drawn. But they hesitated to shoot, probably because I was holding a blaster at their friends and because I was a Space Guardian. One didn't simply shoot at a Space Guardian.

"What is the meaning of this?" An older officer walked forward toward me. Once again, I pushed Alice behind me.

"These males of yours demanded I leave before they even asked what business I had here," I explained. He seemed like a reasonable male.

"So you broke my soldiers' bones?" He asked, exasperated.

I shrugged, "They're alive."

Amusement tugged at the older male's lips. "Take them away." He jerked his chin from the newly arrived soldiers to the ones on the ground. "What business do you have here, Space Guardian?"

"I came to talk to her," I pulled Alice from behind me. Her smile had died. Instead, her eyes shot daggers at me now.

"Talk to me? This doesn't look like talking," she indicated to the injured soldiers.

"They started it," I said. "You saw."

"Lady Alice, do you know this male? Do you wish to speak to him?" The Pandraxian asked, changing my opinion about him being a rational male. Nobody would stop me from talking to her.

"Yes, it's alright, Commander." Alice nodded at him.

"I don't want any trouble here," the Commander told me. "But I will not allow a member of our colony to be mistreated."

"He won't harm me," Alice told him, raising my ire anew. What was it between the two of them?

"Alice?" another woman called.

"I'm alright, Daisy. No worries," Alice yelled back with typical exasperation, telling me the other woman had attached herself to my mate without her being too happy about it. I nearly laughed at how similar we were.

"Come," I took her elbow and led her up the gangway into my ship, away from the other people's prying eyes.

Without speaking, we made our way to the breakroom, where we both sat down.

"Wow," Alice remarked, looking around, "I had no idea this room could be this peaceful."

"It was nice having it back to myself," I agreed.

"So why are you here?" She came straight to the point.

Because I missed you . "Because... it was getting too lonely."

She tilted her head, not fully believing me. "You could have bought a pet if you were lonely."

I don't want a pet. I want you . "I could use an experienced engineer."

She folded her arms across her chest. "Hmm?"

I let out a slow breath, watching her. The way she refused to meet my gaze directly, the way she braced herself as if expecting another fight, or... it could be defensive. Did I dare hope that she didn't want me to know how much she had missed me too?

I leaned forward, resting my forearms on the table, closing some of the distance between us. "Come with me to Darlam."

She blinked, taken aback. I hadn't expected her to agree immediately, and the fact that she didn't shut me down instantly meant I had a chance.

"Darlam?" Her brow furrowed, that engineer's mind of hers already working, trying to piece together why I would want her there. "What is Darlam, and why?"

Because I need you with me . "Like I said, I could use your talents."

She studied me, arms still crossed. "I'm calling bullshit. You have repair drones for that."

I closed my eyes for a moment. Drew in a breath. Let it out slowly, like it might hold back the part of me that had been unraveling since I left her on Astrionis.

"I don't want drones," I said. "I want you ."

Her brow lifted. Still skeptical.

"I left you there because I thought it was the right thing to do," I said, voice low. "Because I thought I was protecting you. Giving you space. Letting you have the life you deserved."

I looked away because her eyes made the words harder and because I felt like she was seeing straight through me, through the lies. The truth was, I left her because I hadn't known any better.

"But I couldn't move on. I haven't slept. I haven't... felt right. My routines are off. The bridge is too quiet. I tried to convince myself it was just logistics, or guilt, or habit." I met her eyes again. "But it's you. It's always you. You're the variable I can't control. And I don't want to."

She still wasn't convinced.

“You make me feel things I’ve never let myself feel before. Irritation. Curiosity. Peace. Chaos. Desire. And... care—real, inconvenient, impossible care. I didn't know how much I’d changed until you weren’t there to argue with me. The drones didn’t stop glitching, and you know what? It's boring when they work like they're supposed to.”

Still nothing. Her silence was merciless. I thought that last bit was funny. Obviously, she didn't.

With a deep sigh, I laid my soul bare for her, “I need you on Darlam because I’m better when you’re with me. Not just as an engineer. As a person. I want you to be there when we discover what these mating marks are all about. I know I don’t deserve to ask, but I am. I’m asking.”

Alice, being Alice, drew her brows together. "That’s a lot of words for I missed you ."

I huffed a quiet laugh, shaking my head. She wasn’t wrong, but I would be damned before I admitted that. "I’m not asking you to stay with me forever, Alice. Just to come with me to Darlam. Help me figure out what’s really going on. Why we’ve got these mating marks."

She moved the chair back and stood. "I need a really good reason to come with you, something more than I need an engin?—"

That was as far as my self-control lasted. She was so frygging close. Those damn kissable lips of hers were calling to me, tempting me. I jumped up so fast that the chair I had been sitting on toppled over with a loud bang, but I didn't care. I reached my arm out, clasped her back, and pulled her against my chest. Her fingers threaded

into the top of my uniform, her eyes widened, her pupils dilated with desire, her lips parted, and I slammed mine down on hers.

She tugged on my shirt and balled the material into her fists while our tongues dueled, and my cock turned so hard I worried I would come right there.

ALICE

Rottvan was beyond anything I could have imagined.

When Silla and Garth offered me the opportunity to come help build a new outpost, I pictured metal scaffolding, concrete structures, and prefab barracks lined up in neat little rows. Maybe a few harsh floodlights cutting through the darkness, the smell of fresh-cut steel and construction dust thick in the air.

But this?

This looked like something out of a dream.

Golden light stretched across rolling green hills, reflecting off smooth, domed structures that seemed to have grown out of the earth rather than being built. The homes—or whatever they were—had a strangely organic look; their metallic surfaces mirrored the sky, the water, and the alien flora around them.

And the water—there was water everywhere.

Crystal-clear pools wove through the settlement, separating the rounded buildings like a natural moat; their surfaces rippled with the slightest breeze. Wooden or stone walkways bridged the gaps, creating paths that wound gracefully through the land instead of cutting through it.

The entire place glowed.

Not just from the golden hues of sunset but also from the warm light spilling from the round windows, illuminating the domes like lanterns. Hundreds of tiny golden orbs pulsing with life dotted the landscape like a constellation brought to the ground.

I had expected a settlement, a military outpost, something cold and utilitarian. But this was a small town of light. I had no idea how they built this, how it functioned, or how the hell I was supposed to help improve it. All I knew was that for the first time since landing on an alien world... I didn't feel like I had arrived at a war zone. I felt like I had arrived somewhere I could actually live.

And then the damn alien appeared.

My heart had leaped in my chest when I realized the ship that had just landed was Xyrek's. He had come for me! I was too excited to consider any alternatives and rushed forward, passing the soldiers aiming their guns at him. Right from the start, he showed his assholishness by antagonizing the Imperial Forces soldiers, and he didn't stop until they were all on the ground, wounded and beaten. I should have been put off, but the tiny little voice inside me was still singing that he came for me .

Not even his words later in the breakroom, because ... it was getting too lonely . I could use an experienced engineer. Like I said, I could use your talents, deterred my hope. I could read between the lines that he had missed me—the same way I had missed him. But just because I could do something didn't mean I should. He wanted to hold onto his stubborn pride and not admit his feelings?

Well, too bad. No matter how much his story intrigued me... fine, how much he intrigued me, I was still a woman. A woman who needed to hear something a bit more romantic than I could use an experienced engineer if he expected me to leave Rottvan and the life I had begun to plan for myself.

He had to do better. A lot better. I wasn't a high-maintenance girl, but I wasn't about

to leave my little supportive role and become a main character in a damn romance movie unless he was going to put some work in and woo me. And I mean, really woo me. "I need a really good reason to come with you, something more than I need an engine?—"

Without a word, he grabbed me. His lips descended on mine, and, oh, that kiss. That freaking kiss. The butterflies inside my stomach didn't just flutter; they rioted. I had to fist his uniform just to remain upright because my traitorous knees turned into melted butter. I held on to him for dear life while his tongue expertly explored my mouth and danced with mine. Above all, he tasted so fucking good. Like a man. Like him.

"Is that a yes?" He smirked when we came up for air.

"Let's call it a good start, Space Guardian," I retorted, catching my breath and doing my best not to let on how much he had stolen it. "What else you got?"

My fingers were still fisting his shirt; our heads were so close I felt his inhales and exhales. The thumb of his hand behind my back began moving up and down, creating shivers along my spine and working its way into other areas, lower.

His other hand was on my arm, caressing my flesh right above the damn mating marks, sending jolts of desire through me, which were answered by my clit as it began to pulse rhythmically.

"Let me show you," he said with a cocky grin, about to pick me up.

I stopped him. "Oh no, not like this. I need to hear you say something nice before I commit to this craziness."

"Something nice?" he asked. "Like what?"

Oh, he knew how to turn a girl's lust into a murderous rage. I opened my mouth to retort, but he moved his hand from my arm and put his finger over my lips. "I did miss you."

Coming from him, that was quite an admission. I wondered how much further I could push him, but my murderous rage ebbed, making room for my desire to return. I mused that if I slept with him, and it wasn't as good as I expected, I could simply tell him goodbye and move on with my life here on Rottvan.

Right, and the sun sets in the east ...

"You did?" I questioned.

"Yes. A lot."

Call me easy, but that was good enough for me right then. God knew the man needed some help in the verbal department, but I wasn't averse to teaching him. Honestly, I had never really liked the kind of men who had adored me. The ones who brought flowers and chocolates. They always made me suspicious of what they were hiding. I liked a man of fewer words and greater action a lot more. They didn't necessarily have to beat an entire squadron of soldiers down to prove it, but... yeah, that had been pretty hot.

"Come," he took my hand and led me to his quarters.

It wasn't the first time that I'd been inside his space, but this time was different. We both knew what was about to happen, and it made me nervous. He moved to one of the hidden compartments in the wall and pulled out a healing wand. Curiously, I watched him set something on the panel before he ran it over his groin.

"What are you doing?" Visions of space herpes ran through my head.

"It incapacitates my sperm," he explained.

"It incapacitates his sperm," I said out loud, nodding like it made perfect sense. Preventing unwanted pregnancies, my mind offered as if I were too stupid to fully understand his words. "Right."

"Alice," he stepped in front of me.

"Yeah?"

He placed his thumb underneath my chin and lifted it, his dark eyes boring into mine, "Don't overthink."

"Okay," I agreed while my mind was running a hundred miles an hour. Pregnant! As in having a little silver Xyrek baby? Sweat broke out all over my body. Babies, family, and motherhood had never been on my radar, not after the shitty childhood I had.

"Alice," his voice was deep.

Before I could answer, his head tilted down, and his lips claimed mine, effectively cutting off any further thoughts of a happy-or-not alien family. I wanted this. I wanted him. With a deep sigh, I slung my arms around his neck, rose to my tiptoes, and let my mind go.

Soon, there was nothing but the incredible sensations he caused inside me. His hands roamed up and down my body, cupped my ass, ran over my flanks and the swell of my breasts. We had to stop kissing for him to tug my dress over my head while I clawed at his shirt to bring it over his.

The man was chiseled. His silver skin glistened slightly with sweat. I ran my tongue

over his incredible pecs. I tasted salt and him. He was so freaking beautiful. His chest was hard as a rock and wide enough that I couldn't fully encompass him and have the tips of my fingers meet. Muscles rippled underneath my hands; his eight-pack was like slabs of marble. So perfect.

His heart beat hard and fast, his breath came out heavy, and when my hand moved south, I found his cock just as hard as the rest of him. Hard, thick, and long. I swallowed. How would that monstrosity fit into me?

He stepped back, his eyes roaming over my now naked body, feasting on my breasts. "You are so incredibly beautiful," he pushed out, and his words were like music to my ears.

It wasn't just his words; it was in the way his hands balled and unballled, ready to cup my breasts, the hoarseness of his voice, and the smoldering fire in his eyes.

"You're not bad yourself," I quipped, but my voice squeaked.

He moved a step forward. I moved a step back. My heart hammered inside my chest. I wanted this. I wanted him. But I also liked how he stalked toward me like a predator.

I reached the bed, and the back of my knees hit the corners. There was nowhere for me to go except to sit down. I scooted backward as he continued to advance. My juices pooled inside my pussy, because, dear God, he was a sight to behold. His gaze burned into me like a silent claim, all male, all strength, all dominance, a predator wrapped in raw power and sharp edges. The way he moved—controlled, effortless, dangerous—sent a shiver down my spine. The hard lines of his body, the tension that coiled in his muscles, the way his cock stood hard and erect... it was intoxicating. And when he took a step closer, eyes dark and intent, I forgot how to breathe.

He stopped by the bed, "I've been wanting to do this for a long time," he said, grabbing my ankles and pulling me down until my legs dangled over the edges.

I swallowed. I had no idea where this was going, but I was tense with anticipation. When he sank to his knees between my legs, I swallowed again. Fuck, he was hot.

XYREK

The moment her sweet scent reached my nostrils, I knew I was lost. Her glistening pussy opened to me like the petals of a flower. I placed my hands on her hips, more to steady myself than anything else, because her aroma was dizzying. I leaned forward, slowly, reverently, drawing this moment out as much as I could, committing it to memory. My tongue moved forward tentatively, making contact with the softest skin I had ever encountered. She tasted like the nectar of the gods, and now I knew why it was called that. Delicious, addictive, intoxicating.

Her skin tremored underneath my palms, a low moan escaped her, and I licked her again, from front to center. I encountered a curious nub, and when my tongue swirled around it, she nearly came off the bed. Ah, her clitoris. It was always like a treasure hunt, finding the pleasure spot of a female of a new species. No discovery had ever been sweeter than finding Alice's source, though. Her hips bucked, her thighs pressed around me, and little mewls escaped her that spurred me on to give her as much pleasure as possible. I wanted to hear her scream my name when she came.

I sucked the little bud between my lips and swirled my tongue around it while applying pressure to her hips to keep her contained. Her torso writhed on the bed, but her pelvis stayed in place. My tongue flicked her clit, eliciting a deep moan from her.

All the while, her juices kept flowing, and I kept sucking them up like the precious nectar they were. I moved one hand to the center of her pelvis and brought the other down, driven by the desire to explore her deeper.

Her pussy was so frygging tight that I worried I would never fit. First, I probed it with

one finger, then two, enjoying her writhing and moaning as I continued to give her clit most of my attention.

I entered her with three fingers and was relieved when her walls expanded around them. Still, I vowed to be careful.

Her breathing hitched; she was close now, so close.

"Come for me, beautiful," I coaxed while flicking her clit with every word.

My balls were throbbing, ready to unload my seed, while my cock swelled and strained, making me worry I would come outside of her. The way her walls convulsed around my fingers nearly made me lose the last reserves of my self-control.

"Xyrek!" She screamed.

My name coming from her lips during her release of pleasure did me in. I grabbed her waist and pulled her up on the bed; unable to wait for another tick, I drove my cock into her, marveling at the tightness of her walls as they closed around my cock, grabbing it like a glove. They were still pulsing from her orgasm, driving me to a height I had never felt before.

I pumped into her three or four times. She cried my name again, and I surrendered myself to my need. My head flew back.

"Alice! MINE!" I roared as my climax exploded inside me with such pressure, I was sure I was about to die. But what a way to go!

Mercilessly, her walls milked me until they squeezed the last drop of seed out of me as I collapsed on top of her, barely conscious enough to use my elbows to keep most of my weight off her. My forehead lowered until it touched hers. Her breathing was

hard and erratic, just like mine. Her little heart pumped hard against her chest like a caged bird needing to get out.

"Alice," I mumbled.

"That was..." she panted, "incredible."

"You're incredible," I contradicted, eliciting a smile from her.

"Wow," her legs stretched underneath me before they scissored around my hips again, anchoring me deeper into her.

I rolled off her, pulling out and settling on my back beside her, gathering her close. She followed my lead, resting her head on my chest and trailing her fingers over my abs. The light dance of them over my skin aroused new desire in me. Just like I had known from the moment I knelt between her legs, scrap that, from the moment I turned around to come to Rottvan, I knew now there would be no turning back from her. And I didn't even need the mating marks to tell me that. The pull I had felt towards her had only gotten stronger, and I was finally forced to admit that there would be no life for me without her.

"Does that mean you will come with me?" I asked, hoping she didn't hear the slight quiver in my voice. I had never been unsure of anything. I had always been purpose-driven, and now, being at the mercy of another being scared me more than not knowing where I belonged.

"Do you still only want me with you for my engineering skills?" She countered.

I lifted my head, and she turned hers so our eyes could meet. Her gaze was teasing, with a hint of the same insecurity I felt, which was reassuring. "I've always wanted more than simply your engineering skills," I admitted.

"Good," she turned and kissed my chest, "I need to let the Lord Protector and Silla know, though. They're counting on me here, and..." she trailed off.

"Do you want to stay here?" I asked, sitting up. It wouldn't be easy, but if she wanted to stay here... I would stay with her. Strangely, all my anger against the Ohrurs, my desires to find out who I was, quieted around her. I would still wonder, of course, but deep down in my heart, I knew I would also be content. Just being with her was all that mattered. I had learned that the hard way. These last few days had been hell. I would have never suspected I could miss someone this much, especially someone I had barely gotten to know. But here we were.

"Would you stay with me?" Her brows creased.

I nodded. "I want you. I don't care where."

"I would never ask that of you." She smiled. "Besides, for some reason, I've become quite invested in that little mystery that surrounds you. Maybe once we're done, we can come back here."

"Are you sure?" Her words elated me, but I didn't want her to see how much. I didn't want to sway her with my emotions, my desires. Something I had never cared about before. But she made me... made me a different person. No, just a different version of myself. A better one, I hoped.

She nodded. "I'm sure."

I leaned forward to kiss her forehead. "You're amazing."

"Yeah, I know," she quipped, and her grin widened.

This time, I wasn't satisfied with a simple kiss on her forehead. I pulled her closer and

devoured her lips as if my life depended on it. I felt her slight hesitation. "Alice?"

"Yes."

"Don't overthink this. The Lord Protector and Lady Silla know. I stopped by Astrionis," I reassured her, feeling that this was where her mind had gone.

"I feel bad for leaving them like this," Alice admitted.

"Don't be. We'll come back if you like." I sat up, pulling on my pants, deciding I might as well get the ship finally going to its destiny—my destiny... ours, it seemed. That made me smile, and a sense of warmth coursed through me.

"We'll see what happens." She yawned, "What are you doing?"

"If you're sure you want to go with me, I might as well get us going. Is there anything you need? Anybody you need to say goodbye to?"

Her mouth opened, ready to say no, but then she changed her mind. "You know what? There are a few people I should say goodbye to. Daisy, at least. And probably the Commander before he thinks you took me against my will. I should also get some of my things. Can you wait a little bit longer before we leave?"

I wasn't sure if her worry about the Commander coming after me flattered or insulted me. I could take the Pandraxian with my hands bound behind my back. But smartly I decided to let it go and said, "Take as much time as you need."

It was getting dark by the time we left the ship to search for her friends and get her things. The air was cooling and fresh, the slight breeze laced with moisture from all the water around us. It was soothing. It was a nice place, I mused.

ALICE

It was strange lying in this bed with him. Strange and comforting. His arms and legs were wrapped around me as if he never wanted to let me go again, and I didn't mind it.

I had never been the spooning type. I enjoyed sex, but I had always preferred to sleep alone after. Now though... I think I can get used to this , my mind whispered as I listened to Xyrek's slow and deep breathing. He had fallen asleep soon after our second round of sex.

That sex!

Oh my God, I could get used to that, too. It was addictive.

I wiggled my ass closer against his already growing erection. Even in his sleep, he wanted me, which gave my self-confidence a boost I hadn't expected. This man was unlocking parts of me I hadn't even realized were locked down. Slowly, steadily, he was shifting the ground beneath my feet—and somehow, I didn't want to run from it. He was changing me in ways I never saw coming... ways that felt good. Real. Like happiness wasn't just possible but already happening, right here—with him. It was like he was making himself my anchor... no, that wasn't right. I was the one forging the attachment, like I wanted to be anchored to him. It should have been impossible given the short while we had known each other, and probably would have never been possible on Earth. But here, now? Things were so different. Near-death experiences had a way of changing your perspective.

I had never been a live-in-the-moment kind of girl. I liked plans. But what good had that done for me? It got me abducted by aliens, that's what. So, for the first time in my life, I decided to live dangerously and allow myself to fall.

I closed my eyes, smiling, still waiting for my mind to let go and allow me a few hours of rest. But there was too much traffic in my brain to take my exhausted body into consideration. It was hard to believe how I was changing, how one person could make me change like this.

My independence had always been my greatest motivator. I had always told myself I didn't need anyone and had made a point of not letting anyone close to me. Not even my friends who had sheltered me. Even after I realized it was a defense mechanism born from years of neglect and abuse, I never felt the urge to change it—until now.

I thought back over everything that had happened today since Xyrek's ship landed. Daisy had been a pain in my ass the entire journey to Rottvan, but part of me had enjoyed her company. I wouldn't have sought it out, but Daisy had done enough of that for the both of us. She was traveling on to Pandrax in the morning, and I was glad I'd had the chance to tell her goodbye. Hopefully, I would get to see her holocasts soon and become her biggest fan. After leaving Daisy and sorting things out with the Commander, I'd packed my few belongings, a lot more than I had when I came to Astrionis, including the comm and tools Xyrek had given me, and we went back to his spaceship. He set course for Darlam, the planet he mentioned earlier. As he did, he filled me in on what Lord Protector Garth had told him. The other Space Guardians and their mates were probably already there.

I wasn't sure how long I lay there, and I was just about to drift off when Xyrek stiffened behind me—not the part that was already hard, his entire body. His feet began to move as if he were running, and his breathing increased. He screamed out a name, startling me into an upright position.

"Allisaahn!" his voice sounded so tortured, so full of pain, that tears welled in my eyes.

I turned and began shaking him. "Xyrek! Xyrek! Wake up!"

He lunged up and wrapped me in his arms. "Allisaahn!"

The eerie similarity to my name sent goosebumps down my spine. I broke free of his hold and grabbed his face with both hands. "Xyrek!"

His startled eyes ripped open. I stared into their black abyss, and all I saw was pain. With a cry, he pulled me back into his arms and kissed my face; his hands moved up and down my body as if he were trying with all his might to reassure himself I was still alive.

"Xyrek, what happened? Did you have a bad dream?"

"Dream?" he nearly scoffed, shaking his head. "I wish."

"What happened?"

Shadows danced over his tortured expression from the sparse light in the room; it was still night. Agitated, he brushed a hand through his hair, then brought it back to my body as if he couldn't bear the thought of not touching me.

"Allisaahn," he repeated, sending more goosebumps up and down my spine and creating a very discomforting sensation in my stomach. Deep down in my bones, I felt I didn't want to hear whatever he had to say. That I wasn't ready for it. Would never be ready for it. Judging by the expression he regarded me with, Xyrek didn't seem to think I could handle the truth either. And that, more than anything, scared the crap out of me.

"It was just a dream." I tried to soothe him. "Sometimes they seem so real that it's hard to..." I trailed off because of his expression.

"I know the difference between a dream and reality, Alice." Hearing him say my name made me feel cold inside, so much so that I had to rub my arms to keep the circulation going. "This wasn't a dream. I remember everything."

"What do you mean?"

"I know where I belong, I know what species I am, and I know what happened to us."

"You're scaring me."

His expression was grim, almost haunted. "You should be scared."

For a moment, weakness overcame me, and I wondered— what have I gotten myself into ? I should have known better than to take a ride with a perfect stranger. Wasn't that what everyone always said? In my case, it was a spaceship, but I didn't feel like being technical at that moment. Was Xyrek insane? That's why they taught you not to get too close to anyone you didn't know well. The old timers had it right when they said to wait until after marriage to have sex or move in together. Even an arranged marriage didn't sound so bad right then. Anything but being in bed together with an obvious madman on our way to an unknown planet to meet more Space Guardians. For all I knew, he could have made that up, too.

You really did it this time, Al , I chastised myself. Forget getting in a car with strangers. You're out in space—in space —with a man who could very well be a psychopath . Way to go !

But that moment only lasted a few seconds. The more my brain attacked me and my questionable choices, the more I became convinced that Xyrek wasn't a psychopath.

It might have simply been a defense mechanism because I really, really liked him, but I didn't think so. This was deeper. Much deeper. I cared for him in ways I never had with anyone before. And if I was wrong, well, then fuck it. I was fully committed to going down with him. This wasn't about me any longer; this was about me trusting another person and wanting to be there for them. I gave up on my family, but I would be damned if I ever gave up on him. No matter where this journey would take us, I would be with him every step of the way. And if I were wrong, fine. Then I would burn for being wrong, but I would burn laughing.

I had a feeling that whatever he had to say would not only shake me to the core but also change anything and everything I had ever believed in. And suddenly, that was fine with me. I wasn't a supporting actor any longer; I was the heroine in this story, and heroines had to endure a lot before they got their happily ever after. And if that was what it took to be with him, bring it on !

XYREK

I was shaken to the core. It had been like a tsunami taking me under and over, twisting and turning me however it pleased. It hadn't been a dream, even though I had been asleep before it happened. But the moment I felt like someone had kicked me from inside my brain, I was wide awake. Unable to move under the onslaught of memories, my inner self writhed, torn between agony and the most incredible happiness. The only way I could explain this was to imagine a wall in my brain—a dam, holding back a sea of memories, crumbling from the water pressure on the other side. Little droplets had escaped here and there, feeding me impressions of my past. Over the last couple of years, more and more had broken through, until tonight, the dam fully broke, resulting in a tsunami of emotions that nearly drowned me.

My head was so full of impressions, memories, and things I now knew that I wasn't sure where to start. It was like a forgotten basket of cords. Every time you picked at one, it turned out it was intermingled with others, even knotted in places, and before you knew it, you were working on the yellow cord instead of on the blue one where you started or the red one that had you distracted for a tick.

My emotions were all over the place; I didn't know if I wanted to cry or laugh or kill someone. The name Allisaahn echoed in my head and heart. She had been real; I knew that without a shadow of a doubt. I had loved her—I loved her still. She was this incredible female in my arms. Allisaahn-Alice. They sounded so much alike. That couldn't be a coincidence, could it? No, nothing seemed like a coincidence anymore; everything pointed to something. A higher power... something... was bringing us together, weaving the kind of magic I didn't believe in. Alice looked nothing like Allisaahn, and yet the resemblance was there. Their stubbornness, their

mannerism, the fire in their eyes.

Again, emotions got the better of me because the last time I saw Allisaahn, I was dying, and she was already dead in my arms. But now I was alive, and so was she—albeit in a different form—and I loved Alice just as much as I had loved Allisaahn. So, was I supposed to be happy to be here with her or heartbroken because she had died? Confusion rippled through me so much that I had no words to express it. It threatened to consume me if I didn't ground myself.

I needed to think this through, so I asked Alice the first question that popped into my head: "How did you get your name?"

"Really?" She stared at me. "That's what you want to know right now?"

She was right, yet this might be another piece of the puzzle.

"Please," I pressed.

She rolled her eyes. "Because you said please," she huffed.

Her body stiffened, and I could tell she didn't want to discuss it.

"My mom was high like always when I was born," she said after a long pause.

"High?" I didn't want to interrupt her, but I didn't understand what she meant, and it sounded important.

"She was a drug user. She and the rest of my family," Alice explained, a detached pain edged into her features. And suddenly, her pain and story became more important to me than anything else. I realized I had never asked her about her past or her abduction by the Cryons. I really was an ass.

"I'm sorry."

"Not your fault. Some people weren't meant to have kids," she shrugged.

"Not that," I replied sincerely. "I've never asked about you. What happened to you, and about your past."

"Well, we didn't exactly have time to... socialize." She waved her hand, but a small gleam in her eyes told me that she was pleased I was asking now.

"Anyway, the story goes that mom was high, and when the nurse asked her what she wanted to name me, she slurred something like..." She scrunched up her face in concentration to get the sound just right. "Allishahh."

A shiver went down my spine. That sounded even more like Allisaahn. She must have noticed it at the same time. Her eyes blinked in confusion. "That's so weird."

I nodded, giving her time to collect herself. "Well, the nurse knew how wasted Mom was and had mercy on me, so she put Alice down on the birth certificate. Probably the only normal thing that ever happened to me."

"It must have been hard to grow up with a drug-addicted mother," I wagered. "Did she ever sober up?" Probably not, if Earth drugs were anything like the drugs we had out here. I had terminated many criminals who had fallen victim to various sorts of means of altering their brain chemistry. The drugs turned them into very vicious assholes. It made me angry thinking that Alice had grown up in that environment.

"She didn't, neither did my father nor my siblings. I was the only one who stayed sober."

My strong little mate ! If there had been any lingering doubt that she was my mate , it

was gone. I wished I could erase those memories for her, wished it had been me instead of her going through a nightmare like that, but I couldn't. All I could do was show her how proud of her I was that, despite all odds, she was here, not addicted, and stronger than ever.

I held her tight for several heartbeats. "You are the strongest female I know."

"Well..." she laughed, "how many women have you actually got to know like me?"

A low chuckle rose in my chest. "You're right. You're the first and only," besides Allisaahn, my mind amended. But since they were the same, I didn't think it counted. But I still had to learn a lot about Allisaahn in this incarnation. First, I would have to make her understand, though.

"Somehow, I feel special." She fluttered her eyelashes at me, increasing my chuckle despite all the dark thoughts racing through my head.

"Alright, joking aside." She pressed my hand. "Tell me what happened and who Allisaahn is. Should I be jealous?"

"You'll never have reason to be jealous," I promised, turning serious like her. Then I swallowed, unsure of where to start.

Before the dam broke last night, I had been dreaming. Now, I knew that it must have been another memory that had trickled through before the subsequent full eruption. For some reason, the dream played out a few days before the end. The sequence might not make a difference, but since this was the clearest dream I had ever had, and it happened just before the memories swallowed me up, I decided to start there.

* * *

I finished dressing the Ikaroo I caught earlier that day, then went to pick Allisaahn up from her workshop, knowing fully well that if I didn't, she would stay there all night. I loved my mate, but her obsession with inventing and refining tools robbed her of sleep and nourishment. It was a good thing she had me to make sure she got plenty of both.

Her workshop, like most of the others, was located in the center of town, and on my way, I met several of our friends. We nodded greetings and exchanged a few pleasantries, but I didn't stop. I was in a hurry to see Allisaahn. Our bond was still fresh; barely a rotation—a year—had gone by since the mating marks appeared on both our bodies. Finally finding my Soulweb mate had been the highlight of my life.

Not all Soulweb mates lived in the same town, or even the same region, which was why every three rotations, a meeting was held at the Borrog Mountains—a holy place, where thousands of rotations ago, the gods landed to bless us with their love. It was called The Seeking , and all eligible single males and females of Darlam journeyed there in search of their Soulweb Mate.

That's where I met Allisaahn. I was already in my twenties and desperate to find my Soulweb mate. I had traveled from town to town for two rotations, hoping to find her, but my search had been in vain. All of my friends were already mated, and I felt their eyes of pity on me.

Shadebound . Nobody said it out loud, not even my family, but the word was there, in their eyes, in my mind and heart. More with every passing rotation during which I still hadn't found her. Shadebound was what we called the ones who lost their Soulweb mate. It meant being bound to a shadow of what once was. No matter what, our Soulweb mates were the ones we were destined to spend eternity with, even if we never met them in life.

People died on Darlam. Not often, there was no crime, no disease, but it happened. A

person could get gored by an animal, fall down a cliff, or drown; there were many ways for death to stalk us. And when death came to one, it might as well claim two because the bound mate would never know happiness again. No matter if they had met yet or not.

All my life, I had prepared for my Soulweb Mate. Finding her was my ultimate life goal. Without her, I was damned to a long, lonely life. We only mated once for eternity. That's how we were born, and that's how we died. Deep in my bones, I felt that she was still out there, searching for me as hard as I was searching for her. I knew that the moment I saw her, I would recognize her like I had hundreds of times before. I would feel complete . I had no memories of the other times, but as sure as I knew I was going to take another breath, I knew that for thousands of rotations, we had been one.

Even so, I wasn't fully prepared for the emotions that assaulted me the moment I laid eyes on her the very first day of The Seeking. My Allisaahn! She was four years younger, which explained why I hadn't seen her at the previous ceremony. The moment our eyes met, we knew. Custom dictated that we spend time with others and get to know them until our Soulweb Glyphs marked our bodies. But we both knew who we were to each other, and we spent every moment together.

The festivities took place over the course of a week, during which time Glyphs appeared on many bodies, and happy couples departed. By the fifth day, Allisaahn and I were concerned. Neither one of us had shown signs of our Soulweb Glyphs appearing. More than once, I had to chase off a desperate male who wanted to spend time with my Allisaahn. Males and females were becoming more distressed with every passing day that they hadn't found their bonded mate. We were a peaceful people; aggression was not in our nature, but desperation could turn people crazy, and I was worried about a physical altercation.

"We should run away," Allisaahn suggested.

"We still have two days," I reminded her. The thought of running away didn't sit well with me. People did; sometimes, they returned with their mating marks, but more often, they were never seen again. Couples without Soulweb Glyphs were not accepted in our towns. It was believed they robbed their mates of the pleasure of being with them, as well as denied their destiny promised to them by the gods. There were rumors of a settlement way up in the mountains where those couples lived with their own community, but I wasn't sure if that was true or not. Shade's Vale was the name of the rumored town, populated by the damned. The outcasts. The ones who had rebelled against the gods and defied their commands.

Every morning that week, I woke, checked my arm, and cursed when I didn't see any black marks. Why would the gods fate us but deny us the ultimate proof of their approval?

On the morning of the seventh day, my mood was particularly bleak. We should run away , Allisaahn's words echoed in my mind. But how could I do that to her? To her mate? To the one I was sure was out there, looking for her as desperately as I had been. No, I'm her mate. I'm her true mate , my mind whispered. I didn't have the courage yet to look at my arm. This was the last morning, and I didn't know what I would do if my arm hadn't been marked yet. How could I let her go? How could I not? I was torn. I would have gladly lived the rest of my life out alone and desolate if I had known it meant she would find her Soulweb Mate and be happy. But I didn't know that.

I raked my hands through my hair and up and down my face, as despair clenched at my heart. The last of the ceremony attendees would leave today; they were packing as I was sitting in my tent, wallowing in misery.

"Xyrek! Xyrek!" Allisaahn's excited voice reached me from outside the tent before she threw the flap aside and entered. She held up her arm, where faint black lines were sneaking their way up her flesh.

Hope filled me for one moment, but when I looked at my silvery skin, there was no trace of it.

"It's not for me," I said in a broken voice.

"I refuse to believe that. I know you're my Soulweb Mate. I do." She rushed forward, and before I could stop her, she threw the blanket I was covered with off me. Underneath, I was naked, but neither she nor I cared because we both stared in awe at the black lines sneaking up my thigh and hip. Laughter escaped her lips, and I joined in as I crushed her into my arms.

"Damn the gods for playing with us like this," I chuckled.

That was a rotation ago, and my love for her had only grown. That's why I wasn't all too happy to see my brother, Zaarek, stepping into my path on my way to her workshop. He had been gone for several moons, and I was happy to see him, but that paled in comparison to seeing Allisaahn.

"Brother, a word?" Zaarek spoke the last words I wanted to hear right then.

"Can it wait until the morning? I'm on my way to pick up Allisaahn. I'm pretty sure she hasn't eaten all day." I tried to step by him.

But he wasn't having it. He pulled me into his embrace and slapped my back, saying, "I missed you."

With a sigh, I returned his embrace, pounding just as hard, maybe more. "I missed you too."

"Come, I'll walk with you," he put his arm around my shoulder, knowing the way to Allisaahn's workshop as well as I.

"How is Noevah?" Noevah was his mate.

"She is good. I had a hard time getting her to leave Ax," he laughed. Ax was a bigger town, a few days' journey from Rek. Zaarek was our town's primarch and had traveled to Ax to confirm rumors of another species having arrived on our planet.

Despite my need to see Allisaahn, I stopped, "Is it true then?"

"Yes," Zaarek stopped as well. "I've met them. They call themselves Ohrurs, and there is something off about some of them. Evilness surrounds them."

War . The word, so strange and foreboding, entered my mind unbidden.

It was a word full of horror invented to keep us pure, yet it was still an abstract concept for us. In all the thousands of rotations of the history of Darlam, there had never been a war on this planet.

But now that one word echoed through my head. The promise of something looming, something dangerous to come, chilled me to the bone—a premonition.

"What do they want?" I asked.

"They claim they only want to trade, but some of their emissaries have already inquired if we are for hire." Zaarek looked down at his feet.

"Hire for what?" Even as I posed the question, the fine hairs at the back of my neck stood up.

"As their bodyguards, their mercenaries." He said, not looking up.

"Why?" I creased my brows. "Why would they want us..."

He shook his head, "According to them, we are the strongest species they have ever encountered. They're traders, and they need protection."

That's not who we were. I had never given my physical stature much thought. We were all built much alike. Some had stronger arms; some had stronger legs; it didn't matter to us. Every one of us lived, worked, and did what was necessary to make our community thrive. We all knew how to hunt and kill prey, but that was all the killing we ever did. We weren't fighters, and we never harmed each other.

"They are so much more technologically advanced than us," Zaarek filled me in. "They have machines that fly through the sky. They came from another planet, another galaxy."

"Are they gods, like the Arkhevari who blessed us long ago?" But even as I asked, I knew they weren't.

"More like demons," Zaarek warned. "We'll be meeting again soon. I just wanted to let you know and tell you to be careful."

"Careful?" What was he talking about?

"Don't leave Allisaahn alone, don't go anywhere alone." Zaarek's eyes darkened. "I have a bad feeling about this, brother."

So did I.

ALICE

I didn't know what to say. The words, it was just a dream , hovered at the tip of my tongue, but I swallowed them down. It was clear that to him, it hadn't been just a dream . And by the way goosebumps spread over my flesh whenever he said the name Allisaahn , I kind of agreed with him. My logical brain was still refusing to believe any of it. Soulweb Glyphs and Mates ? But there was no denying the black markings running up and down the left side of my body.

As much as I wanted to call him a psychopath for making this whole thing up, having injected some kind of poison in me to make those marks appear... well, let's just say that sounded as far-fetched as the other story. Also, there was no denying the deep-rooted emotions inside of me at hearing her name. Or how his description of the town and Darlam reverberated inside me, like an echo that had become so faint it was barely audible any longer.

Yet, it was hard to believe in that whole Soulmate stuff. I mean, if that were the case, shouldn't I have been head over heels in love with this guy? Like from the moment I laid eyes on him? Wasn't that what this was supposed to be all about? Love?

I did have feelings for Xyrek. Hell, I was here on a spaceship with him, going to a planet I'd never heard of before, leaving anything human behind. But love?

I listened deep inside me, recalled the great sex we had, the fluttering in my stomach whenever I saw him, the weakening knees. Crush, maybe, I allowed. But did one follow a crush through the universe like this?

I remembered the ache I had felt when he was gone, and I thought I would never see him again. It hadn't been a mind-numbing, devastating ache, but it had been there, and I wasn't sure how much worse it might have become. Then again, I didn't think love was an emotion one could quantify. Some people fell head over heels, some people enjoyed a quieter bond, and neither one was wrong or right. Many people swore they knew they had found their soulmate the moment they laid eyes on them. None of these were things I could dismiss. Neither could I dismiss my growing... fondness for him. Yes, fondness. One didn't fall in love with someone in a matter of days, dammit. That just didn't happen. But the truth was that I was following a man through space whom I hardly knew because it was better than being without him, so that had to be a pretty strong emotion I felt for him, right?

This was so confusing, and instead of finding any answers, it got more confusing with every clue Xyrek unearthed... was it still unearthing in space? Alright, I decided not to go there right then. I had far more important things to figure out.

"So, you think this is some kind of memory? That we were reincarnated? Me on Earth, you... wherever, through the Ohrurs?"

He shook his head before he nodded. "Something like that. Memories, for sure. I just don't know how I can have them... and you don't."

Yeah, that was one of the millions of questions running through my head.

"There's more," he said.

"Okay." I steeled myself.

Excruciating pain edged over his features. No, I decided. He wasn't a psychopath. There was no way someone could fake this kind of pain. Whatever he told me, whatever he was about to say to me, he believed in it with his entire being. Which

still didn't mean it was true.

"The Ohrurs attacked us. They killed us, all of us," he said.

A cold hand grabbed my heart. My ears hummed, a deep, almost subsonic sound filling my head, pressing down, as if I were diving deep underwater. It kept increasing until I had to let go of Xyrek's hand to press both of mine against my head.

"Alice? What's wrong?"

I shook my head. "I don't know. A sound... pressure... it hurts."

"Easy," he grabbed my shoulders. "It's alright, Alice, nothing is going to hurt you."

I didn't respond; I only crawled deeper into myself. He suddenly let go and jumped off the bed. He grabbed the healing wand and moved it over my head. Expectantly, I waited, but nothing happened. Neither the pressure nor the sound subsided.

"Alice," he grabbed me again. "I need you to focus on me," he urged.

And then I passed out.

When my eyes blinked open, I felt a damp towel moving gently up and down my face. "There she is. You scared me. How are you feeling?"

I blinked a few times. The humming and pressure were gone. He helped me sit up, but dizziness made me lean into him. My hand moved up and cupped his cheek. The roughness of his skin was at once arousing and familiar. Achingly so, as if I had done this kind of gesture a million times before. I looked into the deep black pool of his eyes. Eyes that had been so... alien to me when I first met him. But now? Now I felt like I could read his every emotion in them. It was like diving into a dark pool of

warm water. Reassuring, pleasant, and so very safe.

It felt like an echo in time, looking into those dark eyes, feeling his skin under my palm. My own flesh tingled at the contact, sending vibrations down to my core, warming my heart, and expanding a myriad of emotions inside my chest. Tears burned in my eyes just from this little contact, and I realized he was more than just a crush to me—a lot more. I cleared my throat to get the lump out of it before I reassured him, "Better, I think. It's gone."

"What was it?"

"I don't know. It was a sound. So deep. It felt like it was inside me—" I tried to explain, having difficulty recalling those moments, no matter how bad they had been. Because this latest epiphany, the way I felt about him? It was all that was on my mind right now.

"Surrounded you? Pressed you down?" he interrupted me, not realizing I had already broken off midsentence.

Still, his words brought me back to the reality we were talking about. "How do you know?"

"Because," he rubbed his palm over his face like he didn't want to see my expression when he said, "because that's how we died."

I hadn't thought anything else could surprise me, but it did. His words rang deep inside me; they sounded and felt true. Fuck!

Fuck!

This was true. All of this was true.

"What happened?" I wanted to know.

"Drones." Xyrek's voice was low, rough, edged with something I had never heard from him before—not frustration, not irritation, but something colder. "The Ohrurs used drones to hunt us down, then they killed us with sound and air."

I barely breathed as I watched him. His posture was controlled, arms crossed over his chest, but his fingers twitched—like he was reliving the horror of it. The same horror I had felt before I passed out.

"They didn't even need to fire a weapon," he continued in a flat voice. "They sent in waves of machines that changed the pressure around us, like twisting a dial between life and death."

I swallowed, the weight of his words pressing into my chest like an invisible force.

"First, the air felt thick—like breathing in liquid metal. Then, the pressure dropped so fast it felt like your lungs were being ripped apart from the inside."

My stomach twisted. For a frightening moment, that was exactly what I had experienced.

"Some must have died instantly—blood vessels burst, brains swelled, lungs collapsed." He exhaled sharply, and his jaw worked so hard that I worried about his molars. A shiver ran down my spine, but I couldn't look away.

"The drones emitted a low-frequency sound—something deep that crawled under your skin and into your skull. It shook people apart from the inside out." His fingers curled into fists. "Organs ruptured. Nerves misfired."

My entire body shook at the images he called up in his brutal style. He wasn't the

type to sugarcoat things, but damn, I wished he had this time. The silence that followed felt thick, suffocating—as if even the ship around us could feel the weight of what had been done to him, to us. I forced down the lump in my throat and whispered, "How did you survive?"

Xyrek's gaze met mine, and for a moment, there was something unreadable in his black eyes. Something that made my pulse spike for reasons I couldn't quite explain.

"I didn't," he said simply. "The Xyrek you're looking at? He died on Darlam."

The words shouldn't have affected me the way they did, but a sharp pang twisted deep in my gut because I believed him.

The thought of him dying, or having died, scared me. I couldn't imagine a world without him. "But if you died..." I trailed off, trying to find the right words to express the rampant thoughts running through my head. "Then how... where were you reborn?"

"That's one of the things I need to figure out."

"We," I took his hand and pressed it. "We, Xyrek. This is about both of us. And... Zaarek?" I cocked my head. "That was your brother, right?"

"Yes."

"But he's also one of the other Space Guardians?" I tried to wrap my head around it.

Xyrek pulled up his comm, opened a cube, and showed me an image of the other Space Guardian. "Except for having shorter hair in this image, he looks exactly like the male from my dream. Like how I remember my brother."

There were probably a million psychological explanations for this. Like his mind had made up the whole thing, given his brother the name of the other Space Guardian, and made him think they looked the same. But I didn't believe so. I really didn't. Whatever we were going to hypothesize, we needed to work under the assumption that all of this was true.

I reached out and placed my palm on his face. "Let's not talk about this anymore," I pulled him closer. "Kiss me. Let's forget about this for a while."

"Gladly," he said before his lips sealed mine. Emotions washed through me. Strong emotions. I held on to him like I hadn't seen him in years. My hands moved up and down his muscled arms, arms that felt more familiar than they should have.

A deep tenderness overcame me as Xyrek's strong arms enveloped my body, pulling me flush against his broad chest. His lips moved against mine with a desperate hunger as if he, too, was overwhelmed by the strange sense of longing and familiarity that had seized us both.

Xyrek's hands roamed my curves possessively, igniting my skin wherever they touched. A soft moan escaped my lips as his mouth trailed hot kisses down my neck. I arched into him, craving more of his touch, his taste, not just from physical desire but from something deeper. Something was changing inside me, or remembering. I wasn't sure which any longer. All I knew was that his touch ignited a fire I had never felt before.

"Alice," he growled against my throat; his deep voice vibrated through me and sent shivers racing down my spine. The way he said my name, with such raw need and reverence, made my heart clench almost painfully in my chest.

He was still naked; the need to have his skin touch mine had me pulling my shirt over my head in an impatient rush. I made out Xyrek's sculpted body in the low light,

revealing expanses of gleaming silver skin stretched over rock-hard muscle. My hands explored the chiseled planes of his chest and abs with wonder, marveling at his alien perfection.

"You're so beautiful," I whispered, awed. It wasn't just how perfect he was; I felt things while touching him—things I didn't have a name for. I caressed his body, trying to convey my feelings for him.

Our eyes met, and in the depths of his obsidian orbs, I saw the same powerful emotions churning through him—desire, longing, confusion, recognition. As if in a trance, I leaned in and brushed my lips against his in the gentlest caress, feeling our connection's static charge. Xyrek cupped my face as he deepened the kiss. His tongue delved into my mouth to claim me thoroughly. I moaned and pressed myself fully against him, skin to skin, curves to hard planes. It felt so right, so perfect, like coming home after being lost for an eternity.

My hands mapped the sculpted expanse of his back as he settled between my thighs, the hard evidence of his arousal nestled against my aching core.

"I need you," Xyrek rasped, his voice rough with desire. "I've never needed anyone like this."

I wrapped my legs around his waist, drawing him closer, craving the intimate connection.

"Then take me," I breathed against his lips. "I'm yours."

With a deep groan, Xyrek surged forward, sheathing himself fully inside me in one powerful thrust. I cried out at the exquisite sensation of him filling and stretching me. It was more than just physical pleasure—it was a sense of completeness, of two halves becoming whole. It was like finding a warm spot in the middle of a raging

snowstorm, like standing in the eye of the storm, like gasping for air after being pulled from deep water, like waking from a fever dream to find the world sharper, clearer, more real than it had ever been.

A shudder tore through me as Xyrek held still for a moment, buried deep, his forehead pressed against mine, his hot breath caressing my skin. His grip on my hips was firm and grounding, like he was afraid I'd slip through his fingers.

Then he moved.

A slow, deliberate pull followed by a deep, claiming thrust that sent pleasure rolling through me like a shock to the system, a jolt of raw sensation I could feel in my bones. I gasped, my fingers clawing at his shoulders, my body desperate for more, for all of him.

"Frygg," he growled against my throat, voice hoarse, almost wrecked. "You feel—" He cut himself off with a rough, unsteady breath; his next thrust came harder, deeper, making me cry out. I moaned, arching against him, my legs tightening around his waist. I needed more. I needed him.

"More," I gasped as my heels dug into his back, pulling him impossibly closer.

His fingers tightened around my thighs, and his rhythm shifted—rougher, more urgent, more demanding. Each thrust sent pleasure rippling outward, unraveling everything I thought I knew about need, about connection, about what it meant to belong to someone.

It wasn't just sex.

It wasn't just a claiming.

It was a return, a reawakening, a collision of two halves that had been searching for each other through space and time.

I met his gaze, saw the same wild hunger, the same helpless surrender in the depths of his black, endless eyes.

I was his.

And God help me...

He was mine .

My nails raked down his back as our hips met in a primal rhythm, our breaths mingled with soft moans and whispered words. Xyrek's thrusts grew more urgent, more demanding, as if he were trying to merge our very souls through the joining of our bodies. I matched his desperate passion, rising to meet each powerful stroke. Our mouths fused together in a searing kiss, tongues tangling and exploring, tasting and claiming.

Pleasure coiled tighter and tighter in my core with each deep plunge of his thick length. I could feel myself unraveling, spiraling closer to the edge of ecstasy. Xyrek's hand slipped between our writhing bodies to stroke my swollen clit; his skillful touch sent me careening over the edge.

"Xyrek!" I cried out as rapture crashed over me, my inner walls clenched around him in pulsing waves.

With a guttural groan, he surrendered to his own release as his cock throbbed deep inside me.

It hit me all at once, like a dam breaking, like a tide rushing in too fast to fight. I

loved him. More than I should, more than I ever thought possible. It wasn't just lust, wasn't just the pull of the mating marks—it was him—his strength, his arrogance, his sharp edges that somehow fit perfectly against mine.

There was no running from it, no rationalizing it away. I had fallen, and there was no ground beneath me—only him, catching me, holding me, anchoring me in a way I never knew I needed.

XYREK

Alice slept beside me; her breaths were slow and steady, and her body was tucked against mine as if she belonged there. And she did. I had no doubts about that anymore. Not after what I remembered. Not after the name Allisaahn had torn itself from my lips like a prayer, a plea, a curse. The memories had returned like a flood—too much, too fast, overwhelming me with their intensity. For so long, I had been certain I had no past before the Ohrurs, that my life had begun when they took me in, trained me, shaped me into a weapon.

Had that been a lie, too? Did I have a life before? A mate? Was I a reincarnation of the Xyrek of my memories? Or was I a clone, given his memories?

It didn't matter. She was back.

Not in the way I now remembered we were reborn on Darlam, but still. Alice—Allisaahn—had been returned to me. Different, yet the same. This wasn't an accident—it wasn't even a damn miracle, it was fate.

I brushed a strand of her hair from her face, marveling at the way her lashes fluttered against her cheeks. She was real. She was here. And by the stars, I loved her. I loved her so much that my chest expanded and constricted at the same time. She was my everything. I could hardly believe it had taken me this long to realize it. How could I not have seen it the moment I laid eyes on her? But she was here now, and she was mine. The realization settled deep in my bones, like something that had always been there, waiting to be acknowledged. I had spent the last few weeks fighting it, resisting it, pretending that what I felt was just a side effect of the mating marks, a biological

reaction, nothing more.

But that was a lie, too.

This wasn't just the marks. It wasn't just biology. It was her.

The way she met my sharp edges with her own, never backing down. The way her mind worked, always seeking answers, always needing to know, just like me. The way she had fought to stay alive, survived against all odds, and still somehow found a way to fix things—even when she had nothing. She was Allisaahn in a thousand small ways. At the same time, she was Alice. My Alice.

And I had almost left her behind.

I clenched my jaw, rage simmering just beneath my skin. The Ohrurs took her from me. They killed her. Worse, they stole my memories, erased my past, and twisted me into their obedient weapon. And I had let them. I had followed orders, never questioning, never doubting.

Until now.

Now, I saw them for what they were—liars, manipulators, parasites. And I would burn them to the ground for what they had done. I would find out everything. Why they took me. Why they erased my people. Why they covered up Darlam, locking it away like a forgotten graveyard. And most of all, they would feel my vengeance. For what they did to me. To her. To all the others.

Alice stirred beside me, murmuring in her sleep. Her body shifted closer, as if seeking my warmth. I tightened my hold on her, grounding myself in her essence.

She was mine.

She had always been mine.

And this time, no one—not the Ohrurs, not fate, not gods—would take her away from me again.

I was just about to join Alice in sleep when the air in my quarters grew heavier, charged with an unseen force; the temperature dropped just enough to prickle my skin. A presence pressed against my mind—familiar and impossible all at once.

All my alarm bells went off. We weren't alone.

I tensed, my hand reaching for the blaster on the side table, but then I forced myself to lie still as I realized this wasn't an intruder, not in the physical sense. It was something else. Something deeper.

And then, he was there.

Not in the way a man stands in a room, flesh and blood, but within me, inside my mind. A projection of will and power, woven into existence from something far greater than mere consciousness. His form hovered in the periphery of my vision, blurred yet solid, like the memory of a dream just before waking.

Xyrek, I'm Zapharos . His voice was a whisper and a roar, ancient and powerful, yet somehow personal. It was as if he had always known me, as if he had always been there.

You and the others are not alone in this .

A growl rose in my throat. "Get out of my head," I snapped. "I don't need some cryptic ghost trying to make me feel better."

Zapharos chuckled, and the sound vibrated through my skull. You are the same as always. Stubborn.

"You say that as if you know me," I gritted out, clenching my fists. "I have no idea who you are."

I am Zapharos—one of the most powerful Arkhevari .

Arkhevari?

Could this really be true? Thanks to my newfound memories, I knew that the Arkhevari were the gods who came to Darlam and gave us the gift of eternal love. I was too irritated that he was inside my head to be as humbled as I probably should have been.

You and Alice need to be prepared .

My breath hitched. Alice!

"You leave her out of this." I sat up with a start. Alice moaned, and I forced myself to relax. There was no reason to wake her.

Zapharos sighed as if speaking to a particularly frustrating child.

You and Alice are not like the others. You are more than the marks on your skin, more than the bond that ties you together . His presence pulsed against mine, deep and unstoppable. My frustration reached new heights when I realized there was nothing I could do to get him out of my head.

Did you not wonder why you felt no pain when the marks appeared? Why you could be apart from her when the others could not?

I had wondered. More than once. It hadn't made sense.

The other Space Guardians had been shackled by their mating marks, unable to stray more than a few feet from their fated mates without agony tearing through them—at least according to Lord Protector Garth. But Alice and I? We could be separated. Or at least we could before. I wasn't sure I could ever leave her sight again now that I had surrendered to our love.

Still, our marks didn't bind us the same way.

Because...

Because your souls have reincarnated together more times than you could ever imagine, Zapharos answered the question in my mind before I could even voice it. Shudders of revulsion pulsed through me. If I could have laid my hands on the bastard, I would have broken his neck. It was the worst intrusion of my life. No, I admitted, that honor still belongs to the Ohrurs, but Zapharos is a very close second.

You and Alice don't fear loss because your souls know each other too well. You trust without needing proof. You find each other, always. In every life. In every version of existence.

I didn't want to like his words, but somehow, they comforted me. Still, I snarled, "Get out of my head," careful not to wake Alice.

You are as close to the Arkhevari as a mortal can be. Zapharos' voice deepened inside my head, and that's why you must listen.

"To what?" I bit out.

To her.

Her? Alice!

When the time comes, you must listen to her and trust her, as you have always done. She will know what to do. She has always known .

More ripples moved up and down my spine. "I will not have her in danger."

You will always be in danger if the Ohrurs have not been held accountable. You. Her. All of them .

The urge to argue with him welled up from the pit of my gut, but I forced it back down. He wasn't going to get out of my head until he said what he came here to say.

I'm glad you're finally realizing that , he chuckled. I wanted to punch him more with every passing tick. I would agree to whatever he had to say, just to get rid of him, and then... yeah, then what?

You can try .

Frygging bastard, my jaw tightened.

There is something you must do on Darlam, Xyrek . His presence pressed against me again, a flood of knowledge just out of reach. You are the key. You and Alice both. But you must find Shade's Vale.

" Shade's Vale ?" My frown deepened. Why would Zapharos want me to find the one place on Darlam where the damned dwelled? Or had dwelled. I was sure they were as dead as all the others.

It was a place for Darlams who never found their Soulweb mates. For Darlams who fell in love with each other without the protection of mating marks. A place I had

briefly considered seeking out with Allisaahn before our mating marks finally showed.

Darlam was never just a world. It was a cradle—a beginning. The Arkhevari left something behind, something only you can unlock .

I shook my head. "That doesn't tell me anything."

No , Zapharos admitted, but you will understand when the time comes. When you stand on the shattered ground of your ancestors, when the truth is laid bare before you... you will know .

I growled in frustration, but Zapharos was already fading. His presence withdrew, retreating like the tide. The bastard had given me nothing but more riddles to solve.

"Tell me what I'm looking for; tell me what happened," I cried.

Be ready, Xyrek , his final words echoed in my mind. The balance must be restored; you will be my most valuable tool .

Tool ? The frygging bastard was just like the frygging Ohrurs, using me for his own sick endgame.

"You little—" I started, but he was gone.

Silence crashed down around me.

I exhaled sharply, my muscles coiled, and my mind raced. I didn't want to believe him, but by the Black Abyss, I did. I wanted to cling to the anger he had awakened inside me. But deep down, I already knew. Alice was more than my mate, and Darlam was more than a lost world.

The Ohrurs had stolen my past.

But I would fight for our future.

ALICE

The days passed without us being able to further sort any of the puzzle pieces that still refused to fit together. When we came closer to Darlam, a woman named Hannah made contact with us. She claimed to be the mate of one of the other Space Guardians, Tharaax. Xyrek kept me a secret from her; neither one of us trusted her words. What if this was another trap the Ohrurs had laid?

"For what it's worth, I think she is genuine," Xyrek said after ending another comm with her.

"I hope so," I agreed. Without Hannah knowing, I had watched their conversation, and I liked her. She, too, had been close-mouthed, as if uncertain Xyrek was telling the truth.

"I'm going to meet her and find out if what she says is true," Xyrek said when we were only a day's journey from Darlam.

She had warned us about the forcefield surrounding the planet and the possibility of a strong Ohrur presence. The other Space Guardians and their mates were waiting for someone named Vraax and another human woman named Sloane, who, according to Hannah, had some important cargo aboard. It seemed like we would arrive only a day or so after them.

"I won't let you go alone," I argued.

He shook his head. "It might be a trap." His eyes fell on one of the cleaning drones.

"What in the name of the Black Abyss did you do to it?"

"Do you like it?" I beamed, taking in my latest invention—well, invention might be pushing it; I had only slightly enhanced it. The drone hovered over the ground as we watched it, lifting up like a helicopter.

"Now it can clean the ceilings, too."

"It was already able to do that by crawling up the wall, Alice," Xyrek huffed, shaking his head. "And why does it have to have eyes? It's creepy."

"It was creepy before. Now it's cute. And watch this," I turned my head. "Hey, Lux, when will we arrive at Darlam?"

"In twenty-two hours, fifteen minutes, and four seconds," Lux replied.

"Isn't she great?" I beamed.

"How does she know this?" Xyrek's brows moved together as he regarded me suspiciously.

"Because I gave her the gift of intelligence," I hedged.

"You wired it to the ship's main interface?" he accused.

I shrugged. "It's handy."

"It's going to get us crashed," he grumbled. "Disconnect it."

"Killjoy." I glared at him.

"Now, Alice," he insisted.

"Where's your trust?"

"Oh, I have trust. But I'm not willing to risk your life," he retorted. "I remember everything about you, Allisaahn."

I wasn't sure I liked it when he called me by her name. I still hadn't quite made peace with the whole reincarnation thing. There were parts I might have been able to believe in, but some of the others only created more questions. Like, why did we always have the same names? And if we did, why in the hell didn't we remember who our partner was and put an ad in the paper like: Allisaahn looking for Xyrek ? Xyrek had explained how the names of Darlam males indicated their town. Like Xyrek was Xy of Rek. So, did that mean he would always be reincarnated into the same town? What if he decided to move to like Ax, would he then go by Xyax? These questions alone were confusing enough, but when you added that I had been born on Earth... it reached a whole new level of weird.

Let's say, for starters, the Arkhevari were all-knowing entities, the gods of the universe—something I wasn't willing to believe—and they had populated Darlam. Created little Darlams in their image... if you wanted to get biblical here... Which I also wasn't inclined to do. But fine, let's assume that, just for argument's sake. So they decided Allisaahn mated Xyrek—over and over again. Through every life, they ensured we would meet. Fine, if that happened on one planet....

But it wasn't just Xyrek and me; no, there were thousands of millions of others they watched over. Why? Like I said, wouldn't it have been easier to tell Mom and Dad your baby's name is Allisaahn, and she is the mate of Xyrek?

Fine, let's assume free will and all that crap come into play...

I still didn't see why, for thousands of years, this worked perfectly fine on Darlam, but suddenly—drumroll please—the fated mates were strewn all throughout the universe. From what I understood, Earth had been undiscovered by outsiders until the Cryons came. So were they, too, some tool the Arkhevari had used? That only made me hate them because so many people had died. And for what?

No, I shook my head. None of this made any sense. There was no logical explanation for it, not even a highly doubtful illogical explanation.

"Remember when you invented the brilliant flour mill?" Xyrek grinned at me.

I hated when he did that. No, I didn't remember. I didn't remember ever having lived anywhere else but on Earth. It creeped me out when he did that. No, more than that, it confused me, and it hurt me. Worst of all, I hated how his face fell when I shook my head like I did now. "I'm sorry. No."

"It's okay." He turned, but I felt his sadness coming off in waves.

So, like the times before, I sighed quietly to myself and requested, "Tell me, please."

He turned back to me, his eyes alight, and I couldn't take this joy away from him. I wasn't sure if his memories were really memories or something else, but he did enjoy these moments—a lot more than I did. I steeled myself to listen for his sake.

"You created a town-wide flour explosion. Everybody was covered in white." He smirked.

My lips twitched. I loved this man so much—more than I had ever thought possible, and despite myself, I found myself intrigued. "Now you're making things up," I accused.

He smirked. "You think so?"

"There's no way I caused a town-wide flour explosion in my past life."

He huffed a quiet laugh, shaking his head. "You did. It was even worse than it sounds."

I groaned, torn between laughing and calling him out, but strangely drawn to the story now, kind of like when someone told you something you did as a kid but didn't remember.

"You were always trying to fix things," he said, "even when the people around you weren't ready for it. Even when it went boom." He raised his hands in the air, imitating an explosion, making me laugh.

"The people of Darlam ground their flour manually. You hated it—said it was inefficient, outdated, and that if we are going to live like primitives, at least we should be efficient primitives ." He smirked. "So you built a wind-powered mill that would grind the flour."

I could actually picture myself doing that. Only wind-powered mills had already been invented on Earth. "Okay, that doesn't sound that bad?—"

He let out a sharp laugh. "It worked. At first. Then the wind picked up. The millstone spun too fast, the friction built up, and then—" he spread his hands wide, mimicking another explosion. "Boom. Flour shot into the air. The wind-powered system was still going. So instead of the flour coming down over the mill, the wind blew it all across town."

My lips twitched. That sounded... funny.

Xyrek was chuckling, too. He stepped closer to me until he nearly caged me in. "Most of the town was covered in white dust. Streets, houses, animals. We found flour everywhere, even months later."

I looked up at him. He was so close now. "I should hate you for telling me this."

"You were always like this, you know. Stubborn. Brilliant. Absolutely infuriating." He smiled, his head moving down, his lips brushing mine, sending electrical fires through me.

"Well," I whispered against his mouth, "at least I was ambitious."

"You still are." He said, then claimed my lips with his. I melted into him.

His lips were warm, insistent, consuming, moving against mine with an urgency that stole my breath.

His hands slid down my waist. Calloused fingertips ignited a fire up and down my skin. He pulled me closer until there was nothing between us but heat and breath. His weight and solid strength pressing against me made my knees weak. I clutched at his shoulders, feeling the raw power coiled underneath his skin, the tension thrumming through him like he was holding back.

Like he always was.

"Xyrek," I whispered, not a question, not a demand—just his name. Just me giving in to him.

His answering growl sent a delicious shiver down my spine. His lips moved from my mouth to my jaw, then lower, tracing the curve of my throat with aching slowness.

"I love you so frygging much," he murmured, his breath hot against my skin.

A shudder wracked through me as his hands slid up my sides, fingers mapping every inch of me like he was memorizing it. Like he was claiming me all over again.

"I love you too," I whispered, tilting my head to give him more, to let him in, to let him take.

I reached up, cupping his face, feeling the sharp edges of him—the warrior, the survivor, the man who had waited lifetimes for me.

"Don't stop," I whispered.

"Never," Xyrek exhaled sharply like he'd been holding that breath for centuries. Then he was kissing me again, but this time it was slower, deeper—less desperate, more reverent, like he was afraid to break me. His hands moved with aching patience, sliding beneath my shirt, skimming bare skin, making me tremble.

I arched into him, needing more, needing everything, pressing closer until I felt the pounding of his heart against mine.

"Frygg," he breathed against my mouth, his forehead resting against mine, his hands flexing against my waist. "You feel... just like I remember."

I swallowed, my own heart stuttering at the rawness in his voice.

"Then don't forget me again," I whispered.

XYREK

"I love you," Alice said as I slowly moved in and out of her, making her mine all over again. It was as if she had felt my mind drifting and was calling me back to her side. I could never get enough of her telling me these three words.

"I love you too," I whispered in her ear, sliding in and out of her perfect pussy. So warm and wet. Her little moans were music to my ears. Her hands grabbed my shoulders, her legs scissoring around my hips as she brought hers up to meet me, to allow me in even deeper.

We took our time. Let our orgasms build slowly, just reveling in being fused together like this. She was mine, and I was hers.

Part of me wondered why I remembered that life from twenty thousand ago but nothing from any other before or after, right then my balls began to pulse, killing any thoughts that weren't about her—Alice, Allisaahn, my mate.

The gift from the gods to me.

"Alice, I'm so close," I warned.

"I'm ready," she panted, stiffening underneath me. Her pupils dilated, and a loud, long moan escaped her as her facial features relaxed and took on a blissful expression. She bit down on her lower lip. She was such an incredible sight. I held on, forced my climax to wait so I could commit this beloved face to memory in the throes of her passion.

She cried out my name, and that ripped the last bits of control I had over my body from me.

"Alice!" I screamed the moment the coil inside me snapped.

Pleasure exploded through me, ripped through my body with a violent, uncontrollable force. My spine locked, muscles seizing and flexing simultaneously as my cock pulsed deep inside her; every throb sent a new wave of electric bliss through my veins.

The world blurred. My vision went white at the edges, and for a second, I was lost. A deep, guttural growl tore from my throat as I spilled inside her. My hips jerked involuntarily, caught in the unstoppable rhythm of release.

The pleasure was too much, too good, too consuming.

Every touch, every breath, every whisper of her skin against mine sent another aftershock rolling through me. My arms trembled, and my legs barely held me up as my body fought to recover from the onslaught of sensation. I buried my face against her neck, breathing hard, my entire being wrecked by her.

My love for her was so deep and overpowering, it should have frightened me to my core. But it didn't. Because with her, nothing felt like a loss of control—it felt like clarity. Like everything in my existence had been noise until she entered. She didn't weaken me. She focused me. Made the silence tolerable. Made the fight worth fighting. Most of all, it didn't frighten me because loving her didn't unravel me. It reminded me of who I had been, who I was.

After a while, I pulled her against me; her face rested on my chest, and my arm slung possessively around her. Eventually, her breathing evened out, and I knew she had fallen asleep. As much as I wanted to simply follow her down, memories I hadn't

fully worked through yet—and maybe never would—fought to be acknowledged. Specifically, the last thing I remembered before dying. Finding Allisaahn in her workshop. She was already gone, like all the others in town. I didn't know how I'd managed to stay conscious, on my feet, crawling to find her for so long. But I had.

The pain of seeing her lying there, dead, was the worst agony I had ever experienced. I gladly surrendered to the darkness once I was next to her and held her in my arms. I wouldn't have survived a single day without her. An hour was too much to bear. My only consolation was that we were leaving together.

As I remembered my dream, Zaarek's words rang in my head, they betrayed us . He and Noevah had left for Ax one more time to either try to come to peace terms with the Ohrurs or to rally a war party. For either, it was too late.

Darkness washed over me.

When I woke, I had no concept of time. No idea of where I was, what I was doing there, or where I'd come from. No real idea of who I was, save for my name. I wondered now if I were somehow cloned, maybe raised in a test tube until I was strong enough, or grown by some other high-tech the Ohrurs were keeping a secret. I did not know, but I knew one day I would find out.

I remembered waking up confused, like in a fog, and training. Training my mind didn't seem to want to participate in, but my body obliged. Sleeping and training, with no memories of Allisaahn, or even who I was. It might have been a small mercy that I didn't remember; I wasn't sure.

Every time I awoke anew, there was more training, and then I was guarding someone's house. An Ohrur's house. I learned how to fly spaceships and take down enemies, and as time passed and the training got more intense, it became second nature to me, no matter how much my heart and brain rejected the violence. Until it

was who I was. Until I wasn't Xy of Rek any longer, but Xyrek Draalor, feared Space Guardian—a male who didn't know anything but fighting for the Ohrurs.

I had killed for the Ohrurs. I had ended other people's lives—something no Darlam would have ever done. Then again, our planet was peaceful. The greatest crime on Darlam, the only crime ever committed, was when couples mated without the connection of Soulweb Glyph markings. For this, they were expelled from our society. The Darlams' strong sense of wrong and right demanded nothing less. My planet had no terrible beings like I'd been forced to terminate. So, I didn't know how we would have reacted to someone who had taken another person's life. My gut told me, though, that the punishment would have been equal to the crime. After all, we were ready to fight against the injustice of the Ohrurs—to kill, if necessary. My sense of justice was what allowed me to live with myself now.

I wasn't sure if I should be thankful to the Ohrurs for never making me miss Allisaahn. I died with her, and I woke with no memory of her. Nearly thirty years have passed since I awoke? Became? Appeared? Was that the word for it? Because I was certain I hadn't been born. Either way, holding her now in my arms was a gift I would never again take for granted. I shouldn't have the first time around. I should have known better after how long it took me to find her.

* * *

We took a leap of faith, as Alice called it, and trusted Hannah when she told us where their ship was waiting for us. We figured that, if they weren't hostile, Hannah and her friends were taking a leap of faith for us, too. I still didn't like the idea of Alice accompanying me to meet our new friends. I would have much preferred her to stay aboard our ship just in case things went sideways, but she remained stubborn about coming with me.

"We're stronger together." She insisted.

I gave her a crash course in blaster use, cursing myself for not teaching her how to fight on our way here. I wanted her to be as prepared as possible if we were walking into a trap.

"If something happens, I want you to run back to this ship. It's programmed to take you to Astrionis," I said.

"I won't leave you." She shook her head.

"Alice," I took her beloved face between my hands, "I need to know that you will be safe. I'm trained for this. I can take their entire ship apart if I have to. I can fight any soldier they throw at me, but I can only do that if I don't have to worry about your safety."

"Promise you will join me on Astrionis," she pleaded, tears welling in her eyes, breaking my heart.

"I promise I will do anything in my power to join you on Astrionis," I swore. Meaning it. I would kill anybody who dared stand between her and me.

Her eyes searched mine. I hated seeing the fear in them. Wished by all the stars that I could take it away.

"We will be fine," I assured her.

She nodded bravely. Sniffed twice before straightening her back. "Okay, I've prepared something too. Xyrek, say hello to Vader and Maul."

Two cleaning bots came around the corner. I remembered her studying cleaning bots on the comm a few days ago, looking at different models. Vader and Maul looked just like all the others.

"Uhm, hello?" I stared from her to the bots. "Ahm, who is who?"

She grinned, "If it looks like it hates everything and fights like it does, too, it's Maul." She paused for effect, then added, "And Vader here, he doesn't fight. He executes. If Maul's a storm, Vader's the silence after—when nothing's left standing."

Before I could react to words that didn't make the slightest lick of sense to me, she warned, "Don't react!" just as a third robot arrived, this one the fighting bot from the training room—at least, I hoped it was the fighting bot, because it looked nothing like it. It looked like something straight out of a nightmare. Usually, I set them to resemble a Moggadesh or Pronex because they were the most frightening creatures in the universe. But they looked almost tame compared to this thing. "Frygg."

It moved like a shadow come to life, all sinew and unnatural grace, flowing across the floor without a sound. It was long and sleek, its skin blacker than deep space, reflecting the dim light in an oily sheen. Its body was built for killing—lean muscle, sharp edges, no wasted mass. Its head was smooth, elongated, curving back like a weapon forged from bone, but there were no visible eyes. No way to track its intent, no soul to read. Just hunger, pure and unrelenting.

And then it bared its teeth.

A mouth too wide, full of razor-sharp fangs, with saliva that dripped from its maw like acid ready to burn through flesh and bone. And frygging hells—there was another mouth inside the first, snapping forward like a spear.

I pulled my blaster and pushed Alice behind me. No way I was going to take any chances that this might or might not be the fighting bot.

"No, wait." Alice pulled my arm, holding the blaster down, "Watch."

The black-skinned monstrosity lunged, claws scraping across the metal floor. The damn thing was incredibly fast. I had fought some horrific creatures, but this one?

"Vader, kill!" Alice called from behind me.

The small, round cleaning bot—now a fully armed war machine—rolled forward at full speed, whirring with mechanical menace. It looked ridiculous, like a weaponized cleaning bot, but I had already learned never to underestimate Alice's insanity. The fighting-bot hissed and tilted its head toward the fast-approaching Vader. Its elongated skull gleamed, jaws parting, drool dripping onto the floor in a way that shouldn't have been possible for a machine.

Then Vader launched itself into the air.

Holy frygg.

The tiny bot had rockets.

I had exactly half a second to process this before Vader slammed into the bot's chest with the force of a meteor. The impact sent both machines crashing across the floor; metal shrieked as they rolled in a tangle of flailing limbs and spinning saws.

The bot tried to claw its way free, but Vader wasn't letting go. The little drone whirled furiously, spinning at an impossible speed as tiny welding torches ignited, scorching the bot's exoskeleton.

I barely moved out of the way before sparks and shrapnel went flying.

"Maul's waiting," Alice called from the side, arms crossed, looking way too entertained by the fight. "Let's see if Vader can finish the job first."

Vader slammed itself against the bot again, shoving it backward. But the larger machine recovered too fast, its long tail whipping around, slamming into Vader and sending him skidding across the floor.

Vader let out an offended beep.

I could almost hear the tiny drone's rage.

"Frygging hell," I muttered, stepping back as the bot lunged forward again.

Vader spun in place, recalibrating, then charged full speed—this time, with a goddamn blade extending from its chassis. This shouldn't have been funny. But I couldn't stop smirking.

"Your bots are insane," I muttered to Alice.

She just grinned. "Yeah? Just wait until I let Maul in."

I leaned back against the wall and thought I might actually enjoy this.

Before either machine could take too much damage, Alice stopped both of them with a command on her comm. She grinned at me, "They'll have your back."

I threw my head back and laughed. My incredible mate had just given me the army I needed.

ALICE

The plan was to sneak the cleaning drones in with us when the hatch opened. I'd done some research on them and discovered that most cleaning drones looked alike. They might differ in size or color, but nobody should pay Vader and Maul—I know, too much Star Wars —any mind if they kept to the floor and entered after us. They would go straight to cleaning, fitting in with the others.

I had worried that Xyrek would not allow me to come along, and I didn't want him to be walking into a possible trap on his own, not without backup. So, I had worked diligently on enhancing two drones while simultaneously turning the fighting bot from the training room into a Xenomorph. Again, yes, too much sci-fi TV. But hey, give a girl a break. What else could I have called them? The first one I made ruthless, efficient, and calculated—Vader. Maul, naturally, I programmed to be fast, aggressive, and, yeah, slightly unhinged. It also had several blades in its arsenal.

Honestly, by the time I was done, the fighting bot freaked me the hell out. If that thing had actually been real, I would have instantly died of a heart attack.

I took a deep breath. Xyrek gave me one more questioning glance, a silent question about whether I wanted to stay behind. I shook my head and squared my shoulders as he opened the hatch.

On the other side stood the human female we'd been communicating with, Hannah. Next to her, hovering close by, was a Space Guardian. By the way he immediately positioned himself in front of Hannah, I gathered it had to be Tharaax.

"Xyrek?" The Space Guardian asked.

Xyrek nodded.

"I'm Tharaax, and this is Hannah. Welcome aboard." He held out his hand, and Xyrek grabbed him by the elbow. Hannah eyed me curiously from behind the towering man. She tried to sneak by him, but he held her back.

"Thrax, it's fine," she protested.

"I'm Alice." I moved forward. Instantly, Xyrek pushed himself in between me and Hannah, which in turn made Tharaax flare.

"Oh, for crying out loud," another human woman entered the cargo hold. She was taller than most women and held herself with a commanding presence. Her flaming red hair was tugged back in a tight ponytail that whipped as she moved straight toward me. "I didn't know you had a mate, too. Welcome. I'm Sloane, the commander of this distrustful gang." She held out her hand.

I moved around Xyrek. Commander? Wow!

"I'm Alice," I said, taking her hand.

Xyrek growled.

Another Space Guardian stalked in quietly, his eyes glued to Sloane.

"That's Vraax," Sloane said without turning, as if she had sensed his presence.

From the corners of my eyes, I noticed Vader and Maul making their way in unnoticed. For a moment, guilt rushed through me; this didn't look like a trap at all. I

soothed my feelings by telling myself that I would introduce the others to the drones later. They might still come in handy.

"Come on in," Sloane waved down the hall. "We've got some snacks in the breakroom."

Hannah sidled up next to me, "When you see Luph, don't scream," she whispered, instantly flaring my alarm bells back up.

"Why, and who is Luph?"

"She's mated to Noodar, and she's the only one of us girls who isn't human. She's an alien, alien." She did that thing with her eyes that people do when they want to tell you something without using actual words.

"Is she a Xenomorph?" I asked.

"No," Hannah snickered. "She's really nice, but she does look kind of scary."

Elephant Man came to my mind when I saw Luph for the first time, and I was grateful that Hannah had warned me. She was a frightening sight, from her three legs to her elephant-like skin, but the moment she smiled at me, all that fell away.

"Oh, another mate!" She exclaimed, rushing for me.

"She's a princess and has no clue that she might look scary to us," Hannah whispered right before Luph enveloped me in a tight hug, eliciting another short growl from Xyrek.

"I'm Luph. We'll be best of friends in no time." Her orange eyes gleamed with happiness.

"Alice," I replied, hugging her back, because... because there was such an aura of warmth and love emanating from Luph, it was impossible not to.

"Okay, Noodar, Raasla and Zoe, Nova and—" Sloane was in the middle of introducing us when Xyrek moved forward.

"Zaarek!" My mate pulled the surprised-looking Space Guardian into a big hug and slapped him on the back. "Brother, I missed you."

"You didn't tell us you knew each other," Vraax stated, perplexed.

"We don't." Zaarek's brow creased.

"You don't remember me?" Xyrek didn't show the hurt I was sure he must be feeling. He'd told me about his brother Zaarek and how anxious he was to see him again.

"Should I?"

"I don't know," Xyrek replied, reluctantly letting go of the other man. "I don't understand most of it yet, but I remember everything from Darlam."

His statement caused pandemonium. Everybody seemed to be talking at once.

"Enough!" All eyes turned to Sloane, and the room went instantly quiet. I had no idea how she did this, but I was envious. "Let me finish the introductions, then we can talk."

She glared from one to the next before she continued pointing at people in the room. That's when I noticed a human male. His presence was unexpected, and it startled me.

"That's Tucker, Nova's brother." She pointed from him to another woman and then to

Zaarek. "Zaarek, obviously, and Nova. Zoe and Raasla. Did I get everyone?"

The sound of a throat clearing made me turn my head toward another, more alien-looking alien—one I recognized. "Nock!"

Nock grinned from ear to ear, "Seems like my fame precedes me."

"Ah, frygg," Zaarek groaned. "Not again."

"Your holocasts on mating bonds were really helpful," I said.

"Your holocast telling us where to go was genius," Xyrek added.

Nock threw a triumphant glance at Zaarek. "That's twice now."

"You're a genius," Zaarek deadpanned.

"Alright, let's have a seat. Let's talk," Sloane waved to a long table set with food and beverages. "Help yourselves."

"Let's get to the part where you remember everything ." Zaarek eyed Xyrek curiously. The resemblance between the two men was uncanny—more than the silver skin and black, short-cropped hair. They both had the same nose, even though Zaarek's was more crooked. The same lips and high cheekbones. Even the same square chin. "Why do you think we're brothers?"

"I don't think it. I know it," Xyrek said. "Once upon a time, we were brothers on Darlam. None of you remembers anything?" He looked from one to the other, and all of them shook their heads. Tharaax massaged the side of his head.

"Actually, I do remember seeing you," Vraax said, looking at Tharaax. "In one of my

dreams. But I wasn't sure if it was a memory or something my mind made up. But I saw you carrying Suahaana in the forest."

Tharaax narrowed his eyes. "You never said anything."

Vraax shrugged, "Like I said, I wasn't sure if it was a dream or a memory."

Tharaax rubbed his head harder, and Hannah scooted next to him. "It's okay."

Noodar and Zaarek were rubbing theirs, too.

"What's going on?" I asked.

"Headaches," Nova explained. "Whenever they try to remember, they get terrible headaches."

I looked at Xyrek, who raised his shoulders and said, "Zapharos said mine were gone because I regained my full memory."

"Zapharos?" Sloane asked sharply. "You met Zapharos?"

"Not so much met. He decided to enter my head one night. I still want to kill him."

"You and me both," Zaarek suddenly laughed. "He came to me, too, warning me to stay away from Darlam until we were all united . Creepy bastard."

Suddenly, everyone started talking once again. I met Sloane's gaze, who looked thoughtful. She allowed the racket to go on for a few moments before she slammed her fist on the table. "People, this is not helping!"

I really wished I could learn how she did that.

"We—" noise of what sounded like a battle had all of us moving to our feet.

"Intruder!" Raasla yelled, looking at his comm. "It came from your ship," he glared at Xyrek suspiciously.

"Oh shit," a surge of heat rushed me, born from guilt. The drones. Vader and Maul, they must have done something. "I'm sorry. This is probably my fault," I said, running toward the cargo bay.

"Alice! No! Wait!" Xyrek yelled behind me, grabbing me by the wrist and pulling me back. "We don't know for sure."

"Know what? What did you do?" Zaarek accused, running by us.

Seconds later, we were all in the cargo bay, where everyone stopped dead in their tracks.

"Please, someone tell me that's not a Xenomorph?" Zoe yelled.

"Fuck me," Sloane pulled her blaster.

"What in the Black Abyss is that?" Noodar exclaimed.

"This is a creature no one has ever seen before. I'm standing here with five Space Guardians, and they are just as surprised as me." Nock had his comm pointed at the scene.

"Turn that off, Nock," Zaarek bellowed at the holostreamer.

"Oh, come on, I still have an audience to satisfy!" Nock protested.

"Turn it off," Raasla reiterated.

With a pout, Nock adjusted his comm. "Do you have any idea how many credits you're costing me?"

"Do you have any idea how lucky you are to still be alive?" Raasla countered.

In horror, I stared at the Xenomorph robot that had made its way onto Lugh's ship.

"I don't understand," I mumbled, using my comm to get it back under control. "I shut it down."

"It? You? Explain!" Raasla demanded.

Just then, Vader and Maul appeared and, without my input or orders, began attacking the Xenomorph.

"What in the frigging Abyss?" Tharaax stared, fascinated, at the bots battling.

"Alice, shut them down." Xyrek grabbed my arm.

"I'm trying. You holding me doesn't help." I pulled my arm back. "There!"

All three bots stopped.

All eyes turned to me.

"Oops."

XYREK

For good measure, the bots were locked into a storage area, where they wouldn't be able to do much damage should they power back on. Alice assured us that she would check their on and off switches as soon as we were done talking. As it turned out, that took all night, and we still weren't done.

"You guys go get some sleep. I'll make a quick scouting trip to see how many Ohrurs we're dealing with," Raasla offered.

"You're just as tired as the rest of us. Take a break. We can scout later," Tharaax said.

"You're welcome to stay with us. We have enough quarters available here," Noodar offered. "You two can have your own, like the others. They brought all their things aboard, and their ships are tethered close by. You're welcome to do the same."

"Thank you." It sounded reasonable for all of us to be together. I looked at Alice, but she was in a deep conversation with Zoe and Nova, laughing at something one of them had said. "That would be nice," I agreed.

The night hadn't yielded much new information, which was a surprise to me, but we were able to figure out some of the missing pieces. All of them had foggy memories of training, but my insights helped them realize how it had actually worked. Sloane pieced even more together. She explained that the Ohrurs had most likely kept us in a sort of slumber between training sessions to overrule our instincts not to fight. Over time, she said, the Ohrurs applied so much brainwashing that we became different people. What we still didn't know was, different from what? Were we clones? Lab-

grown? Or both?

"They suppressed all your memories and encoded your brains to make it start hurting whenever you tried to remember. It's actually quite brilliant. Over time, you trained yourselves not to remember."

Sloane was right. It was brilliant, from the Ohrur's perspective. But when it happened to you, you didn't agree with it that much. She explained further, "Thankfully, their hold wears off after a period of years. Twenty to thirty seems to be the magic number."

That, too, made sense. Noodar and I were the oldest working Space Guardians in the group, and he and I seemed to remember the most. It might also explain why and how I had gone through such an onslaught of memories. The dam holding them back had already been breaking, little by little. It had been only a matter of time before it failed completely. I wondered if it had been like this for the other Space Guardians my new friends told me about—the ones who had turned to the Ohrurs in confusion and had been terminated for it.

One thing still didn't make sense: I still looked younger than Zaarek. Well, that and a lot of other things. But it was progress.

I was also astonished to learn that the others had three Ohrurs in their possession. It explained why Possedion and Moddek dum had vanished.

"Okay, but what I don't get is, let's say the boys were in their twenties when they were killed." Zoe's voice hitched slightly at the last word. It didn't sit right with any of us. "So then they were cloned or whatever, and then they worked for the Ohrurs for twenty to thirty years. That would mean every man here would be in his forties or fifties."

My mind was slow to figure out what she was driving at, but when it did, it was an aha moment.

"You don't look forty or fifty, Zaarek." I looked at my brother, still searching his eyes for the love that had once been there, but there was nothing—raising my anger anew against the Ohrurs. They had taken our mates, memories, and even our brothers and sisters from us.

"I don't," he scrutinized me, "but you... maybe..." The small smirk my brother used to wear when he was teasing me was still there, and it lightened my heart. He might have forgotten me, but I could tell that he still loved me—even if that love lay dormant right now.

I chuckled, "Nice try."

He grinned, and for a tick, just a tick, it was like being back on Darlam. He looked at me, really looked at me, and I saw something flicker in his eyes before he grabbed his head, "Frygg!"

"Easy, big boy, easy," Nova was right by his side, massaging his neck. "It's okay."

I hadn't thought I would feel indebted to Zapharos, but not bearing these headaches was a blessing. Not that I would ever thank him if I saw him. At least not before I broke his neck for invading my head.

"Just a memory. I'm okay," Zaarek smiled at Nova, and the way she looked back at him, I could see Noevah in her. We are all here . That thought warmed my heart. No matter how or in what form, we are here .

It amazed me that the others had already figured out all the mated bond secrets and how our names were woven into the Soulweb bonds.

"For a moment, I saw you, Xyrek," Zaarek said, "in the forest. We were..." he shook his head, his face contorted.

"It's okay. Don't try to remember; it's okay," I said, alarmed. He looked like he was in a lot of pain.

"In... the forest..." he pushed out.

"Zaarek, please," Nova pleaded with him. He waved her hand off. A grin formed, at odds with his pained expression. "We were looking for... mushrooms—for Mom!"

I remembered. My lips curved. "We got the wrong ones, and everybody had diarrhea for days."

"They tasted... good though," he pressed the words out.

Sloane grabbed a healing wand and waved it over his head. But it didn't seem to help.

"Press your mating marks to his," Sloane told Nova.

I felt helpless, watching my brother in that much pain. The Ohrurs would pay for what they had done to us—were still doing to us.

Zaarek's facial features relaxed as soon as Nova pushed her arm against his.

"Take a deep breath." Sloane nudged. "That's good. Now, another. Tell us about those mushrooms."

"Are you out of your mind?" Nova erupted. "He needs to rest, he needs to?—"

"Remember," Sloane interrupted unforgivingly. "They all do. This is not going to get

any better, otherwise. Unless," she turned to me, "you have any way of contacting Zapharos."

"I'm not inviting that frygg back into my head." I cursed.

"If it helps the others?" Alice grabbed my arm. I shook my head, but her pleading eyes got to me. So did my brother's pain. Frygg. "I don't know how."

"Well, try. In the meantime, you guys," Sloane looked to each of the others, "need to try very hard to break through that memory barrier." She held up a hand to ward off any protests. "I don't care how much it hurts."

That was one tough female.

"Wait, before you leave." Nova stopped us. "Alice, what do you remember?"

Alice paused, "Not much. Most of it is more like a feeling, like remembering a dream, you know?"

The other females watched Alice as expectantly as Nova; they all nodded like they knew exactly what she was talking about, and they probably did.

"Why, do you remember anything?"

"Hannah does, bits and pieces; for the rest of us, it's more like you said. A feeling, a yearning, a breath of something that isn't there," Zoe tried to explain.

"It doesn't make any sense; if we all died, then why are the men the only ones regaining memories of their past lives?" Nova said. Her words shook me to the core, but not as much as what Sloane asked next.

“The better question is, if we all keep reincarnating, why do the men only remember their last life?”

ALICE

Our new quarters were luxurious beyond belief. The mattress was out of this world—literally—adjusting in just the right places and with the right temperatures. A real shower and bathtub waited for me in the bathroom, and best of all, there were no nutrition dispensers. Silla had filled Luph's cargo hold to bursting. I had no idea how they kept everything fresh because the bread tasted freshly baked, but I would definitely investigate it later when I had a moment.

Because we had been up late last night, or should I say early in the morning, the lights were about to dim for the night again by the time we ate breakfast. Raasla had left earlier for a scouting trip, and Zoe sat anxiously at the table, not eating anything.

"What if they caught him?" She said for the hundredth time.

"We don't see any ships around Darlam," Noodar tried to soothe her by bringing up a cube screen and showing her a single blip, which was supposedly Raasla. "Looks like he's already on his way back."

"Are your marks hurting?" I asked her.

She shook her head, "We never had that distance thing problem."

"Ours are gone too, thank God." Sloane picked up another piece of bread. "This is so good."

"Isn't it?" I agreed. "I have to figure out how all that food keeps so fresh."

Xyrek shook his head, "Don't."

"Oh ye of little faith," I teased him.

"You still have three bots to fix," he reminded me with a smirk, to which, in reply, I made a face at him.

"By the way, what is a Xanomorph?" Noodar asked.

"Xenomorph," Nova giggled.

"Please tell me she made that thing up," Zaarek groaned, still recovering from his headache.

"It's a made-up thing from one of their Earth movies..." Tharaax drew his brows together in concentration, "Alien one, two, three, four... right?" He looked at Hannah for confirmation.

The men stared at him, dumbfounded.

"What? Do your mates not let you watch Earth movies?"

"Oh, they're so much fun," Nock exclaimed, holding a box of honest-to-God Oreo cookies in his hands and munching on several.

"Alright, I vote we do movie night once we've figured this Darlam thing out. We'll start with Alien!" Nova decided. Sloane high-fived her.

"All clear," Raasla declared, walking in. Zoe rushed forward and melted into his embrace. Over breakfast, I'd learned that Zoe was about three months pregnant, but besides a tiny pouch, she didn't show at all.

"What do you mean, all clear?" Sloane stared at him.

"There's nothing there. No Ohrurs, no Space Guardians." Raasla clarified.

"They do know we have three Ohrurs as our captives, right?" Luph clarified.

Last night, they explained that three Ohrurs were needed to get through the forcefield surrounding Darlam.

"They assume we have two males and one female," Hannah snapped her fingers. "I bet they think the field won't let us through because of the female."

"Why?" I asked, confused.

"Because the Ohrurs have this chauvinistic attitude toward women. They think we're inferior to males," Sloane explained with a disgusted expression.

"That would make sense," I remarked, earning me some strange looks from the other women, and I hastened to explain. "I don't mean it makes sense they think we're inferior, just that they would have calibrated the field to only allow men through."

"Oh. Okay." Sloane nodded.

"Are you some kind of inventor or something?" Zoe wanted to know.

"Or something. I'm an engineer. Or was." I explained.

"You still are, always have been." Xyrek kissed the top of my head.

"That makes sense," Nova agreed. "Wow, I'm glad you guys caught that traitor and brought him instead of the woman."

Confused, I looked from one to the other, and they quickly explained what had happened to Sloane and Vraax on Ohrur. It was mind-boggling; we had already talked all night, but there was still so much that hadn't been shared yet. I hadn't known about this or the secret underground city on Ohrur that they spoke of. I was also more than shocked about how the Ohrurs treated their women. What a despicable species they were. Whatever revenge we would be able to dish out, they deserved even more.

"They must have full trust in their forcefield then," Noodar said.

"Let's go," Raasla started for the door.

"Hold on. Let's think this through strategically," Sloane stopped him. She quickly glanced through the room to ensure everyone was accounted for. "We need only one of you," she looked at the Space Guardians, "and the three Ohrurs. You'll use the ship that Vraax and I stole, which should fulfill the requirements of getting through.

"Once you've safely landed, you will need to find the source of the forcefield and shut it down before the rest of us can follow. I also want at least two of you," again she stared the Space Guardians down, "to stay in orbit and monitor for hostiles."

"I'll take the Ohrurs to Darlam," Xyrek volunteered, and my heart sank. This was it then. This was really it. I had known we would do this, that we would risk our lives, but suddenly, what had been something that would happen in the future had caught up to us. The thought of losing Xyrek nearly tore my heart apart.

"I got Possession. I'll go." Tharaax stood up. Hannah clamped her hands in front of her mouth. Just as fearful as I felt.

"If that's the case, I'll go, I got Moddekdam," Vraax stated.

" We got Moddekdam," Sloane corrected before she took a deep sigh. "I'm sorry. Noodar goes. Vraax and Raasla are our best pilots. They will watch our backs."

I expected loud outcries of protest, but they all just stared at Sloane. She nodded. "Good."

"Sloane," Vraax moved to her and pulled her into his arms. "I don't want you going to Darlam without me."

"I know," she replied, returning his embrace. "But you'll have to let me go."

The war on Vraax's face was evident. His face was pale, his jaw set, and every cell in his body cried how much he didn't like the idea, but there was also resolve.

"I trust you." He finally said. "Let's go, Raasla!"

Without looking back, he left. While Sloane watched him retreat, a small smile curved her lips. "Space Guardian!"

She called after him. He stopped by the doorway.

"I love you."

He didn't turn, but from his profile, I saw a smirk and wondered what had just happened. It had to be something just between the two of them.

"With all due respect, Commander," Nova interjected, addressing Sloane mockingly. "I don't think Noodar should go alone."

"I understand." Sloane looked thoughtful, considering Nova's words.

"Once you've successfully penetrated the forcefield, Noodar, come back and get the others before disembarking on Darlam." Sloane decided.

Noodar crossed his arms over his chest, "So it's alright to send me out alone on a suicide mission, but not to set foot on Darlam?"

I swallowed. He was right. It was a potential suicide mission. If the intel was wrong, the forcefield could shoot the ship down with everyone aboard. Nova blanched.

"In essence, yes. Do you have a problem with that?" Sloane challenged Noodar.

"Nope, I'm good." The Space Guardian replied with a small chuckle.

"Well, get going," Sloane moved her hands to shoo him out.

"Yes, ma'am!" Noodar had obviously learned about human military manners. I would have smiled had he not been on his way to find out if he could penetrate the forcefield or not.

My stomach sank when I watched Noodar and Lugh embrace as if it were their last time. Tears stung my eyes, not just because that could be Xyrek and me, but because the love between the two was so obvious and beautiful. It hurt watching their pain.

Zoe walked over and took Lugh into her arms after Noodar freed himself. Hannah moved forward and supported Lugh's other side, nodding at Noodar to move out through the hatch where Xyrek, Zaarek, and Tharaax stood. They had brought the prisoners aboard Vraax's ship since one of the requirements was that the ship had to belong to the Ohrurs—another hitch in the plan. Technically, the ship had been stolen from the Ohrurs, but we were operating on the assumption that any Ohrur-owned and made ship would be okay. We had to. We didn't have another choice.

"You three," Sloane pointed at Xyrek, Zaarek, and Tharaax, "be ready. Noodar is going to make a test run down to the surface and then come pick you up."

The men looked surprised; Xyrek's eyes met mine, and I felt his excitement for going home and forced a smile on my lips to match his enthusiasm. At least he wouldn't be on board for the test run, as Sloane called the suicide mission so diplomatically. I didn't even try to imagine Luph's emotions right then. The thought of Xyrek boarding the ship after it was deemed safe was enough to make me hyperventilate.

"Everything ready?" Sloane asked Tucker as he exited the other ship.

"All good." He nodded.

I hadn't talked much to him yet, but he seemed easygoing. His charismatic smile reminded me of the actor Matthew McConaughey; it was the kind that could sell a beekeeper honey. But there was also darkness surrounding him, the same darkness I had seen on the face of the dealers who sold meth to my parents and siblings.

It still amazed me, the way fate had twisted things—Sloane knowing him on Earth, and him turning out to be Nova's long-lost brother... No, I corrected myself. That sure wasn't a coincidence. My logical mind was taking a huge hit here, but this was fate—all of it.

"It will be alright," I told Luph as the hatch closed behind Noodar.

She looked at me questioningly. The pain in her eyes hurt my heart.

"How do you know?" She asked.

"I feel it in here," I said, thumbing my heart. "We were all brought here for a reason, and trust me when I tell you that the reason is not watching Noodar get blown up on a

spaceship."

She sniffed and hugged me. "Thank you."

I had no right to make this kind of promise to her, none, but deep down, I felt that everything would be alright.

XYREK

My gut churned with anticipation. In a few moments, I would set foot on Darlam. Me, Noodar, Zaarek and Tharaax. Impatiently, my fingers drummed against the chair I was leaning against while I stared through the three triangular windows of the bridge.

Noodar's trip had been almost anticlimactic. His ship made its way through the atmosphere like on any other planet. He landed and took right back off to get the rest of us, well, the rest of us Space Guardians. Not the females, Nock, or Tucker. We weren't willing to take that risk until we figured out how to shut the forcefield down, which was our number one priority.

While waiting for Alice and me to arrive, the others had interrogated Possession and Moddekdam, but either they didn't know where the forcefield was run from, or they were able to withstand the waterboarding, sleep deprivation, and various other tortures Sloane and Tucker came up with.

"Where do you want me to drop you off?" Noodar asked.

We had a lot to accomplish, so we decided to split up. Zaarek and I would work on finding Shade's Vale. I had an idea that it would be located around the Borrog Mountains, but that was more a hunch than anything. It was all I had to go on, though.

In the meantime, Noodar and Tharaax would scout the rest of Darlam to see if they could find any trace of the forcefield's source.

"Take us to the top of the Borrog Mountains," I told Noodar. From there, I would have a good view of the entire valley and the gorge between the mountains. It would have made sense for the Darlam outcasts to find refuge there. It was a hard-to-reach place, filled with water and plenty of game.

Darlam was a one-continent planet. Several uninhabited, tiny islands dotted the ocean surrounding the continent, but it was on the main landmass where the Darlams thrived.

Noodar kept the ship low, low enough that we could see the ruins of several towns we passed over. I had no idea what the towns' names were; from the air, they were unrecognizable. Cobblestone roadways had long ago been overgrown by vegetation, and most of the buildings had crumbled from plants growing through their walls. The elements had since taken their toll, and nobody was here to fix them.

"Stop, can you go back?" I asked, tensing.

Below us was another set of ruins. I wasn't sure what made me ask Noodar to stop; from above, they didn't look any different than the others we had flown over. Still, there was something... something pulled me to this place.

"Do you want to go out?" Noodar asked.

I did, but I also didn't want to make the others wait for me.

"It's alright. We can take a look," Tharaax agreed.

Gratefulness washed through me. I hadn't known Noodar or Tharaax before, but they were quickly becoming like brothers to me. Zaarek's hand fell on my shoulder. He nodded at me. Alright, we were doing this.

Noodar brought the ship down and opened the hatch. I tore down the gangway like never before; the urge to throw myself against the dirt below me was tempting, but I resisted. Instead, I stopped dead in my tracks, taking in the surroundings while inhaling Darlam's air deep into my lungs. It was by far the cleanest air I had ever breathed. The scent of flowers woke a new avalanche of memories, and I threw worried looks at the others, who seemed more curious than anything.

Ruined buildings stood around me. The ground below was uneven, as several stones had been pushed up from the dirt. Large trees and bushes were taking back what had once been theirs before the Darlams came and built this town.

Slowly, my feet began moving.

"Do you think this is... Rek?" Zaarek asked.

He was only a few feet from me. His hand reached out to touch a building. A building that was suddenly very familiar to me. In my mind's eye, I could see how it used to look. Saw the beautiful female poking through the now shattered glass window, waving at us. Black hair framed her silvery features, and her smile had been breathtaking. No wonder my brother had fallen in love with her. Noevah meant as much to me as my sisters. Maybe more because my sisters had moved to their Soulweb mates' towns, and I hardly ever got to see them.

Zaarek entered through the shattered entrance door.

"Zaarek, no!" I yelled, but it was too late. I hastened after him.

"This..." Zaarek looked around. The frame of the fireplace he had built still stood. Same with the large metallic oven Noevah used to cook the most delicious foods on.

My heart pumped hard and fast as I followed a completely subdued Zaarek as he

explored his house. Over twenty thousand years had passed. An incredible amount of time. Mind-blowing. I could still see the colorful curtains that had once hung by the windows, the couch and chairs that were now nothing more than a few metallic springs and dust.

For a moment, I got so caught up in my emotions that I forgot about Zaarek, who had entered the bedroom. A tortured cry made me rush after him. I found him kneeling on the ground, holding his head, screaming in pain.

"Frygg!" I hastened to his side. "Did anybody bring a healing wand?" I asked, even though they hadn't seemed to do much good before.

"Let him go through this. The pain isn't real. It's just in his head," Sloane's steady voice came through my comm.

"That's easy for you to say," I snarled. It wasn't her brother on his knees, tortured by pain.

"Trust me." Sloane's voice sounded a bit more empathetic.

"Frygg," I knelt down next to Zaarek while Tharaax ran back to the ship for a healing wand, and Noodar circled us, looking as concerned as I was.

"What is this place?" Noodar asked.

"This was his home. The house he built for Noevah—Nova—and himself." I filled them in.

Zaarek crumbled in on himself. He fell into a fetal position, breathing heavily. Tharaax returned, waiving the wand he had already activated. Unfortunately, it didn't seem to do much good, and we couldn't bring Nova down here to link their mating

marks.

"I think his breathing is evening out," Noodar observed.

He was right. Thank frygg.

"Zaarek?"

"I'm here," he grunted, rightening himself. "I'm good."

He didn't look good, though. He looked like he had been in a fight with several Pronex and maybe one of Alice's Xenomorphs. Or, like a Xenomorph had eaten him, chewed him up, and spat him out.

I helped him to his feet. When he looked at me, it was different than before. I saw myself mirrored in his eyes.

"Brother." He said, making my heart clench.

He opened his arms, and I gladly fell into his embrace. "Zaarek."

He slapped my back until I coughed. Frygg, that felt good.

"Very emotional, you two," Sloane snarked through the comm.

"Be nice," I heard Alice admonish her, and smiled. It was good hearing her voice.

Zaarek let go of me. His face took on a hard expression. "I remember everything."

ALICE

It was damn nerve-wracking watching the men walk through the ruins and even worse when Zaarek broke down. All of us stared helplessly at the screen, eyes locked on the feed from the drone following them, capturing every move and sound.

Nova's hand reached out, finding mine. I didn't think she was conscious of what she was doing or that it mattered whose hand she was holding, but she squeezed hard, and I returned it. If she needed to break my fingers, I would let her—anything to help ease her pain.

The bridge was deathly silent as we watched the drama unfold.

"This is the first time in history that we see a Space Guardian show emotions," a hushed voice whispered, and we turned to the sound.

Nock had his comm aimed at the screen.

"Knock that shit off, right now, Nock!" Sloane slapped at him, dislodging the earpiece comm that the Holostreamer was wearing.

"Hey, that's expensive equipment," he complained.

"You are unbelievable," Sloane hissed.

"The universe has a right to see this," Nock insisted, picking up his comm but putting it into his pocket instead of in his ear. His words sounded strangely familiar. A small

giggle escaped Zoe, and she slapped her hand to her lips.

"I'm sorry." She blushed.

"It's okay," Hannah's lips twitched a little, but we all fell silent again, staring at Zaarek, whose tortured groans of pain left no room for amusement.

It wasn't until he got up that we all let out a small exhale of relief. Tears stung my eyes when Xyrek and Zaarek embraced.

"Very emotional, you two," Sloane snarked.

"Be nice," I hissed at her. She smirked and winked.

"I remember everything," Zaarek said, and his words made chills run down my spine.

"I'm next. How do I do this?" Tharaax asked.

"I don't think it's that easy. This used to be Zaarek's home," Xyrek explained. "We need to find places or things that will trigger you ."

Nova sniffed, drawing our attention to her. Her hand let go of mine, and I wiggled my fingers to bring back life into the stiff joints. She had pressed pretty hard. Nova's hand reached for the screen. "This was my house?"

"I built it for you," Zaarek said in a hoarse voice. "You decorated it."

Nova turned to us, her gaze pained, "Why can't I remember? Why do the men remember and we don't? This should mean something to me, right?" She turned to Hannah, "You remember things."

Then she turned to Sloane, "And you. You have memories of when you were Solaana. Why?"

"I don't know why," Hannah said, shaking her head. "I wish I did."

The others had told me how Hannah had remembered things, like her Darlam name and even bits of Darlam itself.

Sloane, however, remembered a lot more about her past life. "Trust me, when you guys meet Zapharos, you won't envy the gift he gave me."

Zapharos was the same Arkhevari who had invaded Xyrek's mind. Sloane had explained earlier that, for whatever reason, he had allowed her to remember her past life. I still had a hard time wrapping my head around him, but some of the others seemed to think of him as a god. The opinions about him being a god or just a member of a much more technologically advanced species were evenly divided.

Zoe folded Nova into her arms. "We'll figure it out, sweetie. We're so close."

"Shit," I muttered, wiping a tear from the corner of my eyes and noticing Sloane turn away from us. She wasn't as unaffected as she wanted us to believe.

"So, when are we going to kick some fucking Ohrur ass for this?" Tucker demanded. His expression had changed from easygoing playboy to hard. He looked every bit the action hero from any movie I had ever seen.

"Soon," Sloane promised. "So, are you guys good to continue?"

"There is something I need to see," Xyrek said, "then we'll be off again."

"Xyrek, don't," my voice was choked. I knew where he was going.

"I have to," he replied.

I wanted to reach out and hold him. I wanted to be with him when he arrived at that place. A small sob escaped me. Hannah embraced me. "Where is he going?"

"To where I used to work, to where... we died," I answered.

XYREK

I realized that this was hard for Alice to watch. Frygg, it was hard for me, but I had to go. I needed to see the place where she and I had taken our last breaths. I didn't care how frygging eerie it would be.

The others followed me a few respectful paces behind. Now and then, I noticed Zaarek stop, look at something, and mutter under his breath, but I was too wrapped up in my own misery to care. This was the way I had gone to see Allisaahn. The last time I hadn't walked this way, though, I had barely been able to crawl forward while a droning hum had been trying to push me down. The air pressure had been so high that it was hard to breathe, but I'd managed to make my way to Allisaahn's workshop.

I stopped.

It was right here.

The door was still attached to its metallic hinges. They were rusted, but it opened with a squeak of protest. The place was filled with dust, and a dart rushed past me, startled, but I hardly noticed. My eyes made a quick sweep of her worktable, which had fallen to the ground, slowly disintegrating. Tools, in just as bad a shape as the door, lay scattered on the ground and what was left of the workbench. Shelves had fallen from the walls or simply given in under the weight of their contents after the wood had warped and thinned. None of that touched me, though. Those were just things.

Tentatively, I walked to the spot where she and I had died. She had already been dead

when I found her. The emotions of that moment threatened to choke me as if it had just happened and not... however many years ago. My heart constricted, as did my throat, making breathing hard around the thick lump that had formed inside. I knelt down on the ground. Actually, it was closer to a collapse than a controlled kneel, but I made it back down to the same spot. The spot where my heart had stopped beating and I took my last breath. Where I held my Allisaahn in my arms so long ago, there was now, but dust covering the stone floor. Had I not known that Alice was watching me, that she was only a quick ride up away from me, I would have died here for a second time, right here on the same spot. The grief of those moments hit me hard. Allisaahn. My Allisaahn!

I didn't want to touch the dust, knowing it was all that remained of her and me, but something glinted from a sudden ray of light, and I reached out. Reverently, I blew the dust off the object and picked it up. My heart felt as if it was tearing in two. No, into thousands of tiny fragments. It was being ripped apart from the inside out when I held the small bracelet up. It was forged from a yellow metal, something we called aurhym. It was highly revered as a metal to bring us closer to the gods. It was useless to do anything with but turn into pretty objects, like jewelry, a bowl, a vase, or something like that. It was too soft to use for weapons.

I'd dug the gold nugget out of the Borrog Mountains myself and melted it in the same workshop Allisaahn liked to spend so much time in. I poured all my love into it as I worked the metal for hours, forged it into a bracelet, engraved her name, and “ Love you into Eternity, Xyrek.” Allisaahn loved it. She had never taken it off.

She wore it the day she died. This was all that was left of her now. I brought it to my lips to kiss it, but it was nothing but cold metal. No spark of my Allisaahn's energy was left in it. Her infectious laughter, the abundance with which she loved me and life—nothing but dust. I closed my eyes and saw her beautiful face dancing in front of me, smiling, teasing, calling my name. Just the way Alice did. Alice! I clung to her presence even though she wasn't right here with me now. It was all that kept me

taking in another breath and then another, all that kept me from willing my heart to stop.

Allisaahn was still with me, just like she had always been through every lifetime. She had always been my rock. Then and now. Ever so slowly, the pain in my chest receded; it didn't go away—I knew without a doubt that it wouldn't go away until I held Alice in my arms— but it became bearable.

Suddenly, I remembered something else. Allisaahn had made me forge a bracelet for myself. A larger one. One she engraved with the same words, Love you into Eternity, Allisaahn. I wore it when I died. It had to be here.

But where was it?

I swiped at the dust, carefully aware of its origin, but as much as I searched, there was nothing. I had worn a belt that day, with a metal ring and a sword, too. Those things should still be here.

"What are you looking for?" Zaarek asked.

"Do you remember the matching gold bands Allisaahn and I wore?"

"How could I not? Noevah gave me hell until... I made a pair for us, too," Zaarek replied, looking far away.

"Where were you?"

"I was in Ax," he said, looking at Tharaax.

"That's why I remembered seeing you." Tharaax nodded.

"We were both primarchs," Zaarek answered. "Our bands must be there in the forest somewhere."

"Mine should be here," I reiterated.

"Alright, move." Noodar pulled out a broom and a dustbin that had seen better days but were still in working condition. Reverently, he began swiping at the dust on the floor, sending apologetic glances at me, which I returned with a grim nod. It had to be done, and I wouldn't have been able to do it.

It didn't take long. There was part of a shoe left, Allisaahn's. But that was it.

Nobody asked if I was sure this was where I died. They didn't need to. We all knew that this was the spot. I wouldn't make a mistake like that.

"Now what?" Noodar asked.

I suggested, "Take us to the Borrog Mountains, and then you two can go search for the forcefield's source and your... places of memory."

"How will we know?" Noodar asked.

I thought back to when we had cruised over this town. "You will," I promised. "You will feel it in your heart and gut."

I didn't like leaving them to their own destinies, but Zaarek and I had something else to do. Besides, there wouldn't be anything we could do to help them. They would have to go through their own agony, just like Zaarek had.

Frygging Arkhevari. I was almost grateful to him now for having spared me this pain. Although if it had meant keeping him out of my head, I would have taken the pain

any day.

* * *

"What exactly are we looking for?" Zaarek asked after Noodar and Tharaax dropped us off on a mountain overlooking the vale.

"I don't know. Maybe ruins of a settlement?" I guessed. The frygging Arkhevari had been damn mysterious about this. "If I ever get my hands on Zapharos, I'll wring his neck."

"You and Vraax both," Zaarek chuckled. "He's not a big fan of him either."

"At least he wasn't in his head," I muttered.

"No, but he stunned him. A close second would be my guess."

I used my comm to scan the horizons, the gorge below us, the river that ran between the mountains all the way down, its banks overgrown with trees, bushes, and plants. Blips indicated signs of life below, which was to be expected. This area had always teemed with wildlife. After twenty thousand years, I was sure the animals must have made a big comeback. Contrary to the Darlams, they hadn't been hunted down by the Ohrurs. They had only been collateral damage.

Zaarek did the same, scanning the mountains and zooming in on cliffs and rocks. "I see some caves," he offered.

Since I didn't have any better ideas, I agreed that we should go check them out.

"We should have kept Noodar around for a bit longer," Zaarek complained as we climbed down the mountain. He was right, too. Once we were down at ground level,

we had to figure out how to cross the river and then climb up the other mountain.

"This could take days," I agreed, stopping to catch my breath.

It was a beautiful place. No other place in the universe compared to Darlam.

"Hold on," Zaarek's hand shot forward, hitting my chest to stop me in place.

"What?"

"There," he pointed at a spot where several boulders lay in the river, almost as if they had been placed there on purpose. I squinted. Something silver glinted from the tree line, and then... I stopped breathing.

"I'll be damned," I cursed.

"You guys seeing this?" Zaarek asked over the comm.

"Very clearly," Sloane replied.

"Oh my God, is that a Darlam?" Zoe cried.

"Nock, if I have to tell you one more time, I'm taking it away from you," Sloane yelled.

"He better not be streaming this," Zaarek muttered.

"Let's go down there and talk to him," I suggested, then stopped as more Darlams—females, males, and children — made their way to the river.

"Get Noodar back," I pressed out, telling Sloane.

"On it," she agreed.

"No, wait," Zaarek cautioned. "They look like they've already been spooked. If Noodar comes back, they'll run and probably never come back. Let's just walk down there and see if we can make contact."

"And that's why you were the primarch," I said, smirking. It wasn't meant just as a joke. Zaarek had always been more considerate of situations than I had been.

"Excellent suggestion," Sloane agreed. "But be careful."

"Yes, Commander." Zaarek grinned at me.

"Absolutely, Commander." I grinned right back at Zaarek.

"Assholes," Sloane cursed, but I could hear the smirk in her voice.

Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 5:33 am

ALICE

This was officially turning into the longest day of my life. How could so much happen in the span of just a few hours? I mean, I was glad we were finally finding answers to all our questions, but it was starting to feel like a tsunami. It didn't help that we were cooped up on the bridge while the menfolk traipsed around Darlam.

We had several screens up. Some showed us drone footage from surveillance cameras Noodar and Tharaax had launched while flying over the planet. On another screen, we watched Xyrek and Zaarek make their way down a mountain, followed by another drone.

Each man had one pointed at him, but right now, the one that was supposed to be shadowing Zaarek was pointed at the Darlams on the other side of the river. My heart stuttered in my chest when I watched this group of twenty-eight people—we counted. The men cast nets into the river to catch fish while the women and children sat down and washed their clothes.

The women and children were dressed in colorful, carefully tailored clothing, reminding me of medieval times, while the men wore leather pants. Most were shirtless, but some kept their chests covered.

"Can we get a closer look at that one?" I asked, pointing at one of the men with a shirt.

"Oh, he's a looker," Nova said.

"You know we can hear you?" Zaarek's annoyed growl came from the other end of the comm.

"Oh, keep your pants on," Nova purred, her Southern accent thickening in amusement. "There's only one man for me, and you know it, sugar."

"What are you looking for?" Sloane asked, adjusting the camera and zooming it in.

"Can you get his arm?" I squinted my eyes. "There! See it?"

Sure enough, black lines stood out. "Now that one," I pointed at another shirt wearer. His markings were clearly visible as well. After a few minutes, it was clear that all the men who wore shirts had mating marks.

"Now the women," Sloane demanded, already adjusting the camera.

All of them wore shirts, some with longer sleeves than others, but there didn't seem to be a pattern as to why. Three of them bore mating marks, just like three of the men.

"What does that mean?" Zoe asked.

"I'm not sure," I replied. I wasn't sure it meant anything. But seeing surviving Darlams was a miracle all on its own.

"Who do we think they are?" Sloane asked, her voice steady, calculating.

"I think they're the descendants of Shade's Vale," Xyrek answered over the comm in a rough voice, which appeared to be mirroring his emotions. He had surely been through the wringer today, and I wished I could be there with him. For him.

"Shade's Vale?" Zoe echoed, frowning. "That sounds like something out of a fantasy

romance novel."

"It was named after the Shadebound," Xyrek explained. "Single Darlams who never found their Soulweb bond."

"Wait," Tucker leaned forward, brow furrowing. "You mean they were exiled? For not mating?"

"Not exiled," Xyrek corrected. "But they weren't welcomed, either. They left. Created their own community."

"That's insane," Luph muttered. "Not everyone finds their fated mate. Why would they be punished for something they couldn't control?"

"Because they tried to control it," Xyrek said. "They didn't just live without mates. They chose their own."

That set off a ripple of reactions.

"So what?" Nova snapped. "They fell in love on their own? That was enough to get them kicked out?"

"They didn't just deny themselves a mate," Zaarek's voice came through. "They stole one from someone else."

"What?" Sloane turned to look at the screen as if hoping Zaarek would appear and explain.

"The Soulweb doesn't just bind two people together," Xyrek said. "It weaves an entire path. When a pair chooses each other instead of their fated mates, they don't just change their own lives. They cheat two other people out of ever meeting their

true mate in this life."

"That's... dark," Hannah murmured, her fingers tapping against her arm.

"That's ridiculous," Zoe interjected. "People should be able to love who they want."

"It's not about love," Zaarek said. "It's about balance. The gods wove the Soulweb for a reason."

"That is a convenient way to keep people in line," Sloane muttered.

"It's not about control," Xyrek argued. "It's about harmony. The Shadebound didn't just choose for themselves. They chose for others. They took something they had no right to take."

That hit differently.

I swallowed, shifting in my seat. "So you're telling me," I said slowly, "that by running off and picking their own partners, they left two people completely alone?"

"Yes."

The weight of it settled like a stone in my stomach.

"That's brutal," Nova muttered.

"It's the truth," Zaarek said.

A tense silence stretched over the bridge until Hannah spoke again—her voice cold, distant, filled with something none of us expected.

"They were hollow. They walked in the shadows, forsaking the light of the gods. They gave in to their own selfish longings and defied the gods' will."

The entire room fell silent.

"What the hell, Hannah?" Tucker muttered.

She blinked, confusion and horror crossing her face. "I—I don't know why I said that."

We all looked at her, then back at each other. Zaarek's voice cut through the silence like a blade. "Because you were our High Priestess, Suahaana."

And just like that, another bomb dropped.

Hannah's breath hitched, her eyes widening in shock. Lugh took a slow, disbelieving step back as if reeling from its weight. Sloane cursed under her breath.

And me?

I just stood there, watching the pieces of our past fall into place like an unstoppable chain reaction.

XYREK

The river stretched wide between us. Its surface shimmered under the purple light that filtered through the thick canopy of Darlam's forests. The current was calm but steady, winding through the valley, a lifeline that had kept these people alive all this time.

People we hadn't even known existed.

Zaarek and I stood on the rocky bank, watching them. They had already seen us—we weren't exactly subtle—but they hadn't run.

They simply watched back.

Men stood in the shallows, casting wide, woven nets into the river, their bodies taut with experience and efficiency. The women and children gathered along the banks, washing clothes on smooth, flat river stones, chatting amongst themselves in hushed tones, though their eyes kept darting to us. There were twenty-eight of them. Survivors. Real, living Darlams.

And we had no idea what they thought of us.

"They're not going to come to us," Zaarek muttered beside me, arms crossed over his chest.

"No," I agreed. "We're the ones intruding."

Zaarek huffed a breath. "Guess that means we're getting wet."

I didn't hesitate. I stepped forward, boots sinking into the riverbed as I waded in. The water was cold and lapped against my waist by the time I reached the center. Zaarek followed a step behind, neither of us breaking eye contact with the men on the other side.

A few women gathered the children behind them, protective but not fearful. A couple of the men subtly tightened their grips on their nets, though I could tell it was more out of uncertainty than aggression. They didn't know what to make of us.

"We are Darlam," I called, my voice steady as I reached the riverbank. "Like you."

A ripple of unease moved through them as they exchanged uncertain glances. Darlams had never been aggressive. Whenever tribes met, it had been peaceful, but these Darlams hadn't seen any others in twenty thousand years—at least that's how the theory went, according to which, these males and females shouldn't be here either. Zaarek and I gave them time to work through the news. It took a few moments, but then one of the men stepped forward.

He was tall and broad, with long, black hair tied at the base of his neck. His leather pants were damp from standing in the shallows, and a thin tunic hung open at his chest, revealing the curling black lines of a Soulweb bond.

His gaze was piercing while he assessed us with sharp, intelligent eyes.

"Kryvale," he said, at last, his voice rough but calm. "Kry of Vale."

A name and a test.

I held his gaze. "Xyrek. Xy of Rek."

Zaarek stepped forward beside me. "Zaarek. Zaa of Rek."

Another ripple of subdued shock moved through the gathered Darlams.

"Rek," Kryvale echoed in astonishment. "That name has been lost to the winds a long time ago. Its ruins are crumbling, just like the old beliefs." His eyes moved to our arms, and he noticed our Soulweb marks.

"Not lost. Not yet."

A few of the men behind Kryvale exchanged glances, but none of them spoke. The women remained quiet, though their wary stances betrayed their fears of us.

"You wear the marks," Kryvale observed, his gaze flicking down to my arm, where the black lines of my Soulweb bond curled against my skin.

"And you," I countered, nodding toward his own markings.

His jaw tightened slightly. His voice was filled with defiance. "Some of us do."

I caught the edge of tension in his tone. My gaze flicked to the other men standing behind him. Some bore mating marks. Others did not.

I glanced at the women. The same pattern. Some were marked. Some were not.

Zaarek noticed it, too. "Some of you found your fated mates," he said. "Others... chose their own."

A murmur passed through the crowd. A few of the men shifted uneasily. Kryvale remained stoic. "We made our lives here. We took what the gods did not grant us and built our own path. We are here while your people are gone."

It wasn't meant as an accusation, at least, I didn't think so, but more like a validation, which made sense. Their village had been the outcasts for many years before the Ohrurs came and thought they had eradicated us. They had been wrong. Our people might also have been wrong. Then again, maybe not. "The gods' will is as mysterious as the stars—distant, untouchable, and far beyond our understanding, yet shaping our fates whether we believe in them or not."

He nodded, "Wise words. You are the first outsiders to set foot here in many generations," he said, bringing the conversation back under his control. "Where did you come from? Why are you here?"

I met his gaze. "We have traveled long and far. There are more of us. We are seeking answers and hope you might have them for us."

"You didn't come from here. There is no one left," one of the other men said in a grim voice. "We are all that remains. We know. We looked."

Zaarek took a deep breath, "We came from the stars, but we don't know why we were taken there or what was done to us. Please, we need your help."

Kryvale's brow furrowed, uncertainty flashing over his expression. The other male looked like he was going to say something, but one sharp glare from Kryvale shut him up.

"Our ancestors left us their history. We know what happened to your people. You incited the wrath of the gods with your stoic ways and got punished. Other gods came and terminated all of you. They only left us to repopulate Darlam according to the true belief." Kryvale stated. "I'm sorry, I cannot help you. I do not want you close to my town or my people. Go back to where you came from."

He waved his hands. The females gathered the children and washing articles, the

males their nets, which were now filled with fish. Kryvale did not look back when he prodded his people back into the forest.

"Great, now what?" I ran my hand through my hair in frustration.

"I can send Noodar to find out where they live," Sloane offered.

"No," Zaarek said. "This will take time. We were a surprise to them. We just need time to establish trust between us."

"Time," I mused, sighing.

"Great," Sloane sounded just as frustrated. "Let me send Noodar to bring you back up."

Again, Zaarek said, "No. Something tells me that we should stay here. Don't send Noodar." He looked at me, "Are you good with that?"

"Yeah," I resigned myself to spending the night away from Alice. I hated the idea, but he was right. We needed to establish some kind of trust between the Darlams and ourselves, and we weren't going to gain it if we flew off in a frygging spaceship. "Who is going fishing, you or me?"

"If memory doesn't fail me, you're terrible at fishing, but you do make a decent fire." He grinned, and I grinned back. By the stars, it felt good having my brother back.

ALICE

I hated the idea of sleeping separated from him. I stared at Darlam's dark surface through the window. We were too high up even to make out the ocean and the continent, so I had no idea where he was. He could be on the other side.

I had the comm up to be closer to him, watching him through the drone footage. It had been entertaining watching Zaarek fish. He wasn't quite as good as he had bragged to be, but he did manage to get some dinner for the two of them while Xyrek set up a crude campground and lit a fire. It looked peaceful, and I envied him. It wasn't just that I missed his company; the glimpses I received through the drone footage showed me how beautiful the night sky looked from down there. It would have been nice to be there. With Xyrek. Especially after the kind of day he had.

Returning to the place where we had died couldn't have been easy. Or watching Zaarek in pain. I imagined Nova was lying in her bed, doing the same thing I was. I watched Zaarek talk on his comm; I was sure he was talking to Nova, probably telling her about all the returned memories, like Xyrek had done with me when his returned.

Xyrek was lying on a pile of grass, covered by a large leaf. I wasn't sure if he was sleeping or not; we had said our goodnights earlier because Zaarek had offered to take the first watch. They could have left it to the drone, but I suspected this was some kind of man-bonding thing, so I didn't intervene. I contemplated working on the bots. I was sure I wouldn't be able to sleep all night, but lying here, staring at the comm, seemed kind of... creepy, too. Minor stalker vibes and all.

I decided I should work on the bots. It would be nice if I got them going again.

Before I got up, I looked one more time at the footage, and that's when I noticed it.

"Zaarek," I hissed.

He looked up, startled. My voice was coming through the drone. "Over to your right."

He pulled his blaster with one hand, kicked Xyrek in the kidney with his foot to wake him, and rolled to the side, aiming at the bush I had seen moving. A young Darlam appeared. He looked to be sixteen or seventeen, if I had to guess. It was hard to tell, since I had zero idea how to judge them. Xyrek could be twenty or sixty for all I knew.

"Hey," the young Darlam said.

Xyrek had also pulled his blaster but put it away now that there seemed to be only one of the Darlams.

"Can you send the drones and check our surroundings?" Xyrek asked me.

"Yes," I said, wondering if I should wake the others. But then Nova was probably seeing this too, so I would leave it up to her to decide while I navigated one of the drones through the immediate forest surrounding the makeshift camp.

In the meantime, I kept an eye on Xyrek, Zaarek, and the Darlam.

"I'm Narvale," he introduced himself. "I wasn't with the others earlier, but my friend Horvale told me about you. I was curious."

He sat down by the dying fire and threw on some more wood from the pile that Xyrek had collected earlier. He wasn't the least bit wary, but it was strange observing him.

"About us?" Xyrek asked, sitting down as well, while Zaarek positioned himself between them and the forest. Making sure nothing else would come at them.

"Yes." Narvale nodded, "We've never seen other Darlams before. My friends and I have been combing through the old ruins since we were kids. We have plans to explore the entire continent next year to see if we can find any others."

"Nobody has ever done that before?" Xyrek asked.

"From time to time, but the gods always made them return before they could explore everything."

"What do you mean, the gods?" Xyrek gave words to the question running through my head.

"The gods still come here from time to time to check on us," Narvale pointed up at the sky.

"Do they come on ships?"

"Flying machines, yes," Narvale confirmed.

"Do they look like these?" Xyrek pulled up images on his comm, but I couldn't see them, so I moved the drone, then belatedly remembered to check on the one I had sent into the forest. I'd gotten so invested in their conversation that I wasn't being a very good backup. The other drone hadn't found anything suspicious, so I focused on the first, realizing that Xyrek was showing the young Darlam images of Ohrur ships.

"Like this," the kid nodded, pointing at a transporter.

"Do you know where they go? Do they fly around or always go to the same spot?"

"Same spot." Narvale's finger moved to point behind the mountains.

"Do you know what's there?"

"I haven't seen it, but the ones who have been there said there are buildings. Large white buildings that look nothing like the ruins, not even like before they crumbled. They said it's where the gods reside now. It's forbidden to go there."

My spine crawled. That had to be the spot for the shields.

"Where did you come from?" Narvale asked, unaware of the significant intel he had just given us. It seemed only fair to entertain the young male for a while by explaining who we were and how we got here. I hoped he would take our tale back to their town. The information might help others learn to trust us.

* * *

In the morning, Noodar and Tharaax picked up Xyrek and Zaarek. Both looked tired from their long talk with the Darlam youth, who hadn't left until three o'clock in the morning—or the space version of 3 am based on our ship's clock. But they looked downright lively compared to Noodar and Tharaax. The two Space Guardians had found their place of significance and regained their memories. For all of them, the period between when they died and when they started working for the Ohrurs remained black—that kind of made sense. But the thought of a big fat black nothingness after death had shudders of dread run down my spine despite the knowledge of rebirth, which was still somewhat abstract to me. The evidence was there, but my logical mind still had a hard time wrapping itself around it.

Hannah was the best proof that it did exist. She started to remember more and more. Xyrek said it was because she used to be the High Priestess, the keeper of secrets none of the other Darlams ever knew. It would have been nice, though, to catch a

glimpse of my life as Allisaahn. That, more than anything, would have helped dispel my worries and fears.

The men only remembered bits and pieces of their training and initial work as security for the higher-up Ohrurs, which must have been part of the training. That made sense, given what Tharaax and Hannah had encountered on Ohrur.

In the gleaming morning light, the Ohrur's compound on Darlam came into view—an array of shiny buildings that looked like a cluster of silos and warehouses. A large landing field offered plenty of space for them to set down, and four Ohrur ships already parked there left no doubt that we would encounter some of them soon.

"Do not leave the ship," Sloane warned. They would stand out like the proverbial sore thumb if the Ohrurs were watching them, and there was no reason to believe they weren't.

"Get some drones out; make it look like you're just loading and unloading cargo," Sloane ordered. "Are our guests still good?"

None of the three Ohrur prisoners interested me. Still, it was good to hear Noodar answer, "All accounted for. Unhappy and locked in one of the rooms. They finally stopped trying to kill each other and are now conspiring on how to get out."

"Put them to sleep if you have to," Sloane said without much emotion. She was focused on the cameras as she set them to zoom in on the buildings. "What do you think?"

That question was directed at Tucker, who sat in the other captain's chair on the bridge.

"There and there," Tucker pointed at the screens.

I squinted and made out what could have been camera-shaped black bulbs.

"Do you think they're surveillance cameras?" I asked.

"No, they're weapons," Tucker said, making my stomach sink.

"Let's get them mapped so we can get a better idea of what we're dealing with," Sloane decided.

Both Sloane and Tucker had been studying up on alien weapons tech, courtesy of Emperor Daryus, who was doing everything in his power to turn Sloane into a superweapon. Now I understood why they had been working so hard on it. To me, the bulbs looked just like the kind of cameras I had seen in stores, like the ones in my lab.

"The moment the men step out, the Ohrurs will know something is up." Sloane cursed under her breath.

"Not even the cover of darkness will help," Tucker agreed.

"So we need to turn them off," I argued.

Sloane turned to me, "Can you do that?"

"Nova, can you hack into their system and give me access to their drones?" I turned to Nova before I answered Sloane.

"On it." Nova grinned, boxing Nock in his side and knocking him almost off balance. Come on, partner. We've got work to do. What do you need, Alice?"

"Access to one or two work drones without the Ohrurs knowing," I said, taking in the multitude of drones around the compound. "Once I figure out their power source, I

can have the drones sabotage it," I said to Sloane.

"Excellent." Sloane nodded at me.

"Uhm, Alice, you know I love and trust you," Xyrek's voice sounded out over the comm.

"That doesn't sound like a vote of confidence coming my way," I wagered.

"Well, it's just... were you able to fix the other bots?"

"Xyrek," I made my tone sound sweet, "I love you too. Do you remember what Zapharos told you?"

A loud groan was the answer.

When the time comes, you must listen to her. Trust her, as you always have. She will know what to do. She has always known .

Zapharos' words hung unspoken and heavy in the air between us.

"We're in," Nova announced proudly, high-fiving Nock, who grinned from ear to ear.

"You are the best pupil I've ever had," he told Nova.

"I'm the only pupil you ever had," she corrected.

"My point exactly," Nock chuckled. Nova made a face at him, and he chuckled even more. Their easy camaraderie took some of the tension out of the room.

"Okay, these two are all yours," Nova announced, sending a cube my way.

I took a moment to study the drones and commands before I was able to navigate them through the compound.

"What are you looking for?" Tucker asked.

"I don't know yet, but I will once I see it," I told him, recalling my own homework of studying alien technology over the last few weeks. I wasn't an expert by any means. I knew enough to know that I still had miles to learn, but I had a rudimentary understanding of how things worked. Of course, their tech was not only much different than the tech I was used to from Earth, but they differed between species. Some relied on what we called solar power, others on hydro and wind power, depending on their ecosystems. There were also those who relied on what I called nuclear power to make it easier—it was much more sophisticated than that, but in essence, it was similar. Other power sources included planet-specific sources like gas, atmosphere, and so on. There was one planet that accessed an electromagnetic field that fascinated me.

"See anything yet?" Sloane's impatient voice ripped me from my musings.

I shook my head and drew one drone closer to a rectangular box.

"Is that it?" Sloane asked.

"Sloane," I turned to her.

"Yes?"

"This will go much faster if you let me explore. I'll let you know when I see something."

Luph and Zoe snickered behind me. Over the comm came the sound of a sharp

inhalation. Tucker's amused glance bounced from Sloane to me as if waiting for the end results of a football game.

"Point taken," Sloane acknowledged, raising her hands. I looked up briefly and smiled to take some of the sting out of my words. She nodded her head and smiled tightly back at me.

"They also have..." Nova drifted off before she pulled up her screen to project it against the wall, "a backup system."

"Can you hack into it?" Sloane asked.

"On it," Nock replied.

"Hey, that's mine," Nova protested.

"Kids," Sloane warned.

"There!" I called out excitedly, pointing at an igloo-like building.

"Are you sure?" Sloane asked, narrowing her eyes. "It looks like all the others to me."

"Positive," I nodded. "See that?" I made the drone send us an image of large pipes running from the building to the others, almost like roots.

"Well, I'll be damned," Sloane grinned. "Nice job."

She rose from her chair. "Listen up, boys." All of us did, even though we knew she was addressing the four Space Guardians. "Get your gear and get ready to rock and roll. I want you locked and loaded the moment Alice cuts the power and Nova kills the backup system."

"Yes, ma'am," all four resounded over the comm.

My heart became very heavy. I wanted to call out, be careful , but bit my tongue instead. Hannah looked pale, and Nova looked like she was ready to throw up. Lugh sank into a chair, clutching her chest. All four of us were aware of the danger our men were about to step into.

"Hold on," I stopped them. We had been so busy focusing on turning the security system off that one important factor had escaped our minds: "This also turns off the forcefield."

"Are you positive?" Sloane's gaze on me was hard. I knew what was at stake here. If I was wrong, and we flew down there to meet our men—bang. We'd be goners.

"She's right," Nova confirmed. "I don't even have to cut the backup; the shield will be down once the main power is off."

A quick cheer broke out. "Well, cut it off then. Boys, wait for us." Sloane ordered.

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XYREK

"What about us? There's nothing out here," Vraax complained over the comm, sounding more than unhappy about still being on patrol around Darlam and missing out on all the action.

"We all know a fleet can materialize out of nowhere," Sloane responded. "I need you guys up there, sorry."

Noodar grinned at me. He still looked a little worn around the edges, but he was ready to storm the Ohrur's compound like the rest of us. I wouldn't trade places with Vraax and Raasla for any price in the universe.

"And what exactly are we supposed to do when that armada materializes?" Raasla threw in. It was probably the longest sentence I had ever heard him utter.

"Warn us," Sloane threw back immediately.

"Frygg." Raasla cursed.

"You guys kill some for us," Vraax sounded resigned.

"You got it, brother," Tucker replied.

The two had a complicated relationship. Tucker and Sloane were friends before she met Vraax, and Vraax was understandably wary of Tucker and Sloane's friendship—I would be, too, if Alice had a male friend like that. Tucker didn't waste any

opportunity to tease Vraax. Or rile him up, but they've worked to build trust and a tentative brotherhood.

"Luph's ship is going to stand out," I warned. It wasn't an Ohrur ship.

"They won't be able to do anything without power," Sloane stated. "We're on our way."

Tharaax pointed at our spectral grid—Alice called it radar—where Luph's ship was now visible as it approached. All four of us held our breaths. Everything that meant anything to us was on that ship. The dot kept moving through the atmosphere. We had no idea where the shield was. I was reasonably sure that if the shield were still intact, it would have activated by now. It would make sense to have the shield above the atmosphere so it could take care of the fallout by burning up the pieces—but being reasonably sure and holding my mate in my arms were two different beasts.

"Let's check our gear," Noodar suggested.

He was right. It was better to be doing something other than staring at the dot on the screen. This didn't stop me from glancing at it while I checked my blasters, but it helped.

We moved to the hatch, still following the ship's progress on our comms.

Alice had cut the power, and Nova and Nock had taken care of the backup system. The Ohrurs knew someone was coming for them, but they had no idea who or what.

"We're here," Sloane announced. "On three. One—Two—Three!"

Tharaax opened the hatch, and we stormed out. Sloane and Tucker joined us from their ship, while the others stayed aboard, watching over us through comms. I prayed

to the stars that Alice wouldn't do anything stupid. The only way she could help us was by staying put.

Sloane and Tucker were both trained in combat, but none of the others were.

"I told you to stay back," Sloane hissed.

My head flew over to their ship, expecting to see Alice. I steeled myself to be ready to grab and restrain her if I had to, but to my surprise, it was Nock who Sloane was yelling at.

Nock ignored her, and amazingly quickly, he sprinted over to Zaarek's side. "You promised."

Zaarek sighed and nodded at the holostreamer. Who, as I now noticed, had his earpiece in, streaming what was happening. I only hoped it wasn't live and that he would give us a chance to edit it later if necessary.

"Heads up," Sloane yelled, sending blaster fire toward a building to our left. The gate had just opened, and several heavily armed Space Guardians poured out. None of us were happy about it, but we'd accepted the possibility of having to kill some of our own. Putting the blasters on stun was too great a risk; some species were able to recover from the numbness sooner than others, which would leave us vulnerable to attack. We'd agreed to go in as a lethal team.

The beams of blasters shot through the compounds, Space Guardians went down, and I hardened my emotions. Later , I told myself, I would deal with killing my own people later .

Right now, all that mattered was defeating the enemy, stopping them from whatever evil they were up to, and not letting them get aboard Lugh's ship. For Alice , I

reminded myself as I shot down another Space Guardian.

"Tharaax, Tucker, left," Sloane's commanding voice rang out, "Noodar, Zaarek, right! Xyrek, you're with me, frontal assault!"

I didn't think; I only followed her orders, relying on the others to keep our backs safe. Sloane's tactic got the enemy into a crossfire that decimated them within seconds. The first wave was down, and my respect for the human female grew, as did my understanding of what she called the chain of command. I fully understood now that we needed one person in charge whom the others listened to.

Tharaax, Tucker, Noodar, and Zaarek were now stationed left and right by the entrance, while Sloane and I were facing in, still from a good distance back. She waved me forward, her eyes trained over her blaster at the entrance.

A strange sound made me glance quickly over my shoulder. I groaned, "Heads up, incoming friendly." I wasn't a hundred percent sold on the friendly part, but I hoped to the stars I was right. I stepped to the side and allowed Xenomorph, Vader, and Maul to pass.

We watched the unlikely trio move toward the entrance. Xenomorph was the first one through and was suddenly engulfed in blaster fire. His body twitched; he slowed but still moved forward, and I shuddered at the thought of the kind of nightmare my mate had created. Glad it seemed to be on our side—for the time being. Still, even as mighty as the machine was, a few paces in, it crumbled to the ground.

"Four hostiles to the left and right of the corridor, three more further down," Alice's voice had never sounded so sweet to me before as it did now, coming over the comm.

"Nice job," Sloane praised, pulling out shock orbs, indicating that I should follow her example. Hidden by the entrance, the other four did the same while Vader and Maul

hovered out of sight.

One—Two—Three, Sloane mouthed, and we released the shock orbs simultaneously. Sloane and I threw ourselves to the ground while the others were protected from the following shock wave by the wall behind which they stood. I felt the pulse wave of air rush over my back, and it didn't feel good. It reminded me too much of the last time I died...

"Now!" Sloane was quicker getting back on her feet. I had to run to catch up with her and the others, who were already inside. Vader and Maul veered off, one to the right, one to the left.

"All clear," Alice announced, watching us through the drones.

"Is it safe?" Nock asked from somewhere behind me. I didn't turn. I had no idea where the obnoxious Kred had been hiding during the fight and the shockwave, but he was here now.

Nobody answered him.

In the same groups Sloane had assigned us before we made our way in, Tharaax and Tucker moved down the left corridor, while Noodar and Zaarek moved to the right, and Sloane and I went straight forward.

Alice had been right. Three Space Guardians lay crumpled on the ground ahead of us. Something was different about them, though. I knelt down beside one. "Check the Space Guardians," I said over the comm.

"Xyrek, there's no time—" Sloane started, her blaster up high, but then her eyes landed on what I had seen.

"You guys seeing this?" I asked.

"Frygg," Tharaax replied.

"What are they up to?" Noodar's voice was filled with disgust.

All three of the Space Guardians in front of me looked different. Yes, they were all still silver, but one had green hair, and one's skin was... metallic, reminding me of the skin of Pandraxians.

"That is one ugly motherfucker," Tucker announced. "What the hell is that?"

"Looks like a mix between a Pronex and... I don't know what..." Zaarek cursed.

"Alright, the sideshow is over; let's move," Sloane reminded us of the mission and the danger we were still in. Whatever the Ohrurs were cooking up would have to wait to see the light of day, just like the rest of their abominable secrets.

I imagined the others were just as grim-faced as Sloane and I as we moved through the darkened corridors. Without an energy source, the compound was as dark as a Black Abyss. Our comms were the only source of light.

"Check every door," Sloane said just as she readied herself to send a blaster against a door to our left.

"Wait," I warned, "don't shoot."

With the power out, there was a better alternative. I lowered myself to my knees. I didn't need to look over my shoulder to know that Sloane's blaster was focused on the door and whatever was behind it. Whoever had trained her had trained her well.

I put all my weight into it and shoved the door to the left, which was the universal direction of opening. It worked. It was hard and took a moment, but the door moved into the wall. I shone my comm, and Sloane moved her blaster left and right to check the room. She stepped around me, and I followed, rising back up to my full height. She nodded for me to check the left.

We were inside what appeared to be a small apartment: a bed, a table, a sofa.

"No, let me go," a squeal sounded out as Sloane lifted an Ohrur up by the scruff of his neck.

To my right was one more door, probably the bathroom. I pushed it open. "Empty," I announced.

"How many of you are in here?" Sloane shook the obviously frightened Ohrur.

"I... don't know. I don't know. Who are you? What's happening? The lights went out, and I couldn't leave, " the Ohrur wailed.

"He's some kind of scientist," I pointed at his green uniform. The aura coming off him nearly took my breath away. It wasn't the evilness I encountered with criminals. This was different, almost worse—a total disregard for any lifeforms that weren't Ohrur and a willingness to terminate them.

"What are you up to in here?" I snarled into his face while Sloane lifted him effortlessly into the air, pressing my hands to my hips to not terminate him on the spot. It took more willpower than I could have ever imagined.

"That is none of your business," the Ohrur replied. His voice was filled with fear as his legs uselessly kicked the air.

"Where are the others?" Sloane wanted to know, shaking him a bit more.

"I don't know. I'm just analyzing data. That's all. I swear. I have nothing to do with what the others are doing. Nothing!" Sweat beaded down his body.

"We don't have time for this," I said.

"You're right." Sloane dropped the Ohrur and shot him.

I took a step back. I had terminated many criminals in my line of work, but this... done by a female?

"What?" She snarled at me, her eyes devoid of emotion.

"Are you okay?" I asked.

"I'm fine, let's go."

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ALICE

I didn't know what the others were thinking, but Sloane's actions froze me for a few moments. She just shot that guy. Point blank . My mind repeated. Fuck!

I wasn't upset about an Ohrur dying—well, maybe a little, because... because killing was wrong. Unacceptable. So is kidnapping, experiments ... I remembered Sloane telling us about all the pregnant women she, Vraax, and Zapharos had saved. The Ohrurs had done that to them. This compound here. It wasn't good. It was just like the one on Morrakbarr. The Ohrurs weren't good people.

It was still a hard bite to swallow watching a person I had come to like and respect kill another being like that.

There was plenty of killing earlier , I reminded myself. But that had been different; that had been a battle. This... this had been an execution, and I didn't think I was okay with it. At least not the human part in me. My primal, animal part was actually cheering, filling me with shame.

"Damn, that female is lethal," Raasla observed over the comm. The other two Space Guardians, Raasla and Vraax, were watching what was happening down here just like we were.

"That's my mate," Vraax's voice was filled with pride.

I felt like crawling into myself. What had I gotten myself involved in?

On another screen, I watched Tucker and Zaarek kill two more Ohrurs they found, one in a breakroom and one in his quarters.

Bile rose from my stomach. I looked up. Nova's expression was as hard as Sloane's. She seemed fully on board with this slaughter. Surprisingly, Hannah was also fully on board. Zoe and Luph were the only ones looking slightly aghast, but even they didn't seem to be going to object.

Was I the only one not okay with this?

"Do we have to kill them?" I whispered. The words escaped me before I could hold them back.

"Right now, yes," Nova said. "We can't risk them getting out and falling into their backs."

I didn't try to point out that these Ohrurs appeared way too scared to fall into anybody's back, but I bit my tongue. I thought I had done some ruthless things, like leaving my family and friends behind without a second thought, but that was like getting a parking ticket versus driving drunk compared to what these people were capable of.

These people ? My mind snarked. Really? These people. Are you ready to run again, little girl ?

More shame filled me. My mind was right. I was a runner. I had given up on my family, telling myself there was nothing for me to fight for, and maybe I had been right about that. But there was no running here. This was my home, my new family, and my friends.

"Noodar and Zaarek, two hostiles by the elevator," I advised when Vader sent me the

footage of two Space Guardians taking cover inside.

"On it. Thank you." Zaarek replied.

Time to put your big girl panties on , I told myself. After all, who was I to judge? The others had seen things I hadn't. The night they'd told Xyrek and me about it, I had been revolted just hearing about all they had been through. They had lived it. I promised myself that I would not judge until I had the full story. It was still hard to watch Xyrek take another cowering Ohrur down from his hiding spot inside a bathroom, though.

Noodar and Zaarek took care of the Space Guardians, and Vader and Maul informed me that the first level was clear, which I relayed to the others.

"How many levels?" Sloane asked, leaning against a wall and drinking water from a pouch. All six of them were together again. Well, seven, counting Nock, who was happily streaming.

"No snarky remarks?" Tharaax asked Nock.

"What do you mean?" Nock tilted his head.

"Well, I remember a lecture from you about killing..." Tharaax drifted off, staring challengingly at him. "Something about judge and executioner?"

"I might have changed my mind on that," Nock mumbled.

"What?" Zaarek put his hand to his ear. "I didn't hear you."

Nock glared at him.

Tharaax laughed.

My stomach churned. They had just killed about twenty Ohrurs and even more Space Guardians. And now they were joking? No, I didn't think I was okay with that.

"Welcome to the world of the grown-ups, little man," Tucker pounded on Nock's back so hard Nock moved two stumbling steps forward, but he grinned from ear to ear, happy about the praise.

"Did you guys feel that too?" Xyrek asked.

"Their aura?" Noodar checked, nodding. "Yeah, it's evil at its deepest root."

"Two more levels down," Nova said, having found something like a blueprint of the building.

"Are there any stairs, or do we need to use the elevator shaft?" Sloane questioned.

"Elevator shaft. No stairs." Nova advised.

"Alright, gang, party is over, let's go." Without waiting, Sloane jumped forward, straight into the shaft. A small cry escaped my lips until I realized she had only jumped to the other side, where a ladder was attached to the wall. I blinked a few times. She made this seem so easy, holding her blaster in one hand, reminding me of a cat. There was no way I would ever be able to copy a move like that. Never.

"Wow, I wish I could do that," Zoe took the words out of my mind.

"Same," I admitted.

"I'll teach y'all," Nova said, not looking up from her cube.

XYREK

The second floor was much like the first. There were lots of breakrooms and quarters, but we also found a few offices and one room, filled with eight Ohrurs, which appeared to be the main operating room. The walls were lined with now blank screens, and workstations were scattered throughout. This time, we didn't terminate the Ohrurs; there was a good chance that they were higher-ups who might be able to answer some of our questions. Tucker was tasked with guarding them because he was the only one, besides Sloane, who couldn't sense their evilness the way we did. I doubted any of us would have been able to stay in the same room with them and keep them alive. The vibes coming off them... it was more than I had ever felt from any criminal. From the looks of it, the others weren't faring much better.

I hadn't met the two minders or Craygh yet, so these were the first Ohrurs I encountered in person. The urge to terminate them was hard to resist.

"Let's go." Sloane re-entered the elevator shaft to get down to the last level. The elevator box was stuck on the last level, and we had to cut it open to get inside. Once there, we blasted our way through the doors to enter the third level.

A short hallway allowed access to four doors.

"Let's start over there. No splitting up. Zaarek, stay out here and watch the corridor," Sloane commanded.

I sent a pitying shrug to Zaarek, who held up his middle finger to me, making me chuckle. We'd all adopted many of the human expressions and gestures, becoming a

family, and I enjoyed it. We didn't find anything noteworthy in the first room, which appeared to be a conference room. A long table stood in the center, surrounded by chairs, and the walls were plastered with dead screens—all but one—a large window into a blacked-out area.

"Some are in there," Tharaax whispered. I noticed a couple of small lights as well, probably from comms like ours.

The little light gave us an impression of a large lab, but everything inside was held in shadows.

"Let's check it out." Sloane moved back to the door. She pointed at Zaarek, who kept the corridor in his sight. "Stay."

Noodar pushed the next door open, straight into a nightmare from hell.

"Fuck," Sloane exclaimed when our combined lights hit the space. It was large, larger than the cargo hold of a transporter. Several workstations were spread throughout, filled with various sciency stuff I had no idea the name for. Small machines filled another table. The wall with the window to the other room was bare.

The one opposing it was filled with upright cylinders—so many, I couldn't count them. They were filled with a clear liquid and inside swam... bodies—bodies of all sizes, from infant to adult, all with silver skin. Tubes were attached to them, and small drones moved through the liquid.

"What the frygg is this?" Tharaax picked up an Ohrur who had been hiding under his desk. He shook him and held him against the cylinders.

"Help us," a small voice cried out.

"Shh," another tried to hush.

We turned and stared at the third wall, which was filled with cages stacked up to the ceiling. In each cage hovered a female. A quick glimpse told me that every species of the universe seemed to be represented.

"Fuck. You fucking bastards." Sloane grabbed another Ohrur as he tried to sneak out through the door. She slammed him into the wall so hard he crumbled to the ground. Unconscious or dead. I wasn't sure. And I didn't care.

"Oh no," Zoe wailed through the comm.

"We're coming," Lugh sounded breathless.

"No! We haven't secured the entire compound yet," Sloane snarled.

"I don't care!" Hannah yelled back.

"Fuck, Xyrek, go get them," Sloane cursed. "And bring Tucker and his prisoners back down here with you."

The last part was muffled as I was already racing to the elevator shaft, past a startled-looking Zaarek. Up was a lot harder than down, but I made my way in record time, just fast enough to meet the females as they stormed through the entrance.

"Where are they?" Lugh rushed by me.

"Are you okay?" Alice jumped into my arms, holding me. Nothing had ever felt better.

"You shouldn't go down there. You shouldn't see this," I warned her.

"I need to," she said, and there was something in her eyes I couldn't quite put my finger on.

ALICE

Forget everything I said before. Rage and hate, the kind I had never felt before, fueled me. I was ready to kill the Ohrurs myself. Single-handedly. I wouldn't have hesitated to execute them. What they had done... it was beyond comprehension.

We freed three hundred forty-nine women from the cages. Half of them were visibly pregnant. We weren't sure about the others yet. Even Luph's ship wasn't big enough to accommodate all of them. We would have to ask the Pandraxians for help, since they seemed our only allies. Plus, a large number of the women were Pandraxian because, as I was later told, they were the strongest, next to Pronex women, and could give birth to the enhanced cells they had been impregnated with. They didn't use Pronex women as much because they were harder to capture and put up too much of a fight. At least that's what one of the Ohrurs who was willing to talk revealed.

And we hadn't even seen the worst of it yet.

Our first priority was to make these women as comfortable as possible, which wasn't easy. We spread them out over the first and second floors. Sloane grudgingly recalled Vraax and Raasla from their scouting mission, saying we would have to rely on radar for a while. Then it was all hands on deck.

To say the women were in a state of shock was an understatement. They were traumatized. About twenty of them were human, another hundred or so I had no idea what species they belonged to, and the rest were Pandraxian.

We worked hard and set every cleaning drone loose to make each quarter livable and

allow the women some privacy. Most had to share a room, but a few who were about to give birth were lucky enough to get their own quarters. Birth to what? We didn't know yet, but we had our suspicions.

It took hours to get them all settled down. Two rooms were still left for us to explore. Zaarek kept watch in the corridor, but nobody peeked out. They were either too weak to open the doors or too frightened.

I set the drones I controlled to the task of restoring power while Nova and Nock broke into the database and shot the forcefield down for good. Tucker watched all the prisoners we had, including Possedion, Moddekum, and Craygh, in the conference room.

After hours of work, everybody was finally settled enough to explore the remaining two rooms. Zoe and Luph stayed behind to keep an eye on the rescued women, and Nova and Nock worked on contacting any Imperial Forces who might be in the area. Hannah and I decided we wouldn't be left behind while the men and Sloane moved to explore the last two remaining rooms.

"You two stay back until I say it's clear," Sloane caught Hannah and me with an intense stare.

"Yes, ma'am," Hannah replied straight-faced.

"I mean it," Sloane narrowed her eyes.

"Don't worry. We will," I promised. My bladder was throbbing, not because I had to go, but because fear was clawing up its way inside me. Naked, primal fear of what we were about to discover. It would be bad. I could feel it in every cell in my body. My stomach clenched, and my heart beat so hard, I was sure the others could hear it.

Noodar opened the door, and we watched Sloane lead the others inside. Hannah's hand reached for mine.

"I have a bad feeling about this," she whispered.

"So do I," I admitted.

Our fingers interlaced and squeezed. We waited for an eternity until Zaarek poked his head out; looking grim, he waved us in.

Hesitantly, we followed him, never letting go of each other's hands.

Rows and rows of more cylinders filled the room. These weren't standing, though, but lying down. A lot of them were empty, but the ones that weren't were occupied by men who looked like Darlams or Space Guardians.

Their hair was short, and they were all naked. Tiny drones swam with them in the liquid, moving through hoses and cords attached to them. They all looked like they were sleeping.

"Bryrek." I heard Xyrek's voice. It was laced with so much pain that I let go of Hannah's hand and rushed to his side.

"You know him?" I asked, grabbing his waist and holding on to him for dear life.

"He looks like Bryrek," Zaarek said, appearing at our side.

"A clone?" I asked, but even as the words left my mouth, I knew that wasn't what I was seeing.

"Explain!" Sloane's cold voice made us turn to the entryway. She held the Ohrur that

had been more than willing to talk to us in her clutches; her blaster was directed straight at his cock. "Who are they?"

"Darlams." The Ohrur said.

Sloane pressed the blaster harder against him.

He swallowed.

"What did you do?"

"We captured them and kept them alive for thousands of years," the Ohrur finally said.

I squeezed Xyrek when I felt a tremor go through his body.

"So let me get this straight. You killed all the females and imprisoned the men?" Sloane's voice was one hard edge.

"Not me. Our ancestors." The Ohrur confirmed with a pleading tone in his voice.

"Then what is all that stuff we saw in the other room? What did you do to the females?"

"There aren't many left," the Ohrur said matter-of-factly, without an ounce of remorse, only fear for his life in his voice. "We were tasked with finding alternative solutions."

"As in cloning Darlams and impregnating women?" Tharaax confirmed.

The Ohrur nodded. "The cloning... posed some problems. The specimens we bred

didn't have the Darlams' sense of wrong and right. They were... messy."

"Like the ones on Morrakbarr," Vraax said. "I knew there was something off about them."

"They are efficient, but they tend to take pleasure from terminating their targets," the Ohrur said as if it were the most normal thing in the universe to clone other beings and experiment with them. It was as if the Space Guardians were dogs who had failed training.

Xyrek's hold on me tightened, and my heart went out to him. I could hardly imagine what he was going through. I leaned up and kissed him to let him know I was there and that he wasn't alone.

XYREK

It was hard to describe all the emotions running through me. There was some relief that I wasn't a test tube baby, mixed with anger and fury for what the Ohrurs had taken from me. A need to avenge Allisaahn's and all the other females' deaths. I felt that it wouldn't be enough even if I were given the chance to kill every Ohrur in the universe. Never enough.

We brought the Ohrur informer to the breakroom of our ship. I'm sure he thought Sloane would let him live if he cooperated. She wouldn't, of course, but we didn't let him know that. Everybody was here. They all deserved to hear what he had to say to answer the last of our questions.

Nock stood strangely quietly in a corner, streaming. He had assured us that he would edit everything he had later and run it through us before he cast it. And it needed to be cast. The universe needed to know what the Ohrurs had done. Every one of their atrocities needed to be brought to daylight. The species would have to answer for what their ancestors had started and they had allowed to continue.

"It makes sense now that none of us, except Hannah and Sloane, can remember anything," Nova said when we were together.

"How's that?" Zoe asked.

"Well, we actually died. We are reincarnations, and reincarnations typically have no memory of their past lives." Nova explained.

"I thought Hannah was the High Priestess," Sloane joked. She didn't look quite as tense as she had before, but she was far from relaxed.

"Nova is right," Hannah said. "I don't remember everything, but I do know that I was the Keeper. The Keeper of the ancient gifts the Arkhevari brought us."

"Such as?" Lugh fished.

"Things that I remember but can't tell you yet." Hannah smiled enigmatically.

"Fuck, now you sound just like the bastard Zapharos," Sloane cursed.

Hannah's smile didn't falter. "He's an ancient one."

Alice groaned next to me. "So, what can you tell us?"

"Pretty much all we already know. The Darlams were created to be a species of peace and harmony. The Arkhevari are both light and darkness. Or, to put it in human terms, angels and demons in one."

"I knew it," Sloane spat. We ignored her.

"Their ultimate goal was to create a species that is only... good," Hannah said, smiling wryly and looking at Tharaax with love and adoration. "The Darlams' destiny was to live and love. Souls that had already been bound for eternity were given the gift of finding each other in a physical body in each lifetime."

Sloane interrupted, "Zapharos is very much a physical being."

"In the form he chose to show you himself in, yes." Sloane was right; Hannah sounded like the frygging Arkhevari—riddles on riddles.

"Alright," Zoe waved her hand, "Let's get back to it. The Ohrurs killed us women and put our men to sleep like Sleeping Beauty ."

I didn't know what Sleeping Beauty meant, but the concept made sense.

"Yes. They killed us women, which is why we don't have any memories," Hannah included herself in that we in the general sense, because her memories were of a spiritual, not personal nature. "And the men kept theirs because they... slept."

"So what did you do to make them forget?" Sloane asked the Ohrur.

"It took many trials, but we finally discovered that a subliminal message, implanted while they were in a state of sleep, was needed to erase their memories, and then we added a failsafe to have them experience headaches anytime they attempted to remember. That trained them not to do it." I growled, and Alice squeezed my hand. "Unfortunately, that hold lessened over the years, and we had to... terminate them once their memories became too strong, generally around the thirty-year mark." The Ohrur continued, oblivious to our growing hate. He spoke as if he were in a lecturing hall, training others.

"The training," Zaarek pushed.

"Well, yes, that. The Darlams were strong but not trained in combat or civilized weapons and technology. Again, it took some trial and error, but eventually, we discovered that training with intermittent sleep and mind stimuli helped. Usually, the Space Guardians' memories of training remained fuzzy because of the intermittent sleep."

By the stars, I wanted to end this little frygg so much. Me and everyone else in the room.

"Does anyone else have any questions?" Sloane asked.

We stared from her to the Ohrur. A million questions still warred inside my head, but I was reasonably sure I had heard and taken in everything I could for now.

"Who wants to do the honors?"

The Ohrur looked almost happy, as if he was about to leave.

"Me," Raasla said, pulling his blaster and firing it at the Ohrur, who was still smiling when he hit the ground. His death was almost too fast for my taste.

A subdued silence followed, which lasted the rest of the day. All of us had to come to terms with what had happened. Where would we go from here?

It wasn't until dinner that Sloane announced, "The superior commander of the Imperial Forces, Xandros, and his mate and my friend, Ashley, will be here in the morning with transporters to take the women to Pandrax. From there, they can contact their loved ones."

The emperor must have already been on his way to Darlam to get here this quickly, I mused, but I wasn't about to question our good fortune on this.

That, at least, was good news, though I was astonished that Sloane knew the Pandraxian Forces Commander Xandros' mate. "Did she say she's friends with the superior commander's mate?" I asked Vraax.

Vraax's chest puffed out with pride for his mate. "She is. She was also offered the position of chief intelligence officer for the Pandraxian emperor."

I was duly impressed.

“Where do we go from here?” Alice asked, sidling up next to me.

I put my arm around her, “Right now, I just want to take you to bed and make love to you all night long.”

She smiled softly, “I like that idea. But I mean after.”

I remembered Rottvan and what a peaceful planet it had been. How beautiful it was, and how happy she had seemed with the other humans there. But my heart wanted to stay on Darlam. There was so much to do. The still-sleeping Darlams needed to be awakened. I would like to get to know the tribe of Shade’s Vale better. Broken towns needed to be restored. My heart hurt at the thought of leaving while there was still so much that needed to be done. Most of all, because I had just found my brother again. But if Alice wanted to leave, I would go with her wherever she wanted to go. She was my heart and soul; home would always be wherever she was.

“Where would you like to go?” I asked, making an effort to keep my voice even. I didn’t want her to pick up on how much I hated the idea of leaving Darlam.

“We said we would return to Rottvan once we figured out what happened on Darlam,” she reminded me, and my heart sank even further.

“Is that what you want to do? Go back to Rottvan?” I asked.

She shook her head. “I don’t think so, but what about you? You liked that place, too.”

A heavy weight lifted from my chest. My lips parted into a wide smile as I pulled her into my arms. “I did. I do. But I love Darlam. This is our home.”

She nodded. “Our home. Our family.”

I had no doubt that a lot of work lay ahead of us, but right then, all I wanted was to take Alice to our quarters and make sweet love to her.

But first, “I have something for you.”

I wanted to give it to her when we were alone. I’d cleaned it, and now her aurlum bracelet shimmered as good as new.

“Oh, Xyrek,” she exclaimed, taking it from my hand and holding it up to see it from all sides. “It’s as beautiful as it has ever been. Thank you.”

Her eyes shimmered with tears when she held it back out to me. My confusion only lasted a tick before I realized she wanted me to put it on her wrist. “Alice, I love you with all my heart. Now and forever.”

“Thank you, Xyrek. I love you, too. Once you fix my workshop, we’ll make you one, too.” She beamed.

It didn’t escape me that she had just put me to work, but I didn’t mind. Rebuilding her workshop would be my pleasure.

“I have so many ideas,” her gaze turned dreamy.

“I bet you do,” I grinned. I could only imagine the things she would come up with. “But right now, I have some ideas of my own.”

I pulled her into my arms and kissed her. Technically, we were still on Lumph’s ship, but we were also on Darlam, our home. This would be our first night on it together, and I wanted to make it extra special. I wanted us to forget about all the horrors we had seen and gone through over the last few weeks and, especially, the course of that day.

She didn't hesitate; her arms wrapped around my neck. She pressed herself against me with abandon and the same hunger I had for her. This was perfection. I was never happier than when I could hold her in my arms, knowing that there was nothing that could threaten her.

"I love you," she whispered in my ear.

"I love you too. Let me show you how much." I said, picking her up and carrying her to our bed. Reverently, I placed her on the mattress before I slowly pulled her shirt over her head. She allowed me to undress her, sensing how much I needed this. How much I needed to ensure that every part of her body was unharmed.

"I think my breasts got hurt," she said hoarsely.

"Oh yeah? Where?" I asked, realizing she was only indulging me.

"Right here." She pointed at her erect nipple. "See how sore it is?"

"I do," I mumbled, grinning. "Let me kiss it better."

"A kiss won't help."

"Oh no? How about this?" I cupped her breast and brought my head down to suck on her nipple.

"Hmm," she moaned, "yes. It's getting better already."

"Where else are you sore?" I asked, moving my hands over her soft skin, reveling in the experience, the knowledge that she was here, with me. My beloved.

"Hmm, right there." She spread her legs around me, and I gladly took the hint. I

moved down on the floor, moving her knees apart even more to get a glimpse of her already glistening pussy. She was so frigging perfect. My fingers moved to her lips and parted them. I loved the way she was already soaking wet for me. I leaned forward and swept my tongue from one end of her pussy to the other. I looked up. Her eyes were glazed with desire, her lips slightly parted. She looked like a goddess. I committed her image to memory before my lips closed around her clit to suck on the little pearl and lick all the sweet juices her pussy was treating me with.

Her moans intensified, and her thighs tightened around me, letting me know that she was on the brink. I inserted two fingers into her wet depths, curled them, and felt her shattering apart around me.

“Xyrek!” she called my name. It was the sweetest sound in the world, swelling my chest with pride.

ALICE

I gasped for air as I was coming down from the orgasm Xyrek had just wrung from me so effortlessly. The moment he curled his fingers inside me, my body exploded like never before. Wave after wave of bliss moved underneath my skin, raising goosebumps in their wake. My toes were still curling when Xyrek picked me up and placed me deeper onto the bed.

Soft kisses rained down on my face. His hands roamed my body. I felt like I had died and gone to heaven. Gently, he pushed my thighs apart and situated himself between my legs. I was barely able to raise my hips to give him easier access; my last high was still very much surging through me. Unbelievably, the moment he entered me, filling me like no other had ever before, I came again.

"Ah, frygg, Alice, you're going to be the death of me," he rasped, tensing. Sweat dripped down his neck and back as he tried to hold his own orgasm back while I felt my walls knead his cock sheathed all the way inside me.

"Don't move," he begged. It was an easy enough request to follow since I wasn't able to even lift my little finger. Slowly, ever so slowly, he pulled out, only to thrust back in. I gasped; my pussy was already sensitive and primed, and every stroke of him against my walls made me quiver with bliss. I didn't think I could come again, but once he started moving faster and his hands gripped my hips, I felt another orgasm building.

"Fuck Xyrek, I think I'm coming again!" I screamed the last word. He pushed my hips down so that his cock moved against my swollen clit, and for the third time, I

exploded all around him.

This time he wasn't able to hold back either, and he bellowed my name as his cock pulsed and his seed filled me.

Exhausted, I closed my eyes. I was barely able to move when gentle hands cleaned me between my legs and moved me into a more comfortable position. I felt the bed dip, then his body spooning mine, and with a sigh, I fell instantly into a long, deep sleep.

Xyrek was still beside me when my eyes fluttered open. My body was the most relaxed it had ever been. When I stretched my legs, nerves I hadn't known existed tingled all the way up into my pussy, recalling the delicious sensation he had wrung from me last night. Three times. Three times! I would have never thought I could come more than once.

Alice, get up. You have one more task .

The voice inside my head was familiar; even though I had never met him, I knew instinctively that it belonged to Zapharos.

Get up .

I looked at Xyrek, who was still sleeping. What am I supposed to do ? I asked in my head. Despite the strangeness of having another entity speak to me in my brain , I was neither freaked out nor alarmed. I'd heard the others complain about Zapharos, but to me, his presence felt reassuring.

You will know when you see it .

I put on some clothes, making enough noise to wake the dead because I really wanted

Xyrek to get up and come with me wherever I was going. But he didn't stir. I contemplated rousing him but decided against it.

In a trance, I moved through Luph's silent ship. I walked out of the open hatch. Had we left it open ? It didn't seem possible. The guys took security very seriously. I walked over the tarmac straight toward the building we had raided yesterday. Was that really only yesterday? The longest day of my life?

Nothing but stillness greeted me there. But at least the power had been restored, which meant the lights were on and the elevators functioned again. I hoped that one of the men left to guard the women would stop me, but I never saw anyone. I took the elevator all the way down to the third floor as if someone was telling me what to do, but this time, there was no voice in my head.

I walked into the conference room. The large window allowed a full view of the now-empty lab. I shivered when I thought about all that had taken place there. Inside the cylinders, the bodies of the Ohrur's cruelties still floated, attended to by small drones. It was so eerie, and a cold shiver ran up and down my spine. I turned from the window. It was just too unnerving to stare at the... the objects.

At the end of the conference room, I saw another door I didn't remember seeing before. We must have overlooked it in the chaos of the raid. A sudden bout of nervousness overcame me. I felt like I shouldn't be here. Most of all, I shouldn't be here alone. What if more Ohrurs were hiding out inside? I might have been a fool for coming here, but I wasn't an idiot. I called Vader and Maul over the comm and waited until my trusted drones were next to me. Only then did I move to the door. A panel next to it blinked, requiring a palm scan or code or whatever other security measure the Ohrurs had dreamed up.

Just like the others never went anywhere without their blasters strapped to them, I always put on my toolkit, a smaller version of the one Xyrek had originally given me.

Selecting something akin to a screwdriver but a little wider and flatter, I moved it between the panel and the wall and pried the lid off. Pulsing cords, like arteries filled with blood, greeted me. The fluids I knew held different components: some for power, some for data transport, and so on. It was the dark orange one I wanted, the one that held the power. This was going to be messy, but it needed to be done. A pair of pliers cut through the cord, and I jumped back, careful not to be drenched in the orange liquid. The door hissed open.

The light inside the room came on automatically, and I stared at a large storage room filled with boxes. Most of them were the size of shoeboxes, but some were larger. There had to be hundreds of thousands of them if not more. Each one was labeled. Rylax, Querrek, Toltant—name after name, stack after stack.

There were so many that it would have taken me days to look at all of them, so I pulled one out at random: Vrexium. With the screwdriver, I pulled off the lid. My mouth dropped open at the sight of a belt, a ring, a necklace. I swallowed. These were things that must have belonged to Vrexium. Again, I stared up at the stacks and stacks of boxes as tears rolled down my cheeks. I had no reason to believe that I was right, but instinctively, I knew that every single one of these boxes held whatever the Darlams had been wearing or carrying on their last day. One of these boxes would hold Xyrek's gold bracelet, his belt, and his sword.

I took a deep, shuddering breath. This was not something I could tackle alone. It took a herculean effort to raise my hand with my comm up to my lips to alert all the others. "Come to the conference room in the Ohrur building. I need you."

My hand fell back down, and I was too numb to answer the millions of questions thrown at me in response. I just sat there, staring at the walls of boxes.

Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 5:33 am

XYREK

Come to the conference room in the Ohrur building. I need you. Her words, spoken in a dead-sounding voice, gave me wings. I ran through the halls, pushing Tharaax and Raasla out of the way, all the while yelling into the comm for Alice to answer me.

The sound of boots behind me thundered over the ground. The elevator was filled with every single member of my new family, each one staring at me, asking me what had happened, what Alice needed, and what was going on. I didn't have any answers, and the elevator seemed to take forever until it opened on the third floor. I was already at the door before it opened; the others gave me room to rush out first.

"Alice!" I screamed as I ran into the conference room. My heart stopped; she wasn't there.

"In here," she called, and I noticed another door we had overlooked so far. The panel had been pried open in typical Alice fashion, eliciting a wry smile from me as I followed the light and the sound of her voice.

Alice sat on the ground, an open box in front of her. Not that I cared; my entire focus was on Alice, taking her in from head to toe, making sure she was breathing and unharmed.

"What is this?"

"By the Black Abyss."

"What the fuck?"

"Frygg."

Words of exclamation rang out, but I didn't pay them any attention. I fell on my knees next to Alice. My hands moved up, but for some reason, I was worried about touching her.

"Those are names."

"Frygg, that's Ronnex. I knew him."

"Grab one."

"No, wait. Alice has one."

The voices talked all at once. Like in a trance, Alice looked up, and I followed her line of sight, finally seeing what the others had already noticed. The stacks and stacks of boxes. So many.

"They must have taken this from the Darlams," Alice's voice told me, bringing me back to her. I finally turned my attention to the box's contents. I cursed when I realized what Alice's words meant.

Just when I thought the Ohrurs couldn't surprise us anymore, they did.

"Why would they do this?" Zoe asked, reverently stroking a box.

"Why did they do anything? They're fucked in the head, that's why," Tucker replied.

Nobody disagreed with that statement.

Gently, I took the box from Alice and handed it to Vraax. Then I helped Alice up. She snuggled right into my chest. "So many, Xyrek. There are so many."

Unsure of how to reply or if a reply was even necessary, I kissed the top of her forehead, holding her tight, as if I was afraid she'd float away if I let go.

"How many Darlams are still asleep?" Nock asked.

"We counted seven thousand four hundred and eleven," Luph replied in a subdued voice.

"You should wake them," Nock opined, removing the comm from his ear, looking more shocked than I had seen him so far. He shook his head. "This is... I'm sorry. I'm so sorry I ever said a bad word about any of you. But I will use all my power to cast this atrocity throughout the universe. Everybody will know what the Ohrurs did to you."

A tear rolled down his face. Zaarek moved next to him and grabbed his shoulder, squeezing it. "You're alright, little Kred."

"You're one of us," Raasla nodded.

"That's another brilliant idea, Nock. Actually two. I think he's right. We need to awaken the others." Sloane agreed. "It's time."

"Why?" Vraax looked torn. "We have no idea where their Soulweb Glyphs mates are. We can't wake them and have them go through the same agonies we went through without the support of their mates."

My heart constricted. Vraax had a point.

"How would we ever find them?" Zoe sounded shattered. "The Cryons took so many of us, scattered them throughout the universe. We don't even know if any of their mates are still alive."

"We were hunters," I was surprised my voice was even. "Once these males are awake and have recovered their memories, they will do what they did best once upon a time. They will search until they find their Soulweb mates."

"I don't know," Vraax shook his head. His eyes wandered over the many boxes stacked upon each other.

"We don't have to decide right now, we—" Sloane was interrupted by the noise of several boxes falling.

Our attention turned back to Nock, who seemed to have recovered from his emotional outburst and had attempted to climb up the wall to reach something, only to bring an entire column down on him.

Noodar was closest and moved the boxes off the Kred. "What in the name of the Black Abyss were you doing?" He pulled Nock up.

Nock didn't appear worse for wear. He freed himself from Noodar's grip and pointed, "There, up there. That one looks different."

He was right. High up on one of the columns stood another box. It was red and stood out from the rest of them.

"Let's find a ladder," Zaarek sighed.

"We don't need one." Nova was already in motion. She was up those boxes as if they were a staircase. "Zaarek." She had reached the box and held it out, ready to drop it.

"On it," Zaarek was already below her, having watched her progress with worried eyes but also a gleam of pride.

"It's heavy," Nova warned right before she dropped it.

Zaarek's knees buckled when he caught it. "Oomph," he complained.

"I warned you," Nova replied, making her way back down even faster than she went up.

We circled around Zaarek, who put the box on the ground before prying at the lid to open it.

"Here, use this," Alice held out an omni-key—screwdriver—to him.

"Thank you."

"No, no, not like that," Alice fell to her knees and adjusted the box. With a sigh, Zaarek held out the omni-key to her.

Alice grabbed it as if it were her baby that he had held onto for too long and went to work. Within a tick, the lid popped open, exposing another box—a simple, black box. There was nothing special about it, but we all hovered as if this were some kind of holy relic.

Alice held it up and scrutinized it from all angles. "It looks just like a cube. There is nothing..." Her hands ran up and down the box's surface. "Aha!" Her fingers hesitated. There is something." She held the box up again. "Xyrek, some light?"

I held up my comm as she squinted. "Zaarek, hold it like this," she instructed, already digging through her tool belt. Zaarek and I exchanged an amused look as this moment

took us back in time. How many hours had we spent in Alice's workshop, assisting her when she was in the zone ? Unaware of anything other than what she was building. I had always believed the world could collapse all around her, and she wouldn't know. And maybe it had. I hoped to all the stars that when death came for her, she had been in the zone , not realizing what was happening.

"Hah!" Alice exclaimed once more. "Turn it just a little to the right, ZaZa, more light—" She broke off and stared, stunned, at Zaarek, who took her in with the same surprise that tore through my heart. Despite Allisaahn and me only having had a rotation together, she and Zaarek had grown close. Zaza had been his nickname from one of our little sisters, and Allisaahn had adopted it.

Alice cleared her throat, but her hand was shaking as she finally found the tool she had been looking for. It had a small star at the top and was as thin as a needle. Nobody knew its use, but it was kept in everybody's tool belts. Even the repair drones were equipped with them. Over the years, people had started calling it the Master's Pin ; legend had it that only true engineers instinctively knew its purpose. I stared at Alice in wonder. She was so caught up in what she was doing, and with no memory of her past or knowledge of the significance of this tool, that she didn't realize that all of us Darlams—and Kred—stared at her in utter disbelief. Even non-mechanically inclined people like us had heard of the Master's Pin . It was a legend in itself.

Surreptitiously, Nock was casting again, but nobody stopped him this time. We all sensed that we stood at the precipice of a gigantic historical moment. The very air around us seemed to stand still as Alice inserted the pin with the star side up. Carefully, she rotated it until there was a small click. It was so still in the room that the click sounded like a missile exploding.

Zaarek nearly dropped the box when the lid sprang open.

"Zaarek!" Alice snarled, stabilizing the box until he had himself back under control.

Nova snickered quietly from behind him, a sound that was picked up by the others and broke some of the tension.

But the snickering stopped when Zaarek lowered the box, and we saw what was inside. The globe inside was the most beautiful sight I had ever seen. It shimmered in gold and silver, and its facets caught rays of light and reflected them in tiny sparkles of color. Alice's hand moved forward.

"Don't touch that," Hannah snarled, rushing forward as if to snatch the globe.

Zaarek pulled it away from her.

"Hannah?" Tharaax stepped behind his mate.

"Don't touch that," Hannah repeated. Her entire body was shaking. "This abomination needs to be destroyed right fucking now."

"Tharaax, hold her back," Sloane demanded.

Tharaax looked torn, but when Hannah made another jump for Zaarek, his hands gripped her waist and pulled her back.

"Hannah, what's wrong?" Tharaax wanted to know.

Hannah didn't look herself. She shook her head, "I don't know. But something tells me this is evil. It needs to be destroyed."

"Ark-he-vari." Zaarek squinted at something only he could see inside the box.

"Let me see," Alice reached for it.

"No, don't touch it," Hannah cried again.

Torn, I looked from one to the other. I didn't know what to do. Stop Alice like Hannah demanded, or let her investigate?

Alice's hands were moving closer.

"Don't touch it," Hannah's eyes were pleading. Her fear for Alice was real.

"This is not going to hurt me," Alice said, giving Hannah a warm smile.

"You don't know what you're doing," Hannah wailed.

"I think I do," Alice said. Her hands were already caught in the otherworldly golden shimmer emanating from the globe.

"Stop her," Hannah stared right at me.

"It's okay," Alice assured me.

When the time comes, you must listen to her. Trust her, as you have always done. She will know what to do. She has always known. Zapharos' words echoed in my head. Was this the moment he had talked about?

Hannah's worry and fear were valid.

None of us knew what that globe was or what it could do.

Alice's eyes met mine. Trust me was written all over them, but Hannah's fear was also real. My heart nearly tore in two, because I had no idea what to do.

ALICE

From the moment I saw the globe, a warm feeling spread through me—a feeling of homecoming. Zapharos, his name repeated in my head. Somehow, this globe was the key to contacting him. I knew it—I felt it in my heart, bones, and soul.

But then Hannah's sudden outburst sent doubts through my stomach. They said Hannah had been a priestess in her previous life, and probably the life before that, and so on. A High Priestess. Out of all of us women, she remembered the most on her own. Sloane's memories had been a gift from Zapharos, but Hannah's had broken through because of who she was in her previous life.

Deep down, a voice told me that Hannah was wrong. This globe wasn't evil. My entire life had been dictated by logic—a logic that had taken a serious hit during the past weeks and was cracking even more now. There was no logic to how I knew that the globe was anything but evil. But I did.

"Trust me," I told Xyrek, watching the emotional war tearing at his features. He nodded, but the pain and worry in his eyes nearly stopped me from doing what I knew I needed to do.

My hands grabbed the globe. It felt strange, not solid at all, yet heavy. The golden light and crystal glitter inside swam around my skin. It was as if my hands dove right inside it. Yet, there was enough resistance for me to hold on to and lift it out of the box.

It was the most beautiful sight I had ever seen, like being inside a diamond. The

warm glow emanating from the globe began to spread all around me.

"No," Hannah wailed.

Xyrek looked like he was ready to grab me, but then the golden glow began to leave me. It swirled like a small, benign twister. Everyone who had surrounded us automatically stepped back; they didn't want to come in contact with the golden glow, especially not once it began to form a shape.

"You summoned me?" Without a doubt, I knew this was Zapharos, even before Sloane cursed.

"Zapharos!"

A devilish smirk rose on his lips. "Well, well, well. You finally figured it out. Good job, little engineer."

"Figured what out?" Xyrek took a step forward, murder written all over his face. I threw a warning glance at Zaarek since I couldn't put the damn globe down to stop Xyrek. Thankfully, Zaarek got my message and stepped in Xyrek's way, stopping him.

"Later," I heard him whisper. "You can kill him later. Let's hear what he has to say, brother."

Zapharos stood in the center, turning in a circle. He made eye contact with each one of us. His commanding presence ensured absolute silence despite a few growls from the men. But I was sure they, too, saw what I did. There was something deeper in his gaze—something ancient and burdened.

"Is this the Ohrur place? It feels evil," he said, looking around.

"It is," Sloane said.

"I told you not to let her activate it," Hannah lamented.

Zapharos took a deep breath and walked toward her, but Tharaax stepped in his way, "Not a step closer." He warned.

Zapharos' smile was enigmatic. "Hello, little priestess. It's been a long time."

"We've never met," Hannah said.

"Oh, but we have," Zapharos assured her. "Unfortunately, at the time, you and your brethren took my brothers' words over mine." He shrugged as if it didn't matter.

"You are evil," Hannah declared, and Tharaax stiffened, ready to defend her if necessary.

Zapharos laughed, "That's true. Good point, little priestess, but sometimes it's the evil that you should listen to because it's the voice of the truth."

Hannah shook her head, but his words seemed to do something to her because she stilled.

"My brothers had their own agenda, you know that."

"I don't. I don't remember," Hannah cried.

Zapharos raised his hand, palm up. He jerked it forward, not directly touching Hannah, but I thought I noticed a ball of light coming for her.

"Hannah!" Tharaax yelled.

Hannah looked stunned but held Tharaax back. "I'm okay, Thrax. I'm okay." She took a deep breath and steadied herself by fisting Tharaax's shirt, who stabilized her by placing his hand on her waist.

He glared at Zapharos. "What did you do?"

"I only helped her remember," Zapharos defended himself, and then he looked at Hannah. "Now you see?"

"How do I know you just didn't make me believe that this is what happened?" Hannah demanded.

"It's called trust." Zapharos smiled.

Sloane snorted, but he ignored her.

"What did he do to you?" Tharaax asked. "I'll kill him."

Hannah shook her head. "It's alright. Really. It's okay."

"Well, don't leave us hanging. What do you remember?" Nova almost yelled.

Hannah looked perturbed, like someone who had seen life in black and white and suddenly saw colors for the first time.

"That I'm a terrible person," Hannah cried, burying her face in Tharaax's side, who mouthed, you're dead , to Zapharos before he simply held his mate tight and whispered words of encouragement to her.

All of us exchanged startled glances; nobody knew what to do or say, but Tharaax wasn't the only one who looked ready to end Zapharos.

"You can give that to me now, love," Zapharos nodded at me.

"Oh... oh good." Carefully, I put the globe that seemed to be getting heavier into his hands.

"Alright, Zaph , storytime." Sloane glared at him.

He exhaled slowly and seemed to choose his words carefully. "You're looking for answers." It was more of a statement than a question, so he continued, "you want to know who the Arkhevari are, what they are, and why we do what we do. But answers come at a price. Some truths cannot be spoken—only understood in time."

Zaarek folded his arms. "You sound like you enjoy keeping secrets."

A smirk tugged at Zapharos' lips. "Oh, I do. But this is not about pleasure. It is about survival. Some knowledge burns the mind when it is revealed too soon."

Sloane narrowed her eyes. "Then tell us what you can ."

Zapharos inclined his head. "Very well. You know the Arkhevari once had mates. What you don't know is that it was the Archegene that bound us and gave us our Soulweb Glyphs. It's a gift that we spread across the stars. And what you do not understand is that we lost them."

His amber eyes darkened like the void between stars. "We reached too far. We sought to understand too much. There is a place beyond the black hole, a place you call the Black Abyss—a space without time, without gravity, without limit. It is where we listened and learned. It gave us wisdom beyond measure; knowledge from every world was consumed. And for a while, we believed ourselves invincible, untethered from the constraints of lesser beings."

His voice lowered, torn between anger and incredible sadness, "But we were wrong."

Silence spread throughout the room as Zapharos continued, "The Archegene is not merely a gene—it's balance . It binds; it anchors. And when we abandoned our physical being and drifted too long in that weightless place of endless knowing, the Archegene did what it had to. It severed our tethers. We became...unmoored."

Noodar frowned. "Unmoored? From what?"

"From them . Our mates. Our very destiny. We lost the resonance of their souls. The bond we took for granted became an echo we could no longer hear. Some say the Archegene did it to protect itself. Others believe it was a punishment." He exhaled. "Perhaps both."

Zaarek's expression was unreadable, but Sloane was watching Zapharos closely. "You said some truths can't be spoken. What aren't you telling us?"

Zapharos chuckled, but there was no amusement in it. "You assume I have all the answers. If only that were true."

Nova leaned forward. "Then tell us—why only Darlam? Why only Earth? Why are those the last places where the Arkhevari can find their mates?"

Zapharos was silent for a long moment. Finally, he said, "Because we are running out of time. Because the cycle is closing. And because, whether we like it or not, you are part of this story now."

Luph shifted uneasily. "What about me? I'm not a human. And there were some others too that we know of."

Zapharos stepped toward Luph. Noodar was ready to interfere, but Zapharos only

gently touched her cheek. "You and the others are very special. My species mixed with yours a long, long time ago. So long, the Archegene has all but vanished in your species, but every now and then, a spark ignites, and one such spark became you."

Zaarek's voice was edged with distrust. "Why are you telling us all this?"

Anger flared through the golden gleam around Zapharos' edges; Vraax stiffened as black bolts of lightning could be seen, but before the Space Guardian could do anything, the blackness retreated, and Zapharos took a deep breath. "Because it amuses me?"

"I'm calling bullshit," Sloane crossed her arms in front of her chest.

A smile tugged at the corners of Zapharos' lips, as if he liked her. With a wry smile, he amended, "Because you deserve to know some of the truth. Your part of my story is over. We will go our separate ways from here, but now you have the means to summon me if you need me." He kept a tight hold of the globe but placed something else into the box.

Sloane snickered, "Here, little genie."

Zapharos glared at her. She laughed and spread her arms in surrender, saying, "Only when absolutely necessary, I swear." Then she cocked her head. "How is Ella?"

"She will be safe now that I have the globe."

The golden glow around him turned brighter, so bright, it was hard, so hard, that I could barely make out his form. And then he was gone, and the golden shimmer dissolved.

We all stared at each other. "Well?" Zoe asked.

“Why do I feel like we shouldn’t let him have the globe thing?” I asked no one in particular.

Sloane’s eyes met mine. “You feel that way, too?”

I nodded; I did, but for some reason, I also knew that the globe had nothing to do with us. I shrugged, trying to play off my unsettling feeling. "At least we know a little bit more now."

"Hardly," Sloane snarked, her eyes turning to Hannah and Tharaax. Is she okay?"

Hannah freed herself from Tharaax and rubbed her eyes. "No, but I will be." She turned to me, "I'm sorry, Alice."

I creased my brow, "You have nothing to be sorry for."

She exhaled loudly, "Trust me, I do. To all of you and mostly, to the people living in the Vale."

Her statement was as enigmatic as Zapharos's, but we decided to give her some room for now.

XYREK

The decision on what to do with the still sleeping Darlams was put on hold with the arrival of the supreme commander of the Imperial Forces the very next day.

We all assembled by the airfield as several Imperial spaceships landed. One of them, a large transporter, hovered over the others because there wasn't enough space for it to sit down. Long ramps extended, and drones began unpacking boxes upon boxes.

"What is all that?" Alice asked.

I shrugged and was about to come up with a guess when the imperial ship's hatch opened and a ramp extended. The first out was none other than the emperor himself, with a beautiful human female at his side.

"Oh shit," Sloane exclaimed and looked, for the first time since I had known her, worried. "I haven't told him yet," she whispered to Vraax.

The next to exit was an impressive male in the uniform of the Imperial Forces, calling him out as their supreme commander. Right next to his side was a human female wearing the same type of uniform, who looked every bit as commanding.

"Ash!" Sloane exclaimed and ran forward to embrace the other female.

"Sloane!" The two hugged tightly while the males watched with amused patience. "I brought Silla too."

Lady Silla and Lord Protector Garth emerged from the royal ship. Several of our females ran forward to meet Lady Silla. Then, another human female appeared, and Alice squealed, "Daisy!"

Surprised, I watched her rush forward and embrace the woman. "What are you doing here?"

The female smiled endearingly. "I'm to be the empress' personal holostreamer. Emperor Daryus wants his subjects to feel like the imperial couple is accessible to all of them."

"Oh, that's wonderful!" Alice hugged her again.

None of us Space Guardians were Emperor Daryus' subjects, so none of us bowed, but the male did exude a large amount of power. I noticed I wasn't the only one who respectfully inclined their head toward him.

Zaarek, who had been our primarch so many years ago, was the first to find his tongue. "It is an honor to meet you, Emperor Daryus. Please let me extend our deepest apologies for not fulfilling our sworn duties by you."

Teal eyes regarded my brother thoughtfully. "I understand the kind of predicament you and your brothers were in. This is a fight I will take up with the Ohrurs, not you. You may not have fully achieved what I paid for, but your accomplishments more than made up for it. Without you, we would never have discovered what evil the Ohrurs were up to. You have my thanks for that."

"You have more females who have been hurt?" Lord Protector Garth interrupted.

"They are inside the compound, ready to leave with you," I said, pointing toward the building that had held so many nasty surprises for us.

Lord Protector Garth raised his hand and waved a group of males and females forward, carrying medical supplies, equipment, and hover stretchers to take the females aboard another ship.

"What did you find out about the females we brought you?" Vraax wanted to know.

"They were not only in bad shape, but we learned that most of the children born through this act of cruelty either don't survive long or turn into something that would be better off never to have been born." Superior Commander Xandros explained.

"I fought a few of them; they didn't... " Vraax shook his head. "They weren't Space Guardians; they seemed to enjoy cruelty."

Xandros nodded darkly, "Vra—yes—we are working with each merrily—female—individually to determine her wishes and will accommodate whatever she requests."

"There has been enough suffering. Those females will receive the full support of my empire, no matter if they're Pandraxian or not," the emperor vowed.

Our females finally seemed to have gotten their hugs out of the way and joined us.

"Emperor," Sloane nodded at Daryus.

"Ah, my elusive new spymaster, tell me, Lady Sloane, how are things going?" Daryus asked.

"Quit intimidating her," Empress Heather elbowed the emperor, amusing me. "You and I both know that she won't be your new... spy mistress. You're lucky if she sends you intel now and then. So quit."

"Is that true?" He quirked an eyebrow at Sloane.

"I'm afraid so, at least for now. We need to rebuild Darlam?—"

"Let me assure you that for that endeavor, too, you will have the full support of the Pandraxian Empire. Whatever you need." He offered. "I'll leave some troops to keep out any other vultures who might want to pick on Darlam's bones."

I didn't like the idea of Pandraxian troops close by, but I also knew that, for now, we would need all the help we could get. The emperor was right; once word spread, thousands of people would come. The best-case scenario would be that most would come just out of curiosity, but there would inevitably be some who would seek to exploit Darlam like the Ohrurs had.

"That is very generous, thank you." Again, it was Zaarek who spoke for us.

"And this must be Nock, the most famous holostreamer and my personal favorite," Emperor Daryus strode forward. Zaarek groaned. I would have expected Nock to glow right in front of us, expected his small chest to expand, and pride to fill his features. I even expected him to throw an I told you so look at Zaarek, but none of that happened. Instead, he stared dumbstruck at Alice's friend, Daisy, who also beamed at him, "I've watched all your holostreams. You're a legend and a genius. I know this is asking a lot, but would you be willing to help a newbie? Give me some pointers?"

She placed her fingers on his arm. Nock opened his mouth to respond, but not even a squeak left him. He tried again, and we all stared at him, bewildered. Or at least bewildered until the first mating marks began to move up and down his arm.

"Oh, what is this?" Daisy asked, clasping one hand over her arm, where the same mating marks spread.

Nock, the little Kred, seemed to grow right in front of us; he moved forward with a determination on his face that matched a Space Guardian about to terminate someone. He grabbed Daisy by the waist. “MINE!” He yelled, in a voice so deep it didn’t seem to be his. Then he kissed her.

All of us expected the human female to push him away; that’s what it looked like at first. I was ready to interfere, but she slumped against him like one of those females in the movies Alice made me watch. I think they called it swooning .

Dazed, she stared at him when he finally let go.

“Mine!” Nock repeated.

An unintelligible acknowledgment came from Daisy as if she had been struck dumb, but the haze in her eyes left no doubt that she was as fascinated with Nock as he appeared to be with her.

“That must have been one hell of a kiss,” Zoe exclaimed wistfully.

“You’ve been holding out on us, Nock,” Sloane laughed.

“Well, I’ll be damned,” Zaarek stared at Nock.

“No pain?” Nova asked.

“Doesn’t seem fair,” Sloane agreed.

“Hannah?” Alice turned to our High Priestess.

“I don’t know,” Hannah looked thoughtful, “but I can’t shake the feeling that Zapharos has something to do with this.”

As if on cue, I thought I heard a deep laughter inside my head, but before I could react, it was gone. Damn Arkhevari.

* * *

Nock broadcasted his holostreams soon after the entire party left—after he showed us what he had put together, of course. It was impressive, not in his usual style at all.

"I didn't think the Kred had any respect in him at all, but that was... pretty good," Zaarek said.

"Pretty good?" Nova raised an eyebrow. "Come on, it was great. And you better tell him that, too."

"Tell me what?" Nock entered, munching, as always, on his Oreos, which had quickly become his entire nutrition intake. "Lady Silla brought them. I think I'm in love," he grinned.

"I'm not sure if I'm more in love with Nock or the Oreos," Daisy said, following Nock and giving him a kiss on the cheek. "I think these are better than the real thing."

Nova boxed Zaarek hard in the ribs, and after a grunt, Zaarek mumbled, "Your holostream was pretty good." Nova boxed him again. "Alright, it was great !" he elaborated, widening his eyes and silently pleading with Nova to quit boxing him.

"Really?" The Kred beamed, "Thank you! That means a lot coming from you. Thank you, Zaarek."

Nova raised her eyebrows at Zaarek again in a See, I told you so way, and I turned my face so my brother wouldn't see me snicker.

"Good job," Raasla grunted, taking Zoe by the hand, rising. Ready to leave for the night.

"Hold on, we still need to discuss what to do." Sloane stopped him, and with a groan, he sat back down, pulling Zoe onto his lap.

We all knew what Sloane meant.

Nock was about to leave with Daisy in tow, but Sloane called him back. "Wait, you and Tucker get a vote in this, too. You might not be Darlams, but without you, we wouldn't have been able to find them or this planet."

Appreciative grunts followed. She was right. Both Nock and Tucker deserved a vote in this.

"I told you when I assumed command that important decisions would be up to all of us, that we are a democracy. Now that we have had some time to think about it, I need to know your votes on waking the others."

"Wait," Hannah rose from her seat. She looked paler than normal. "I need to say something first."

Tharaax placed an encouraging palm on her shoulder. "Zapharos didn't return all my memories, just what I needed to see. In my vision, the group of Arkhevari that landed on Darlam was made up of fifty couples. A ship dropped them off and left. They didn't bring any technologically advanced things with them, nor did they share their knowledge with the Darlams. They sought out different towns and simply lived with them. Over time, their children grew and mated with Darlams; some bore the Soulglyph webs, others didn't. But the ones who did were revered over all others.

"From that, a priesthood grew, and several generations later, I became a part of it.

And... this is so hard," Hannah twisted her hands.

"Keep going, sweetie, you're doing fine," Zoe encouraged.

Hannah smiled gratefully at her. "I didn't know any better. I swear I didn't."

"It's okay. You don't have to do this," Luph said, rising and wrapping her arms around her.

"No, I do. I really do. Like I said, I didn't know any better, but I was part of the priesthood that preached about Soulweb Glyphs. I was one of the ones who believed with all my heart that everybody was destined to find their Soulweb Mate, that no other love was acceptable." Hannah swallowed, and her tears threatened to spill over. "I was part of the group that made people run to Shade's Vale."

"You didn't know any better," Sloane said in her no-nonsense voice. "And now you can change things."

"I want to, so very much." Hannah nodded.

I cleared my throat, "Hannah, if I've learned one thing through all this, it's that none of these things happened by accident. It was always fate that dictated our path. Always. You had your beliefs, and so did we. We all believed the same. People made their own choices. Do I think it was terrible that Darlams had to choose like this and move to Shade's Vale? Absolutely. But you know what? If it wasn't for Shade's Vale, hardly any of us would be left."

I paused. I had never spoken like this before, and I didn't like that everybody was staring at me, but Alice was holding my hand, and that was enough. "We counted twenty-eight Darlams the other day, but I think there are more of them, a lot more, because a group of twenty-eight can't sustain a village or thrive as a population. That

they are there is a miracle. Their ancestors would have been killed or captured like all of us had they lived out in the open."

Hannah's glassy eyes met mine. "Do you really think so?"

"Yes," I nodded. I did.

"Thank you," Hannah said, and by her expression, it was easy to see that she wasn't just saying it; she meant it. A slight smile tugged at the corners of her lips.

I shook my head, "I wasn't saying it to make you feel better. These are facts, and?—"

It was my turn to get elbowed by Alice. "Stop while you're ahead," she cautioned, and light laughter erupted from our group.

"Alright, anything else?" Sloane asked.

"Yeah," I surprised everyone, "I want to say that having learned all this, I vote to wake the others up. I don't feel right making a decision like this for others; it makes me feel like one of the Ohrurs, but we are left to sort out their mess, and I think every Darlam has a right to forge their path. Allowing them to keep sleeping... for however long? What, until we find enough human females who we think might be their mates?" I shook my head. "Again, that makes me feel like we are taking their lives away just like the Ohrurs did."

"Damn straight, brother," Zaarek nodded. "I vote to wake them too."

The vote was unanimous, and we decided to figure out how to proceed the following day.

"I'm proud of you," Alice said on the way to our quarters.

"I'm proud of you, too," I told her, pulling her into my arms. "You are the most amazing female I've ever met."

She tried to laugh it off. "I don't know about that. There are some pretty amazing women aboard this ship."

"None as amazing as you," I reiterated and pushed her against the wall to look her in the eyes so that she would see the truth.

"You're pretty amazing yourself." She smiled.

"Don't do that."

"Don't do what?" She pulled up her brows, creasing her forehead.

"Don't belittle the things you have accomplished. You are the most wonderful person in the entire universe."

Just then, a small maintenance drone passed us. Instead of moving straight forward, though, it moved in a zigzag pattern.

"One of yours?" I smirked down at my mate.

"Well, how amazing am I now?" She challenged.

I put both of my hands flat against the wall, caging her head in. My forehead moved down until it met hers. "Still the most amazing female in the entire universe," I doubled down.

She smiled up, "I love you."

Just before my lips brushed hers, I said, "I love you too, Alice. I love you with every beat of my heart."

ALICE

A lot of work lay ahead of us, but within months, we built the first settlement. Not in the ruins of the others, but something new that included all the technology that was now available to us. We called it Dawnsfire. It didn't follow the traditions of the old towns, but that was on purpose. People shouldn't be called by the name of their town, nor should they be bound to it. Everybody was free to come and leave as they pleased. Over time, the entire population of Shade's Vale joined us. At first, they came to trade, but when they realized that we were changing things for the better, they began to settle.

This was mostly thanks to Hannah, who spread the word that Soulweb Glyphs were not the mark of the gods but simply a symbol between two lovers that declared their love for each other.

Waking seven thousand four hundred and eleven sleeping Darlams had been quite an undertaking. One Zoe and Luph excelled at. Their calm, patient, and loving demeanor helped the Sleepers—as we called them for now—get through the rough times they experienced. Contrary to us Space Guardians, the Ohrurs had never trained these Darlams. They had slept for a long time, but their memories hadn't been fully erased. No headaches had been subliminally planted. But that also meant they woke fully aware of their losses, their grief fresh and raw.

Sloane, Vraax, and Tucker left to dish out some vengeance with the Ohrurs. Supreme Commander Xandros had given them a small fleet to support the underground forces and to help the Luminial Union regain control of Ohrur. Women's rights were restored, and the underground city rose to reclaim the top. I didn't imagine that it was

easy for any of them, but soon, Ohrur would be a peaceful planet again; I was sure of it.

Craygh had been given to Lord Hyugh to punish as he pleased, and last I heard, Craygh was languishing in prison. Our two other prisoners, Possedion and Moddek dum, were both executed, along with any other Ohrur we found in their facility before we burned it to the ground. The boxes have been returned to as many of their original owners as could be found, and Xyrek proudly wears his bracelet again. The ones whose owners didn't survive are now at Hannah's new temple, serving as a graveyard and a reminder of everything we had lost.

Sloane and Vraax found every last Space Guardian in the Ohrur employ, and they all joined our growing town. I had an idea of what they did to the cloned Space Guardians raised by the Ohrurs, but I didn't ask for confirmation—some things are better left unknown.

Nova and Zaarek settled on the outskirts of town, by the swamplands. They're not as big as in Louisiana, but they're impressive and big enough for the two to vanish occasionally.

Nock and Daisy came to visit us not long ago to make another holostream about Darlam. Both work for the imperial couple as their personal streamers, but both also still work their own gigs. They looked so happy together that it made me happy, too. I've never been one for having friends, and now I have so many, an entire village, and it swells my heart.

And Xyrek and me?

Well, I just gave birth to the second baby in Dawnsfire—Zoe had the first a few months ago. Turned out that we created her the first night we made love on Darlam.

She was perfect in all ways, from her silvery skin to her green eyes. She was only a

day old, and she already had her dad wrapped around her little finger.

"I think her hair will be red," Xyrek said, lying next to me.

"I'm sure she'll be beautiful either way," I said, fighting tiredness. The birth had been relatively easy, only a few hours, and the aliens did have some great meds for pain. Step to the side, morphine, you just found your match. Still, I was exhausted. Ready for a nap. But lying there, with Xyrek next to me and our new daughter in between us, was more happiness than I could have ever hoped to experience. It was a dream come true, one where I still had to pinch myself occasionally just to make sure I wasn't dreaming.

"I love you, Alice." Xyrek looked up from our daughter. His dark eyes gleamed with pride and happiness.

"I love you too, Xyrek," my heart expanded with the words, like they always did. Looking at him made me realize I was the luckiest woman in the universe.

"Have you thought of a name yet?" He asked.

Hannah told us that Darlam mothers usually heard their daughters' voices at some point during or after delivery, telling them the name of their soul. But so far, I hadn't heard anything.

I was about to confess my growing worry over the silence when a young woman's voice suddenly whispered in my mind: Oscianna. It was so familiar that it brought tears to my eyes. "Oscianna," I whispered. "She just told me."

"Oscianna," he repeated with a gleam in his eyes. "I like it."

I closed my eyes and let myself drift into the quiet, undeniable joy that now surrounded me. For most of my life, I'd been content playing the supporting

role—fixing things behind the scenes, helping others shine, never stepping fully into the spotlight. But not anymore.

This was my story now. My ending. My happiness. And I was finally ready to be the main character in it.

THE END of the Space Guardian Series

Thanks for reading the Space Guardian series.