



HISSA  
WARRIOR



# DEFENDING REVIN

RK MUNIN

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## **Translation:**

Don't steal the stories I worked so hard on, and occasionally cried over.

Don't get upset at the absolutely made-up story lines: this is a romance, so of course it isn't realistic, duh! Don't be petty and hate on it because it isn't your kink. We've all got different tastes and there's no shame in that.

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**Thank you to all my readers!**

## **Defending Revin**

**After a lifetime of slavery, Kamaril is finally free. She just wishes she understood what it means to be free.**

Kamaril has spent her life as a slave, raising and tending the fierce minari pets the family sells and trades as a matter of prestige. As a Decanted human, she was originally created and shipped off as part of a breeding pair. When the Decanted male didn't survive the trip to the Anavac planet far from human-controlled space, and the wealthy family couldn't get a replacement right away, they turned to raising minari instead. She's spent her entire life surrounded by the fierce creatures, living each day devoted to their care.

Then one day, a group of males from a species she's never seen arrive. The next thing she knows, her ownership has been transferred, and she's leaving the only home she's ever known, as well as the precious minari that are as close to family as she's ever had.

These men call themselves Hissa and claim that she isn't a slave anymore. They say she could have a child if she wants one. That she's free. But she finds their ship overwhelming and the attention of so many unnerving. Then she meets Revin, and life on board the ship isn't so difficult anymore.

Revin would give his life to protect any of the Decanted women, but Kamaril makes him want to surrender his heart. He doesn't only want to protect her, but he also wants to hold her tight and whisper soft words in her ear. He wants to find out how to make her smile and spend his nights curled around her in a warm bed.

He wants so many things, but he worries that her life as a slave has made her unable to refuse him anything. How can he make sure she wants to be with him rather than agreeing because she perceives him as safe?

It will take an unexpected attack and dire circumstances before Revin truly understands how strong Kamaril really is.

# CONTENT WARNING

- One of the main characters is a slave at the beginning of the book.
- There is an instance of abuse (owner against slave) in the first chapter.
- There are fight scenes depicting graphic violence, including minari (square-headed, six-eyed, dog-like creatures) fighting the enemy.

## **DEDICATION**

Thank you, Etta! You forced me to participate (despite my kicking and screaming) and then I had fun. I'm your partner-in-crime from now on, there's no getting rid of me!



# CHAPTER 1

## Kamaril

The minari in the kennels at the front of the building went quiet, a clear sign that something new was happening outside. If it was one of the Anavac owners, they'd be chirping with annoyance. The minari didn't like their owners. Silence meant they were undecided if what they were seeing were enemies, edible, or both.

Kamaril needed to get to the front of the building before anyone tried to interact with a minari and potentially lose a limb. Despite the very real danger of someone being injured by the animals she raised, trained, and cared for, Kamaril delayed for a moment to praise Cloud.

"You did very well, little mother," Kamaril cooed to the minari, unwilling to get up and leave her. The four-legged beast responded to her words by huffing out a little breath and rolling two of her six eyes up to Kamaril. With no fear of those sharp teeth embedded in a powerful jaw, Kamaril leaned over and put her face close to Cloud's wide, flat head and placed a small kiss on the female's snout. The beast gave Kamaril a lick across the cheek with her rough tongue, then lowered her head back down, closing all her eyes and relaxing her body with a little huff.

She'd finished giving birth not long ago and was rightly exhausted. Her three perfect pups were burrowed into the pouches on her belly, greedily suckling. The helper females brought in to assist Cloud during birth were snuggled around the mother, nudging her and licking her with their long tongues and petting her with one or more of the prehensile tentacles on their necks. In the wild, the females acted as both midwife and guard during and after the birth. Here, they saw Kamaril as the midwife minari, so their only job was comfort givers and guards.

"I'll be right back," she promised Cloud.

None of them were happy when she stood up and ducked through the kennel doorway. The new mother sounded

a forlorn howl as Kamaril closed the gate behind her. Cloud's howl caused the helper females to start howling, their distress spreading to the minari in the nearby kennels. She knew from experience that all the minari would start howling the moment she left the building. Even though she knew they'd all calm the moment she was back, the sounds still broke her heart.

She straightened to her full height, almost touching the ceiling of the building the kennels were housed in. The kennel structure, along with all the other buildings and facilities on the compound, were all designed for smaller Anavac bodies. None of her owners stood taller than her shoulders, and most were far shorter. At seven and a half feet tall, she'd been told she was tall for a human because the Anavac family deliberately requested large, robust specimens when they'd put an order in for a pair of Decanted humans.

It would be ridiculously easy for her to crush one of her owners, especially with all the muscle she'd developed over a lifetime of caring for the many minari entirely by herself. Very much like her minari, she was an owned creature with an obedience collar around her neck that meant her owners weren't intimidated by her height in the least.

Besides, even if she had freedom, where would she go? This compound and the minari were the only life she'd ever known.

Careful to avoid a low beam, she walked to the front of the kennels. She was almost there when she heard Ti calling out for her.

"Kamaril! Kamaril present yourself!" Ti shouted, clearly excited. Ti tended to handle all the sales so she could only assume there was a buyer here to look at one of her precious minari.

Most of the Anavac family didn't like the minari. They'd been the passion of their matriarch, who had grown old enough to remain indoors most days. Kamaril worried for the day the woman died because the family probably wouldn't keep breeding minari. What would happen to her?

Ti's yelling pushed her to break into a run, sprinting the last distance to the door and out into the bright sunlight. She stumbled and almost fell when she saw two unfamiliar figures standing next to Ti. One of them reached out to steady her, but she flinched back, and he dropped his arm to his side.

They were a species she'd never seen, and she was shocked by their size. They were both taller than her, making it the first time she'd ever looked up to meet someone's eyes as an adult. It was a novel experience.

They might be as tall as her and a similar shape, but they didn't have human coloring or features. Although not the same shade, they were both green and with no visible hair, unlike her long white hair held back in a loose braid that ended at the small of her back.

There was a scale pattern starting at a point between their eyes in a V shape that extended out and took up most of the top of their head. It looked like they might have long canines peeking out from under their upper lips. She curled her fingers into fists to keep from reaching up and lifting a lip to see.

Then she noticed their eyes. She'd spent a lifetime looking at her hazel eyes or Anavac eggshell-blue sight orbs, making these stranger's lilac-colored eyes fascinating.

While she'd been examining them, they'd been doing the same thing to her, and now they had identical expressions of intense disgust on their faces. It made her want to turn tail and run back into the safety of the kennels.

She'd heard talk that humans were rare outside their own solar system. When families came to look at minari to buy, they often stared at her and asked Ti or one of the other family members questions, as if she was also a beast who couldn't answer for herself. She learned to play dumb and just accept it.

Trying to ignore their displeasure, she gave them both polite bows. To her surprise, they responded in kind.

“What took you so long?” Ti demanded, his sight orbs twitching with annoyance. He spoke in Space Standard, probably because these strangers didn’t speak Anavac, and he didn’t want them to feel excluded.

“I’m sorry, Master Ti,” she responded in Space Standard, giving him a much lower bow. “Cloud just gave birth, and I was caring for her pups.”

“Pups?” he asked, body relaxing.

Kamaril smiled broadly. “Yes sir, two males and a female.”

“Are they all healthy?” he pressed.

“Yes, and the female has the spotting you’ve wanted to breed into them. It’s a beautiful red pattern.” She pointed at the open door to the kennel building. “Would you like to see?”

“I’ll look later,” he told her dismissively. Using the bristles at the top of his head, Ti gestured to the two men with him. “They’re here for you.”

Kamaril’s brows knitted with confusion, and she looked at the strangers. “Do you want advice about minari? Or do you need to add new animals to an existing bloodline? If you tell me what you have, I can recommend good matches.”

The men looked at each other and then back at her. “Can I see the side of your neck please?” one of them asked, taking a small step forward. Unsure but eager to be helpful, she turned her head, but the man frowned. “No, the other side.” She turned her head again, and the man gave a small sound of satisfaction.

“She has the Decanting scar?” the second man asked.

“With her hair braided back, it’s easy to see,” the first man confirmed. Feeling deeply uneasy, Kamaril took a small step back. Why did they care if she was a Decanted human? Weren’t they here for minari?

“I can speak several other languages if you wish to talk more fluidly in something other than Space Standard,” she assured them, hoping it was only a language issue. “I speak

Anavac, Niemo, and Old Delean. I know all the minari terms in many other languages too, so I can help you to understand what bloodlines could help grow your pack.”

“Do you speak Hissa?” the first man asked.

She shook her head regretfully. “I’ve never heard of that language. I’m terribly sorry.”

The man dismissed her concern. “Don’t worry yourself. Space Standard is fine.”

“Very well,” she said with a forced smile. “Would you like to follow me into the kennel? We can talk as you view our stock.”

“We aren’t here about the minari. Our species doesn’t raise them,” the second one said. “We are Hissa, and we are here to collect you and take you to our home.”

Facing the men, Ti began talking. “I’ve been informed that her hair color is unusual for a human that isn’t advanced in years, but I assure you she is perfectly fit. The dark spots on her face are called freckles and don’t affect her performance at all. As you can see, she’s strong and healthy. She’s also respectful and normally quick to obey commands. The only thing I should warn you is that you must give her clothing to cover her skin. Exposure to too much sun will damage her, although she will still work through the damage if you forget.”

Her eyes flew to meet Ti’s happy sight-orbs. The way his bristles flattened told her he was ecstatic about this arrangement. Fear hit her. Life with Ti and his family wasn’t easy, but they mostly ignored her, and she got to live and work with the animals she loved. She didn’t know what these strangers wanted from her, but if they didn’t have minari then she was of little use.

“You’re selling me?”

“I’ve already sold you,” Ti confirmed. “These Hissa are collecting Decanted humans. They paid an excellent price for you.”

Fear gave way to terror. “Please don’t sell me! I promise not to fuss any more when you sell a minari. I

promise!” She dropped to her knees in front of Ti, grabbing one of his hands.

He jerked away from her. “Obedience 1,” he hissed out.

His order caused her collar to deliver a hard shock, making her gasp, jerk violently, and fall like a felled tree. She landed badly on her side, hitting a rock against an old injury, but the pain from the collar was too intense for the discomfort from the fall to even register.

She’d received enough obedience shocks over her life to know she needed to focus on her breathing. Eyes closed, she worked to pull breath into her lungs while the sound of scuffling went on around her.

“Kamaril?” It was one of the Hissa.

Opening her eyes, she found him crouched next to her, his face looming over her. Forcing her body to remain still to keep from getting any more punishment, she rolled her eyes to see the other stranger holding Ti, one massive, muscled arm around the Anavac’s chest and a large hand over his mouth.

“Do you think this one can take off her collar?” the Hissa holding Ti asks the one kneeling next to her. Why would they want to take her collar off? They could just have Ti key it to their voices instead of his.

“Bring him,” the male next to her growled out, then turned his attention back to her. “My name is Sarin, and this is Tilin. We aren’t going to hurt you so please don’t fight us. We only want to keep you safe. Do you know if this Anavac can remove your collar?”

She nodded her head, surprised these men didn’t know that anyone who controlled a collar with their voice also had the power to take it off or lock it back on.

“How does he take it off? Does he need to speak?”

She avoided looking at Ti. “He needs to place a finger-stem over the control box and press for ten seconds. It will verify his identity and open.”

Sarin nodded and moved out of the way so Tilin could force Ti to the ground next to her. The Anavac looked murderous. If the Hissa wasn't covering his mouth Ti might've ordered the collar to kill her. Tilin whispered something into Ti's ear. Whatever Tilin said was effective because Ti's bristles went limp in fear, and he reached down to press one long bony finger-stem to her collar until it unlatched.

The moment it was unlocked, Sarin snatched it off her and broke it into several pieces, tossing them away with a satisfied grunt. Tilin released Ti, who moved away from the three of them with an angry hiss.

"How dare you!"

"You didn't need to hurt her," Tilin said, voice gruff. "She was just scared."

"She's my property to do with as I see fit!" Ti screeched, so angry that spittle ran down his flat, bristle covered face.

"Not any longer," Sarin retorted. "You signed the contract. She's ours now."

Kamaril sat up and ran a shaking hand over her naked neck, feeling numb with shock. Ti and the family sold her. These two men owned her now. They were going to take her away, and she'd never see her minari ever again.

Even worse, they took off her collar. Why would they do that unless they had other, worse methods of punishment?

"Don't be scared, Kamaril," Sarin whispered to her. "You're safe. I promise on my honor."

"Get yourself and this slave off my property, and off the planet," Ti screamed, every bristle on his body standing on end and making him look slightly bigger.

"You need to leave," she urged Sarin. "They're the most powerful family on this continent. They could demand a battle of honor."

Sarin grinned, showing off his teeth in a clear threat display. "I accept!"

She wasn't ready to die yet and if they stayed within reach of Ti, none of them would survive. He'd make sure these two Hissa died first and then he'd end her life because she'd been witness to his humiliation.

"I don't think you understand. You're not Anavac so Ti doesn't have to fight fair." Sarin's grin disappeared as he finally understood the danger they were in as Ti stalked off, shouting for his assistant.

He turned to Tilin. "We need to leave."

Tilin responded by tapping a communicator in his ear and saying something in his native language. Soon, a small transport shuttle landed in the field next to the kennels.

"I can carry you," he offered. "Or you can walk."

"I can walk," she assured him. Sarin nodded and stood, holding his hand out to her. She grabbed his hand, impressed when he easily hauled her bulk off the ground and to her feet.

All the minari were howling now, demanding her attention. They'd heard her pain. They could smell her distress. They wanted to protect and comfort her as much as she wanted to run back and comfort them.

"Hurry," Sarin said, forcing her attention away from her precious minari. Her only family.

Tilin was already at the shuttle, opening the door and climbing in. With a hand on her back, Sarin ushered her up the short ramp. To her relief, the inside was tall enough to accommodate her height. Sarin was right behind her, the ramp sliding up behind him. As she watched, the hatch slid soundlessly closed and cut off all the sounds and smells of her home.



## CHAPTER 2

### Kamaril

“Sit here,” Sarin ordered, pointing to a seat. She sat, and he leaned over to strap her in, then took the seat opposite her.

A third Hissa in the pilot’s position shouted over his shoulder. When Tilin barked a command at him, he repeated his question in Space Standard. “Is she well?”

“Her mind seems intact, and her body appears healthy,” Sarin responded. At least this was familiar territory; being talked about as if she wasn’t there.

“We need to hurry!” the pilot said. “I’m going to have to push hard to make it out of the atmosphere before the travel-shutdown grace period is up, or we’ll be stuck here. Make sure she stays in her seat. There could be bumps.”

Sarin turned his attention back to her. “Even if you get scared, you shouldn’t move until I tell you it’s safe. Jonic is a good pilot but he might need to make evasive maneuvers.”

“I’m very obedient,” she assured him. “My old masters were almost always happy with me. I can please you too.”

“We aren’t your masters,” Sarin growled, the scales on his head darkening to almost black.

Kamaril flinched. What did she say to that? Hadn’t they bought her and taken her away without asking her permission? That’s what owners did.

“Apologies,” she whispered, dropping her gaze to her lap.

“I’m not angry with you.”

She risked a glance up to find he was still scowling, but his scales hadn’t returned to the bluish green of before. He might not be angry, but he wasn’t pleased either. Uncertain what to say, she fell back on familiar patterns and remained silent.

The shuttle bucked around them a little and the pressure changed slightly. As an adult, she'd been off planet only once before, accompanying two minari and assisting their new owner with acclimation and training. It had been the most fun she ever had, even if she'd missed her pack.

This time, the change in pressure reminded her she'd never see them again. It all happened so quickly; she never got a chance to name Cloud's pups. Not to mention all the other little things she did for the minari every day to make sure they stayed healthy and happy. Who would take care of them if not her?

"You're a Decanted human grown specifically to be sold into slavery. Did you know that?" Sarin asked, breaking the silence.

"I know. I was sold as a set, and we were put in cages for the trip. The male died in transit. I arrived here alone."

Sarin looked outraged. "He died in transit?"

"Yes, but I didn't know that until I got here because our cages weren't housed in the same place. The family wanted a breeding pair and tried to purchase another male, but the company was backlogged, and it would've been a year before they could grow and ship another out. The family didn't have the patience to wait so they gave up on humans."

Sarin's outrage was replaced with surprise. "They told you all that?"

She shrugged. "Over the years, I found out what happened by overhearing their conversations with visitors. They wanted to breed humans to sell as pets but had such bad luck they decided to breed and train minari instead. It made sense to keep me in the kennels to care for the pets that replaced me. It was a little hard at first, learning to take care of minari. They can be aggressive to strangers. But I was never bitten so badly that I couldn't do my job." She smiled proudly, excited to share her value. "I'm very strong and capable with minari. I could learn to work with other animals, but it might take me some time. I'll labor night and day for you, and I don't need much sleep. If I'm allowed to hunt, you don't have

to provide much food. You'll never be disappointed in me, I promise."

She hoped her words would assure Sarin and the others that they hadn't wasted their money on her. She heard Ti comment often enough that when she got too old to work, they'd sell her to the market for exotic meat. She didn't know if it was an empty threat or even if such a place existed, but it was better not to find out!

To her disappointment, Sarin's expression didn't change and the two other Hissa snarled and spoke loudly in their language. Their harsh sounds made her jerk violently in the seat. Her future wouldn't be a comfortable or safe one if she couldn't figure out how to keep these confusing new masters happy.

Sarin spoke rapidly in Hissa, and the two other men went quiet. He turned his attention back to her. "No one here is going to hurt you. I know you have no reason to believe that, but it's the truth."

"I'm a very good slave," she babbled. "I don't usually question or talk back. I promise."

"You're not a slave," Sarin reminded her. "That's why we took off your collar."

If that's what he wanted to pretend, she could as well. "Thank you for my freedom. It's been very nice so far."

"I doubt that," he muttered, then spoke louder. "Do you hurt anywhere? You have scars on your neck. Do they cause you pain? There are skilled menders on our ship. They'll want to examine you to make sure you're fine, but that can wait a bit if you're not in any pain now."

She touched the scars on her neck self-consciously. "I'm not in pain. These are old. I grew fast and sometimes they didn't change my collar out often enough."

There were more growling/angry sounds from the pilot, but Sarin didn't have to yell at him this time. Tilin smacked him on the shoulder, and he shut up. Kamaril was familiar with corporal punishment, but the Anavac were small,

and their slaps, punches, and kicks only bruised her. These Hissa might break a bone if they hit her.

This was terrifying. All she wanted was to be back in the kennels and sitting with Cloud. Shutting her eyes, she wished with all her heart she'd wake up and find this was all a dream. When she opened her eyes, Sarin was watching her with an uncomfortable level of focus.

“Do you have any questions for me?”

“No.” She waited to see if answering in a minimal way would help or hurt her with these unpredictable and angry Hissa. No one growled or shouted, but Sarin still looked upset.

“I know there must be questions, but you're probably not ready to ask. Don't be afraid to voice your thoughts when you're ready. Time will show you that we mean you no harm. Are you hungry?”

She was always hungry. The quantities of food the Anavac gave her would be enough to feed one of them, but nowhere near enough to keep her sated. She learned to supplement her meals with hunting when she was out running the minari, but she wasn't able to do that today because Cloud went into labor.

As much as she wanted to say yes, was this offer of food a trap?

When she didn't answer right away, Sarin pulled in a deep breath, his scales shifting from black to brown and finally to a dark blue. “You must be overwhelmed. When we get to our ship, Steadfast, you'll have a cabin to yourself and plenty of anything you might want. I promise you this is the beginning of a good life.”

He called out to Tilin, who tossed a bag back. Sarin easily caught it and set it in his lap. After rummaging around, he pulled out several packets and reached over to hand them to her. She took them cautiously, unsure of what they were.

“If you're starving, you can eat those until we're on Steadfast. They're ration packets,” he explained. “They aren't

very tasty, but full of calories and nutrients. These are calibrated for humans.”

Hunger was making her feel shaky. She’d never dealt with this type of packaging before, causing her to fumble with one of the ration packets until Sarin plucked it from her fingers and showed her how to tear it open, then handed it back.

“Thank you,” she mumbled, barely remembering not to say the word master. Expecting it to be dry and tasteless, she took a cautious nibble off a corner. Flavor she’d never experienced exploded in her mouth.

Afraid the treat would be taken away if they realized how much she liked it, she crammed the entire contents of the packet in her mouth and almost moaned. She didn’t notice Sarin staring at her with wide, surprised eyes until she’d finished the third packet of food.

She must’ve disgusted him with her poor eating habits and lack of control. Bracing herself for his reprimand, she crumpled the empty food packets up in one hand and dropped her eyes.

“I’m sorry, Master Sarin,” she whispered, hoping he wouldn’t deny her in the future because of her poor behavior now.

He got out of his seat to kneel in front of her. After plucking the empty packets from her hand, he dumped three more full ones in her lap.

“Try very hard not to use that word,” he reminded her, his voice soft as he took his seat again. “Eat as much as you like but try not to make yourself sick.”

She nodded quickly, relieved he wasn’t upset and ecstatic that he’d given her more packets. Her stomach felt almost too full, so she tucked the food packets in one of her pockets for later. They could give her these packets for every meal, and she’d never complain.

“Those were the chocolate-flavored ones. Mian told us human women tend to like that flavor especially,” he

commented after tucking the empty packet wrappers into the bag Tilin had tossed him.

Sarin continued to talk about the ship and their future journey. It seemed important to him to repeatedly tell her she was safe and would be well cared for. Kamaril listened with half an ear and kept her expression neutral, all the while enjoying the rare pleasure of having a full stomach.

All too soon, they docked with a much larger ship. The three of them surrounded her, walking her off the shuttle and down a series of long corridors. Occasionally, she caught a glimpse of other Hissa or the sound of faraway voices; otherwise the ship almost seemed empty.

They led her to a room with a bed, table, and several chairs. One wall had an oversized media display with a large, empty food storage cabinet next to it.

“This is your room,” Sarin said as the other two Hissa left. “If you need anything, press that pad next to the door and someone will answer. It’s important you communicate with us.”

“I will,” she lied, remaining in place and pivoting to follow Sarin as he showed her the room’s amenities.

“Here are the facilities for elimination and cleansing,” Sarin said, tapping a door open. “Our re-filtration systems are very good, so spend as much time in here as you like. All the products in there are safe for human use and in scents other human women have told us are pleasing.”

Leaving that door open, he took a few steps that put him next to a stack of clothing on a short table. He gathered the clothing up, looking annoyed. “This was all for you, but I can see none of them will be big enough. Don’t worry, we’ll find some that’ll fit you.”

She glanced down at her own clothes. There weren’t any holes, but they were faded and a little frayed. When he sniffed and rubbed his nose, she realized he might be smelling the minari on her. Judging by the expression on his face, it was a displeasing smell to him. After so many years of working

and living with the animals, she found their smell familiar and comforting. This must be why he was making a point of telling her that she could bathe for a long time, he wanted her to wash the minari stink off.

“I’ll bathe,” she promised. “And wear what you bring me.”

“If you like,” Sarin said, standing stiffly in front of her, then nodded his head at the door to the room. “No one can open the door except you and a few other individuals with override codes. We won’t post guards outside your door unless there’s an incident or you request them.”

What was the point of guards? Where would she run away to? They were on a ship!

Sarin pointed to the pad next to the hatch and continued his instruction. “Contact us for an escort if you want to leave the room. The menders will be eager to see you, so we’ll give you a warning and reminders about appointments on the door pad. Expect a delivery of food and clothing soon.”

She thought to ask for more ration packs but lost her nerve as Sarin kept speaking.

“We will be back in Hissa in about nineteen cycles or so, then there’ll be other human women for you to talk to. Many Hissa look forward to meeting you here on the ship and later when we get to our homeworld. Please don’t be afraid. Your future will be good.”

“Yes, Ma—” she just stopped herself from saying master. “Yes, thank you.”

Sarin looked like he wanted to say something else, but then tapped his fingers over his heart, turned and left. Kamaril watched the door close behind him, unsure what to do. This morning, she was helping Cloud give birth and looking forward to a quick late afternoon run with the pack. Now everything she’d ever known was gone and she would never see her precious minari again.

Moving to a far corner of the room where the bed hid her from sight, she sank to the floor. Tears flooded her eyes

and flowed down her face even as she muffled her sobs against her knees. Curling up in a ball, she rocked and cried herself into a fitful sleep.



## CHAPTER 3

### Kamaril

The mender frowned at her, stopping her in her tracks only two steps inside the large, well-lit medical bay. His scales had been blueish-green when the door first opened, but now they were a dark blue with hints of brown. Not only was the mender upset, but everyone else in the room was scowling with scales all going darker.

All she did was walk into the room and she made everyone here mad. This was both fascinating and frightening.

Before she could offer to leave, the mender turned his angry gaze to Sarin. “Why is she wearing this outfit? Don’t we have anything nice to offer her?”

Kamaril looked down at her clothes. What was wrong with them? The top fit her perfectly and the pants were only a little big. There were plenty of pockets for her to use, and both articles of clothing were soft and clean. She even liked the dark blue color of the shirt and lighter blue of the pants.

The Anavac had a strict dress code depending on your wealth and political status, so maybe she was wearing the wrong outfit for her status? She looked at Sarin since he was the one who’d provided her with a stack of clothing earlier.

Sarin didn’t look at her but frowned back at the upset mender. “We expected her to be the size of an average human female, not as big as a Hissa.”

“Male clothes are all that will fit her,” Tilin added. “We’ll have an entire wardrobe made back on Hissa, but for now, this is what she’ll have to wear.”

“I guess these will have to do.” The mender sighed and turned back to Kamaril. “I’m sorry, you should be wearing much better clothes.”

She bit her lip and didn’t respond. She was sure that no matter what she said, it would be wrong. Thankfully, the mender started talking again.

“My name is Mender Honil,” he said, tapping on the data pad in his hand. “Please sit on this bed here,” he said, pointing to an exam table not unlike the ones the Anavac used. Once she was sitting on it, Honil started speaking again. “I’m going to take some samples and do a full body scan. Are you in any pain or discomfort?”

“No pain,” she answered, feeling that this was a safe topic. Her side hurt where she landed yesterday after being shocked, but it was so mild it didn’t even occur to her to mention it. To her, pain meant she couldn’t perform her duties. At the moment, her body was well enough to do all her normal tasks.

The mender turned to another Hissa in the room and gestured him forward. “Favil, take a blood sample. Don’t take it from her neck, there’s too much scar tissue there. Maybe her shoulder or arm.”

Favil stepped toward her holding a small instrument with a vial attached. “Hello, I’m a med tech. If you could please bare your shoulder for me, I can take a small blood sample. I promise it won’t hurt, and I’ll only touch you for a brief moment.”

Without hesitation, Kamaril pulled the wide, scooped neck of the shirt over to bare one of her shoulders. Favil pressed the mechanism to her skin, and she felt pressure but nothing else. Fascinated, she watched the vial fill with red liquid. When he took the instrument away, there was no trace of it being there.

“Thank you,” she said with a smile. She’d only seen an Anavac doctor twice and both times were painful and humiliating experiences.

“Do they hurt?” Favil asked, staring at the scars on her neck.

“No,” she answered, her smile dimming. Why did they all stare at the scars? It made her wish she still had the collar on.

“Get that sample in the analyzer,” Honil ordered Favil. The med tech moved quickly to a machine in the far corner as Honil spoke to her. “I need you to lie down for a few minutes.”

Obediently, she laid on the table, glad to see it was long enough to accommodate her and closed her eyes against the bright lights overhead. A large machine mounted in the ceiling over the bed came to life as the mender talked.

“This won’t hurt, but I need you to remain still.”

“Should I hold my breath?” she asked.

“That’s not necessary,” he answered. “Simply warn me if you need to move.”

She closed her eyes and concentrated on keeping her breathing even. Now that Honil asked her not to move, it felt like all her body wanted to do was twitch and shift. She should’ve asked how long this was going to take. It might’ve made it easier to remain still.

The mender’s voice filled the room. “There’s an old break in her arm, but it looks like it healed well. There is another old injury to her lower ribs on the left side I don’t like the look of, but I’ll examine that more closely later. All functions appear normal and within healthy ranges. Her bones are surprisingly thick, and she has a large number of muscles. Not enough body fat though.”

The machine went quiet, and someone patted her arm. She opened her eyes to find Honil hovering over her. “You can sit up now.”

He stepped back to give her room to sit up and swing her legs to dangle off the side of the bed. That was when she noticed someone new had entered the room and this new arrival caught her attention in a way none of the other Hissa had. He possessed the same green skin, blueish-green scales, and lilac eyes as everyone else, but when their eyes met, she felt *seen*.

Sarin, Tilin, Mender Honil, and Favil didn’t really see her. They talked over her and gave her orders in the form of requests. Even worse, they were always scowling, sounded

upset, or both. This Hissa didn't look angry or upset. He didn't address the mender or any of the other Hissa in the room first. He waited until she saw him and then slowly tapped his fingers over his chest.

“Greetings, Kamaril. I'm Revin, one of the Hissa assigned to you.”

His eyes didn't drop down to look at her neck or her clothes. They remained fixed on her face, his expression pleasant and kind. Everything about this male made her feel calmer.

She was unsure of the proper verbal greeting among the Hissa. She wanted Revin to speak again, so she risked using an Anavac greeting while mirroring his gesture by tapping her fingers over her heart.

“It's my good fortune to meet someone who is strong enough to resist the wind, but wise enough to take shelter.”

Revin's gentle smile became wider, his sharp canines on prominent display. “That is a lovely greeting, Kamaril, but you should tap your fingers here,” he said, pointing to his neck. “I can teach you all the different places to tap and what they mean later.”

“Yes, that would be nice, thank you,” Kamaril replied. She wanted to talk to Revin, ask him all the questions she was too scared to ask anyone else. She wanted to be near him and bathe in the calm assurance that radiated from his body.

Sarin addressed the new arrival. “Revin, what brings you here?”

“You're needed on the bridge,” Revin explained. “I'm here to take your place.”

Sarin moved to stand next to Revin, and they spoke too softly for her to hear.

“Do you know if you've had any vaccinations?” Mender Honil asked, drawing her attention away from the two just as Sarin nodded his head and turned to leave.

“I don’t know,” she answered honestly. She wasn’t sure what a vaccination was. She filed it away as something she’d ask Revin about.

The mender looked at Favil. “Give her a full course. We can give her the boosters just before landing.” Favil started opening cabinets to gather things while the mender continued asking her questions.

“Have you ever had children?” Honil asked next. She wasn’t sure why, but the question made her blush.

“I never had a male to breed with,” she admitted. “I was bought as part of a breeding pair, but the male died, and they couldn’t get another one.”

Honil glared and Favil glanced over his shoulder with a deep frown, their scales dipping back into the black register, Tilin’s scales turned brown bordering on black, and he growled loud enough to make her flinch.

Their strong reactions made her curse herself for adding more to her answer than strictly necessary. She’d managed to upset these two with nothing but a few simple facts. She wanted to look over at Revin but was scared his calm had been an illusion and he might have the same angry expression.

She hunched her back and hugged herself. Suddenly, she felt cold and uncomfortable. As much as she didn’t want to go back to her small, lonely room, she didn’t want to stay here with all these irritated males either.

“How disgusting,” the mender muttered as he reviewed something on his data pad. He didn’t look up before starting to speak to her again. “Your body composition is off for a human female. Too much muscle, not enough fat. Is your menstruation consistent? That means do you bleed between your legs at regular intervals?”

“Does she really need to answer these questions now?” Revin asked. His objection to the question made her look up. Unlike Honil and Favil, he wasn’t angry or disgusted and even

gave her an encouraging smile before moving his gaze back to Honil.

“What do you mean?” Honil asked, looking puzzled but not angry.

Revin’s voice was deep and calm as he spoke to the mender. “We recovered her yesterday afternoon. She hasn’t even been among us for a full cycle. We don’t know what she’s been through. A mind mender should talk to her before we bombard her with intimate questions. This session should only be about checking her overall health.”

“No, you’re right, that’s not important right now,” the mender agreed, looking a little embarrassed. He gave her an apologetic look. “Ignore my earlier question. You can talk to someone on Hissa about all that.”

“Thank you?” The words came out as a question because she didn’t understand what was wrong about the mender’s inquiry. She’d been taught to read and write specifically to record and monitor the minari fertility and bloodlines closely. She’d never tracked her own because she didn’t have any male to pair up with.

Did his question mean they had a human male for her? Did they plan to breed her like the Anavac had originally wanted to do?

The idea of breeding with an unknown male was scary, but it would be worth it if she could have a baby of her own to love. Even better, they kept telling her she was not a slave anymore so she might even get to keep the child. She could have a little family of her very own!

“How did you break your arm?” The mender’s question pulled her out her happy thoughts.

“I was acting badly,” she explained. “I climbed into a tree with a pup because they were going to kill it. When they triggered my collar, I fell out of the tree.” The incident happened when she was still young, before she learned how to hide the runts of the litter and fool the family into letting all but the sickest of pups live.

Thinking of her minari washed away all her earlier joyful excitement. What would happen to all those pups now that she wasn't there to protect them? Cloud's pups were safe, but Sturdy was newly pregnant. Would Ti hire someone soon enough to see to Sturdy? Even if they were competent minari keepers, they wouldn't know that Sturdy would want Red, Gap, and Worthy to be her birth mates. They wouldn't know that Sneak liked to be scratched on his chest and Tubby wouldn't eat unless you sat down and pretended to eat with him.

She thought she'd shed all her tears last night, but her watery vision told her differently.

"Does the memory upset you?" Revin asked.

Taking a steadying breath, she forced back the tears and tried to smile for him. "No, it was a long time ago, and they set the arm and it healed, so I'm fine."

"Barbaric," Favil spat.

Confused by his insult, Kamaril worried Favil saw her action as an unsavory level of disobedience. She tried to reassure them. "After that, I was a much better slave. I was never willful again."

Favil muttered something angry, and the mender jabbed at the data pad with a growl. It was becoming apparent that she wasn't answering them correctly. Maybe they wanted her to thank them more for buying her?

"Everything is better now," she said, watching Honil closely. His expression didn't change. She tried again. "My cabin has a bed, and the ration packs Sarin gave me were really good. It's all much nicer here."

There, that should do it!

Favil's expression turned outraged. "Have you been eating ration packs?"

She wanted to sigh with frustration. Why was he so upset? If they didn't want her eating the ration packs, then why did Sarin give them to her? These Hissa were impossible to please.

Giving up, Kamaril tilted her head down and let her long hair create a visual barrier between her and the room.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered. Favil started talking about what types of food she should be eating while at the same time Honil tried to ask something regarding her ribs. She felt crowded by their voices and battered by their displeasure. It was getting harder to understand their words, even though they were speaking Space Standard.

She felt both overwhelmed and trapped.

Then the voices went quiet, and no one was standing next to her anymore. A single finger breached her curtain of hair and drew it to the side to create a small vertical opening revealing Revin’s face.

“Kamaril?” Revin’s voice was gentle and soft, caressing her ears and making the sensation of being crowded lessen. “Is there too much going on at once?”

He understood! Not only did Revin smile and not get angry, but he could see her growing unease. He was reading her like she could read the minari under her care. It made her feel secure.

She leaned in a little closer, whispering to him. “Everyone’s so upset.”

There was no anger on his face at her comment. If anything, his expression turned slightly sad. “We aren’t angry at you. We’re angry for you.”

She was bewildered. “Why?”

“The things done to you are abhorrent to us,” he said, pulling his hand away from her hair and straightening up. To keep him in sight, she was forced to raise her head and let her hair fall to the sides.

The other Hissa had stepped back to give her and Revin space. They were watching her with confused expressions. Good, it was about time someone else was puzzled besides her!



“So they hate me because I have an abhorrent past?” she asked. She tried to keep the question quiet so no one else would hear, but the shocked sounds they made told her Hissa hearing might be as good as a minari.

“But we don’t hate you at all! We could never—” Honil started to protest but went quiet when Revin looked over at him.

“Let me explain,” Revin said to the mender, then focused back on her. His scales didn’t change color from the blueish green, his gentle smile didn’t waver, and those lilac eyes made her feel seen and understood. Revin gave her a similar sense of security as she had when nestled in the center of the minari pack. Unable to help herself, she reached out and grasped one of his hands in both of hers.

“Please,” she whispered. “I want to understand.”

## CHAPTER 4

### Revin

The last thing Revin expected was for Kamaril to voluntarily touch him. She might be the largest and strongest Decanted woman they'd recovered so far, but that didn't mean anything. She was almost as timid and fearful as Lara, a Decanted human who'd been badly abused in the past.

As much as he hated that she'd been grown and sold at the equivalent human age of six years old, he could understand that slavery was the only life she knew. His fellow Hissa were expressing agitation and outrage at her past experience, but she didn't know anything else. She was clearly distraught and confused at their reactions to her attempts at being a good slave.

He'd tried to remain quiet, planning to speak with her later. Watching her head dip down and her shoulders slump pressed him into action early.

Now she was looking up at him as if he had the answers to the universe.

"You see all the angry faces and you think it's you," he said, sweeping a hand around to indicate the room. His words caused both Favil and Mender Honil to suck in sharp breaths in shock. Tilin didn't make a sound, but he was clearly surprised.

"We aren't angry at you!" Honil said in a voice only a decibel or two shy of shouting, accompanied by a fierce expression.

"We are angry that bad things were done to you," Favil added at a far more reasonable sound level, but his mouth was twisted into a scowl. Tilin remained silent and gave Revin a nod of encouragement.

Kamaril's eyes bounced from Honil to Favil before resting her gaze firmly on him, as if she was scared to make eye contact with anyone else. "They keep frowning and being loud."

“We only want to make you safe and happy,” Revin assured her. “From now on, Honil and Favil are going to keep their tones in check and smile more. You’ll see, they’re both very friendly.”

“Yes,” Favil agreed readily, stepping a little closer with a tray full of drug guns in his hand. “I’m known for making others laugh. Ask anyone.”

“My daughter told me I gave the best hugs,” Honil said, moving to stand next to Favil.

Kamaril pulled her eyes away from Revin to look at Honil. “You have a daughter?”

“I did,” Honil said, sadness pulling at his mouth down. “Until the Great Death took her.”

Kamaril probably didn’t know what the Great Death was, but she looked mournful. “It’s hard to lose a child. None of Cloud’s first litter survived, and I almost lost her. I cried for days.”

“Cloud?” Honil asked.

“One of my minari,” Kamaril explained. “Well, not mine because we were all owned together. I guess I should say my pack because they saw me as one of them.”

Revin’s gaze shot to Honil, and he was ready to tell the mender not to overreact to Kamaril’s explanation. It turned out he didn’t need to because Honil’s scales didn’t turn brown or black, but stayed a normal, neutral shade.

“The minari were your family?” Honil asked, in a gentle tone that let Revin relax. It seemed the mender understood the assignment. “How many were there?”

“Twenty-one,” she stated proudly. Kamaril still held onto one of his hands, but her grip had eased a little. “Cloud’s new cubs make it twenty-four. You should’ve seen the babies! One of them has these dappled spots my owners have wanted to reproduce for years. She’s going to be so handsome when she’s all grown up.”

As Kamaril spoke of the minari her face lit up with happiness and she rubbed several of her fingers against his palm, as if petting him.

“We’ve disrupted your entire world, haven’t we?” he murmured, then gave her an encouraging look. “Tell me about your pack.”

Kamaril didn’t hesitate to launch into a detailed description of each minari, including any unusual markings or personality quirks. As she spoke, Honil and Favil discreetly continued the exam. They interrupted her occasionally to ask questions, then urged her to resume what she’d been saying. It worked brilliantly, and the intimidated, quiet woman of earlier vanished, replaced by a vibrant and animated version of Kamaril.

Through it all, she refused to let go of his hand, even going so far as to lift it up in one of hers to demonstrate the size of something. When she wasn’t using her hands to help talk, she went back to rubbing and petting his hand in hers. Revin tried very hard not to read anything into her touch. She was daunted by her new circumstances, and he was a stable place for her to cling. It didn’t mean anything more than that.

Except he couldn’t keep his dick from responding to her touch. She might as well have shoved her hand down his pants based on his cock’s reaction. He thought he had more self-control than this. He’d been wrong.

“I’m going to need help here, Diminish,” he prayed under his breath.

“Who’s Diminish?” Kamaril asked, stopping her story mid-sentence to regard him with worry.

“Diminish is one of our moons,” Favil explained. He must have heard Kamaril but not Revin’s earlier statement or he’d probably be giving Revin a stern look. “The other moon is Brimming and then there is the Unseen moon, but we don’t talk about that one.”

The humor of the situation helped Revin gain a little control over his libido while Kamaril asked about the Hissa

moon deities. Favil's recitation of the Hissa origin myth took up the rest of the exam time. As he finished telling the story of Brimming and Diminish saving the Hissa from the Unseen Moon, Honil set down his data pad and spoke up.

"You're a healthy human woman, Kamaril," he announced. "I'm going to study the scans and test results a bit more, but I don't see anything of imminent concern."

Biting her lip, Kamaril regarded him with a furrowed brow. It was clear there was something she wanted to ask. All three of them watched in silence, hoping she'd voice her question. Then she shook her head and dropped her gaze. She must have used up all her courage for the day.

Honil released a breath. "If you don't feel well in any way, you need to contact medical immediately. It's important you let us know if you're in pain or discomfort."

"Yes, I will," she promised.

Revin knew she was lying. It would have to be extreme circumstances before she'd voice a request. Kamaril didn't know how to advocate for herself yet so he needed to be her voice when she couldn't bring herself to speak.

She let go of Revin when Honil urged her to stand up. She didn't look as fearful as when they first came in, but she didn't look as lively and confident as when she spoke about the minari. It was a stark and sad difference.

"I'm going to escort you back to your room," he explained, leading her into the hall, Favil and Honil calling out their goodbyes behind them. She didn't say anything as she fell in step at his side, Tilin falling in behind them. The other warrior kept silent and stayed far back then disappeared altogether. Revin was about to stop and go looking for him when his data bracelet pinged with a message from the missing male.

*I'm worried that my presence will cause Kamaril distress. While we were in medical, I tried to stop scowling, but I couldn't. I'm going to report to Bayin and see if he needs help with anything. I'll remain on alert to assist you if*

*necessary. Keep working your calming magic on Kamaril. She even smiled a few times back at medical. It was good to see.*

Revin wrote a quick message of thanks to the warrior then focused back on Kamaril. As they walked, he pointed out a few features of the ship and kept their pace moderate. She asked him a few generic questions that felt like appeasement more than interest, but it was nice to hear her voice.

The moderate pace slowed as they got closer to her cabin, but not because of him. Soon they were moving at a similar speed to a glacier, and she started to look apprehensive.

He didn't think she was in pain or fatigued. Was there something in her room that was bothering her? It was one of the nicer cabins, but perhaps she was struggling with the environmental controls or needed a softer bed?

When they finally reached the door, she stood there staring at it until he pointed to the display on the wall next to it. "You need to press your fingers there to open the door. Did Sarin explain the rules?"

"Um, yes," she said, putting her fingers to the display. She was slow to drop her hand and walk across the threshold. "The room is my safe place, and no one can come in or out without my permission. Unless it's an emergency."

He followed her in, desperate to figure out why she sounded so forlorn. Then he noticed the empty food storage units. Usually they provided the human women with more food than they could ever finish. There should've been containers full of food in the storage units, not completely empty space.

"Did you eat everything they brought, or did you throw away anything you didn't touch?" he asked. "It's fine to throw away food, but we need to know if you're finishing it all so we can make sure you get enough."

She looked confused for a moment before flushing. He wasn't sure if the rush of red on her face and neck were from fear or embarrassment.

“I’m sorry!” she cried out, rushing across the room and pressing open the door to the disposal in the wall. Before Revin could act, she reached in with one arm and her head. By the time he recovered from surprise, she emerged from the waste catch with several empty ration pack wrappers in her hand.

“Sarin said I could eat them,” she said, presenting them to him as if they were of great significance instead of common trash. “I know I shouldn’t have eaten them all for breakfast, but they tasted so good.”

Revin accepted the wrappers and noted they were the flavor Deena, Mian, and Mouse said tasted the best. “Sarin gave these to you for breakfast?”

Hugging her arms around herself, she stared at his hands. “He gave them to me yesterday on the trip from the planet to here. He said I could have as many as I wanted but not to eat too fast and make myself sick.”

Finally Revin started to understand what happened. “No one delivered food last night? Not even a droid delivery?”

“I thought that was my food,” Kamaril said, pointing to the wrappers.

Reaching past her, he dropped the wrappers back into the disposal and then smacked the button to send the wrappers to the ship’s reconstitutor. Rubbing a hand over his scales, he worked on keeping his annoyance at the crew from affecting his face or scale color.

“There’s been some kind of mix-up,” he explained. “You should’ve gotten trays of food last night and this morning. The ration packs Sarin gave you were only meant as a snack.”

The tension in her shoulders eased. “I liked the ration packs. They tasted good!”

“You think they taste good?” he asked, making an exaggerated expression of disgust. “They’re barely edible!”

She giggled at his reaction. The simple sound of joy resonated through him, making a genuine smile tug at his lips.

One packet was enough calories for a small meal so three must've been enough to satiate her for dinner and breakfast. It was good that Sarin was so generous with the inflight snacks or Kamaril would've gone hungry.

"You might like the ration packs, but fresh food would be better for you," he explained. "I'll bring your lunch and dinner personally."

She smiled. "I get to see you again?"

"I'm one of four warriors assigned to guard you on our journey back to Hissa," he explained. "It's our job to make sure you're happy and safe."

"I like your smile," she said shyly.

For a moment he was confused, then realized it was his lack of scowl or loud voice that caused her to favor him in the first place. "I like yours too." Her face heated again, and he thought it was embarrassment. Unsure if this was a positive or negative sign, he changed the subject.

"You can always call for me using the ship's comm system," he said, pointing to the doors interface.

"That contacts you?" she asked, looking at the display.

"It can contact anyone you want. Me, Mender Honil, or the galley." He tapped it a few times to show her how to use it. Her brows furrowed as she paid close attention, as if being able to use the ship's comm was a matter of great importance.

"Does being able to contact me make you feel better?" he asked after she understood the system.

She nodded her head but didn't say anything. Her lackluster response worried him.

"Dealing with Mender Honil and the medical bay must have been tiring," he offered, hoping she'd give him an insight into what was going on in her head. "I'll leave you to take a nap. I'll return with food."

It was only because he was watching her so closely that he saw a fretful expression flash across her face before she dropped her gaze to the floor. "Yes, thank you."



Giving himself time to assess the situation, he pivoted in place to take in the room. It was a standard size for the Steadfast. Except for the lack of any personal items, it looked like every other room on the ship. Tidy, sparsely furnished, and lacking in any kind of color or vibrance, this place could be any generic cabin on numerous space stations or ships.

Her earlier slow pace made sense now. She had to be used to far more sensory input and activity, so this room might as well be a prison cell for her.

“It’s very plain in here,” he commented.

“It’s a very nice room,” she offered without much enthusiasm. It struck Revin that she couldn’t complain. Slaves that complained or were troublesome were punished or sold. She’d been trained her entire life to ignore discomfort and probably even pain.

It was going to be tough to teach her to act otherwise.

“All the rooms are nice,” Revin agreed, trying another tact. “But that doesn’t mean anyone wants to stay housed in one all the time. What did you normally do during the day? What was your daily routine?”

A relieved smile graced her lips. “In the morning, I fed the minari, then cleaned all the kennels. After that, I checked on the nursing mothers or pregnant females. Then I cared for the sick or injured. After those chores were done, I’d take the pack on a run until dinner. After dinner, I’d check on everyone again, and groom them until I was tired.”

“That’s a lot of work. You must be used to a lot of physical labor,” Revin murmured. “There are no pets on this ship to care for, but I can take you for a run. It won’t be as pretty as the Anavac planet, but you might find some of it interesting. It would be a good way for you to learn your way around the ship.”

“Yes, a run would be nice,” she agreed quickly, her expression lighting up.

He’d dressed in his normal work clothing, consisting of plain but sturdy pants, and heavy boots designed to deal

with any number of textures and dangers. They were good for walking or standing guard all day, but if he was going to take Kamaril for an extended run, he wanted to change to lighter shoes.

As he looked down at his boots, he realized for the first time that she wasn't wearing shoes. How had none of them noticed before?

"Where are your shoes?"

Kamaril bit her lip and regarded her bare feet. "I've never worn them before. The ones Sarin brought with the clothes hurt my feet. Perhaps someone else can make use of them. I only wore them for a little while, and I was clean. Is it against the rules to be barefoot? No one said anything, so I thought it was fine. Please don't tell anyone!"

Cursing himself for a fool, Revin was quick to smile at Kamaril. "Don't concern yourself. You're not breaking any rules. If you like going barefoot we won't make you wear shoes."

"I can still run?" she asked, shifting from one foot to another as if anxious to get moving.

"Of course, but will you let me look at your feet after? I want to make sure the metal plating on the ship isn't doing damage. It's a different substance than you're probably used to running on."

She waved off his concern. "I run on the stone beaches back home, and I never get cuts anymore. Unless you have floors made of knives, I'll be fine."

It was hard to keep from wincing at the images of her feet being abused during a run, but he did like the way she spoke so candidly to him.

"Unlike you, I'm far too delicate to run barefoot or in these shoes," he explained with a self-deprecating chuckle. "We need to go to my cabin for shoes."

She blinked at him. "But you're wearing shoes."

“Different shoes,” he said with a full laugh. “This way.”

## CHAPTER 5

### Kamaril

She got to stay with Revin!

The thought of going for a run sounded nice, but remaining close to Revin was the real reason she was excited. He asked her a few questions about running with the minari as they walked. Explaining minari social structure kept her occupied all the way to his cabin.

She was surprised that it was the same size and layout as hers. She'd assumed they'd put her in something smaller and less well-appointed than everyone else. The only real difference was all the clothes and personal items strewn about the living space. Almost every flat surface was covered and there were piles in various places on the floor. Heaps of clothing, gear, and items she couldn't even begin to guess about covered much of the floor space. He had so many possessions; the cabin was overflowing with them!

"You must be very wealthy," she commented as he dug around in a pile near the bed and pulled a pair of shoes free. They looked smaller and lighter than what he was currently wearing. She'd pictured him pulling on a pair of shoes over what he was wearing, but it looked like he didn't need extra shoes, but different shoes. These must be specific for running. How interesting!

"Why would you say that?" he asked as he sat on the bed and toed off his boots. While he did this, he followed her gaze around the room. "I'm not more or less wealthy than every other Hissa. I'm just messy."

"But you have so many things." She ran her fingers down a long-sleeved, high-neck shirt hanging off the back of a chair. The dark fabric gleamed as it moved, shimmering like oil on water.

"There really isn't that much here. It's just what I packed quickly to join this trip." Standing up, he stretched his

arms over his head to touch the ceiling and arch his back. “Do you like that shirt?”

Guilty, she drew her hand away and stepped back. Looking down at the floor, she tucked her hands behind her back. “I didn’t mean to touch your fine things.”

“Touch anything you want.” She looked up in time to see his scales dip into a shade of purple she hadn’t seen before, then return to their normal blue. Coupled with his expression, she’d guess he was flustered. But why?

Plucking the shirt off the chair, he held it out to her. “You can have it, if you like.”

Among the Anavac, refusing a gift was a severe insult, but what if the Hissa were like the Onsurate, and you were supposed to refuse all gifts?

Unsure of what to do, she accepted the shirt and clenched it between both hands in a tight ball. “I don’t have anything to give in return and no influence to wield on your behalf.”

“Kamaril, please look up,” Revin demanded gently. She raised her head to find his lilac eyes regarding her with gentle encouragement. “The shirt is a gift, not a bribe or a transaction. You don’t need to give me anything in return. The thought of pleasing you makes me happy.” Suddenly, he grinned at her with real humor. “Some would think you’re doing me a favor. You’re reducing the mess in here by one shirt!”

She smiled tentatively back at him. “I could clean for you. I’m good at keeping things tidy.”

His smile vanished, and he looked a little panicked. “Absolutely not! If you went digging around in here, you might find something incriminating.”

Unsure how to respond to that statement, she busied herself by tucking the shirt into one of the large pockets in her pants. “Thank you. I promise to treasure it.”

Revin snorted. “It’s only a shirt. Wait until I give you something really nice.”

Nice? He didn't consider the beautiful shirt nice? Between the chocolate ration packs and this shirt, she was receiving more gifts in two days than she had in a lifetime. Feeling disoriented, she was tempted to request Revin walk her back to her cabin so she could process better.

Revin's expression turned flat. "I've made you uncomfortable. Let's run before I say something worse."

He led her out of his cabin and to the center of the empty corridor. Moving his neck back and forth a few times, he rolled his shoulders, then looked at her. "Do you normally stretch first?"

At her confused look, he chuckled. "I guess that answers my question. We'll start with a slow pace. We'll run side by side. If the corridor is full or busy, you can jump behind me. If you don't feel well or need a break, just stop."

"Yes, I'll do that, thank you."

He nodded once, then started a slow run. She fell in step next to him, finding it easy to match his stride. It wasn't long before she felt her muscles warming and the pleasant buzz of exercise lifted her mood.

The only problem was the smooth flooring of the ship. Despite the thick calluses on her feet, she found it was slightly slippery. She had to concentrate on keeping her stride even and her traction in check as they moved from corridor to corridor. Still, it was easier than running over water-covered rocks near the riverbank with the minari.

Unlike the corridors outside her cabin and medical, these hallways weren't empty. When they passed, men would stop to stare at her. She was careful to put herself behind Revin and drop her gaze to her feet, only returning to his side when the path was empty again.

News of their run must have spread through the ship because soon it was obvious men were gathering in the hallways specifically to watch the two of them run by. She felt their eyes on her, and she'd occasionally catch a glimpse of

anger, disgust, or a longing expression. It made her self-conscious, but Revin was ignoring them, so she did too.

To combat her unease, she stopped trying to run next to Revin. Staying behind him made her feel protected and sheltered from the attention. Revin didn't comment when she stopped moving to be at his side. Without breaking pace, he'd occasionally glance over his shoulder to confirm she was still with him. Every time, she'd give him an encouraging smile to show she wasn't winded or interested in stopping.

After a time, she realized that Revin was incrementally increasing their speed. It was a simple matter of lengthening her stride to keep up. Eventually, they were flying down the halls, passing the other Hissa too quickly for her to see their expressions.

It felt good to push this hard. It reminded her of chasing after the pack when they'd caught the scent of prey. She could almost imagine the sounds of them, their clawed feet digging into the earth and heavy breathing.

The joy of it made her push herself back up next to Revin. Side by side, they hit a steep ramp. He slowed a bit, so she did as well. Worried that he was getting winded, and the run might end soon, she didn't stop when the ramp ended at a short set of stairs, even when Revin halted.

Kamaril felt too exhilarated to check her momentum. Timing her steps, she pushed off hard. Her leap was strong enough to clear the stairs, and she made a triumphant sound at the feeling of her feet hitting solidly at the top.

Breathing hard, she suddenly realized she'd gotten ahead of her keeper. Stumbling to a stop, she pivoted in place and kept her eyes downcast.

"I'm sorry Master Revin," she said quickly, sweat trickling down her face and stinging her eyes. "I didn't mean to out stride you. Please don't make me stop running yet."

"Don't call him master!" a voice roared from behind her, making Kamaril flinch. Moving on instinct, she dropped to her knees and put her forehead to the smooth metal floor.

She finished the act of supplication by tucking her arms under her, like the Anavac do when lesser individuals kowtow to those of greater social status.

Her entire body started shaking at the sound of heavy footsteps storming in her direction. She braced herself for a blow. Instead, she heard the rustling of clothing and then a gentle hand on her back.

“You’re not in trouble, Kamaril. Please sit up,” Revin requested. Her hair had come loose during their run so when she tilted her head up, most of the world around her was obscured by the white strands. She could see him, though. Revin’s gentle expression was a balm to her frayed nerves.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered. “I didn’t mean to cause offense.”

“What’s she doing on the floor?” the same voice demanded, his tone loud enough to bounce off the walls. He was close now and there were other Hissa gathering around them and voicing concern.

Revin turned his head to growl at the male. “You scared her, Damen.” His hand on her back was gentle as he spoke angrily to the other Hissa. “And you’re still scaring her.”

Kamaril wanted to press herself against Revin, maybe even crawl into his lap. Knowing it wasn’t appropriate but still needing more contact, she slowly uncurled an arm out from under her. He was partially leaning forward using his right hand to hold his weight while his left rested on her bowed spine. Reaching out, she pressed one of her hands over the one he had braced on the floor.

Sitting back a little, he pulled his weight off his hand and turned it over, inviting her to hold him more firmly. She tangled her fingers in his, immediately starting to feel better. Revin was here, and he’d protect her from the other Hissa’s anger.

“I didn’t scare her,” Damen scoffed, dropping to his knees next to her. “Kamaril, are you injured? Has Revin been



neglecting his duties while pretending to own you?”

Terrified that any answer she gave would cause more problems, she put her forehead back to the floor and didn't respond.

“What are you even doing making her run like this? It's all over the ship that you two have been at this for an hour! We only rescued her yesterday. What are you doing here, holding her down so she can't look at me? Get your hands off her!”

The last sentence was voiced in a roar, then Revin was ripped away from her. Gasping, she sat up to see Revin under Damen. The other male had the advantage, but Revin was deflecting all the blows.

“Revin!” she cried out. Part of her wanted to defend him, but she was scared that the punches and strikes he was effectively blocking would be turned on her.

Men crowded around her, obstructing her view of the fight. They all started speaking at once.

“Kamaril, are you injured?”

“Stay were you are, we can fetch a mender and techs to help.”

“Don't be scared, no one will hurt you.”

Resisting the hands trying to get her to lie down, she scrambled on hands and knees through a sea of concerned males to find Revin had switched places with Damen. They weren't hitting each other anymore. Locked together with arms and legs, their bodies twisted and wrestled for control of the altercation.

She looked up at the faces who'd moved to surround her again. “Save mas—Revin! Please!” she begged. None of them moved to intervene.

“He's fine.”

“Let them get it out of their system.”

“Damen’s been in a foul mood for a while. He needs to run more triads.”

“It’s more important we know what’s wrong with you,” one said, kneeling in front of her. She was thankful that none of them tried to touch her, but their lack of concern for Revin was shocking.

When she heard Revin grunt with pain, tears gathered in her eyes. He was the only one who understood her. He was kind and gentle, she couldn’t lose him! Even worse, it was her fault this was happening.

If these other Hissa weren’t going to help Revin, then it was up to her.

She didn’t know how to fight, but she was large and strong. Maybe if she launched herself at Damen, she could knock him away from Revin. He might hurt her, but she could live with the pain, she had before.

“Damen, Revin, break it up, you’re making Kamaril cry!” the man who’d knelt in front of her yelled over his shoulder. Several Hissa waded into the scuffle and pulled Revin and Damen apart. The moment Revin was free, Kamaril scrambled over to him, putting herself between the two men. Sniffing back her tears, she dropped into the supplication pose again, facing Damen.

“It’s my fault. I didn’t mean to cause offense,” she sobbed, wishing more than ever she’d stayed in her room after finishing at the medical bay. “I’m sorry for what I did wrong, please don’t blame Ma— Revin.” She just barely stopped herself using the word master again.

“This is what the Anavac taught her,” Revin announced from behind her. She heard him move, and then his warm bulk was next to her. He put a hand close to her body, inviting her touch. She grabbed it with both of hers, desperate for reassurance. “Please sit up, Kamaril. I promise no one is angry, and we all find this posture very upsetting.”

His words make her jackknife up into a sitting position. She moved so fast she almost hit him in the face with

the back of her head.

“She’s fearful, like Lana,” someone murmured.

“But she trusts Revin,” another pointed out.

Damen ignored the other Hissa and sneered at Revin. “I don’t know what you’re playing at Revin but making her call you master is wrong. Moon preserve us, look at her scars! How could you do this to her? She needs rest and comfort, not an exhausting run through the ship.”

All eyes dropped to her neck, and she almost let go of Revin to cover the scars with her hands.

“I’m sorry.” Her voice didn’t sound right, and it took her a moment to realize it’s because she was still crying. “Sarin told me not to call him master, and Revin too. I forgot. Don’t be mad.”

“We could never be angry with you,” Damen assured her, his voice low and gentle. The change in his attitude was so abrupt she looked up at him, startled. “You’re safe here. We’re going to look after you. All of Hissa will protect you.” He moved his eyes to Revin, his lips twisting back into a scowl. “We’ll even protect you from those Hissa who think to take advantage of their position.”

To her relief, the crowd spoke up and most were on Revin’s side.

“I think you’re overreacting, Damen.”

“She looked happy when she passed me earlier.”

“Some of the other Decanted humans have struggled to adjust after we retrieved them.”

“Revin didn’t touch her until after she dropped to her knees.”

Damen ignored all of them as he got to his feet. “Sarin will hear about this.” After that declaration, he sent Revin a last glare, and then stomped off.

Revin regarded the Hissa around him. “I think Kamaril would feel better if there weren’t so many eyes on her.”

The men were quick to move away and soon the section of hallway was empty except for the two of them.

“Did you hurt yourself when you dropped to your knees?” he asked.

She gaped at him. He’d been in a fight, and he was worried about her? “I’m not in pain. But he hurt you!”

Revin grinned and pointed to a spot on his face that was scraped raw. “This is nothing.”

“I’m sorry,” she said, feeling like a broken machine.

“Me too,” he agreed. “Would you like to walk, or should I carry you?”

Confused as to why he’d be sorry, she latched on to something practical she could do. Scrambling to her feet, she braced and tugged at their joined hands. He grunted with surprise and flowed to his feet with her help.

“You’re strong,” he murmured. Was that admiration in his voice? Did the Hissa admire strong bodies, or was it Revin only?

She wanted it to be Revin. “I could lift you and probably carry you for some distance.”

“I have no doubt,” he said as he turned to walk them back the way they’d come. “Tell me more about your duties with the minari. Maybe we can design a triad course for you to run that would mimic some of your activities.”

She didn’t know what a triad was but by the time they reached her cabin, the tears were gone, and she’d filled his ears with stories of her pack. She tried to tug him inside, but he shook his head.

“I need to go to the galley and find out why your food wasn’t delivered and report to Sarin,” he explained. “But I’ll be back soon with lunch.”

“Could lunch be more chocolate ration packs?” she requested boldly. Revin made her feel like she could ask for anything!

He chuckled as pulled his hand free of hers and urged her through the open cabin door. “Maybe for dessert. Go bathe and relax, I’ll be back soon.”

Kamaril was still smiling even as the door shut, leaving her in the room by herself. Tugging the shirt he’d given her out of her pants pocket, she held it to her face and breathed in. The smell of Revin filled her nose. She wanted to wear it now but not with so much sweat drying on her body.

She’d bathe, then put on Revin’s gift. She would be surrounded by his comforting scent while she waited for him to return with chocolate. Except for Damen, today was a good day.

## CHAPTER 6

### Revin

Silently cursing Damen's blundering intervention, Revin walked briskly to Sarin's office. He needed to tell Sarin what had happened before finding Kamaril food and more chocolate ration packs. Hopefully, the meeting would be quick, and he'd be back with Kamaril soon.

Maybe he could even talk her into walking to the exercise room so they could put together obstacle courses that would better simulate her daily runs with the minari.

He wanted to see the same joy on her face as displayed while they were running. When he'd gotten to the stairs, he'd thought to give them a break and assess how much longer she wanted to continue. The look of joy on her face when she'd jumped to the top and shouted out a laugh had made his chest fill to bursting with delight. It was the first real happiness he'd seen her express.

Then Damen heard her call him master and rushed to condemn Revin. He could understand Damen's outrage, but the warrior should've let Revin speak up or at least assessed Kamaril before speaking with such force. After she dropped to her knees, Damen should've backed off and realized he was causing Kamaril's distress.

Unfortunately, Damen was a prime example of Hissa overreaction. They were so desperate for women that they tended to overlook even the most obvious indicators. Not all the Decanted women they found needed to be rescued. Many were living successful lives as traders, pilots, or farmers. It made the warriors forget that some of the Decanted humans came to them with trauma. They couldn't all be treated the same.

There was one thing all the Decanted human women had in common—they could successfully breed with Hissa males.

After a plague wiped out all their women and half their men, the Hissa thought they were a doomed species. They couldn't make the human Decanting technology work for them and weren't breeding compatible with any other species. Then several warriors stumbled onto the answer when they met and formed relationships with Decanted women. It turned out the scientist who developed the Decanting technology decades ago mixed a little Hissa DNA in with the human, making the Decanted women breeding compatible with the Hissa.

Knowing the Earth Government wouldn't approve, the corporation sold their grown slaves on Mars. When their government discovered them and raided the Mars facility, it triggered a series of reactions that ended with the compound's total destruction. The Hissa's only hope was to find all the Decanted women still out there, and possibly the human scientist who'd developed the technology in the first place. She'd left the program when she realized what was going on and seemed to have disappeared, but there was still hope she was out there somewhere.

Revin's data bracelet pinged, and he looked down to see a command from Sarin. He winced at the tone of the command and quickened his pace to Sarin's office. It didn't take long for him to get there. The door slid open to reveal Damen, pacing the length of the small room with a thunderous expression on his face. Sarin sat behind his desk, watching Damen with an annoyed expression.

They both looked at him as he entered, Sarin with relief and Damen with fury. "Tell him," Damen demanded. "Tell him what she said."

Trying to ignore his rising temper, Revin met Sarin's gaze. "She was flustered and called me Master Revin. She didn't mean to and was probably about to apologize for forgetting when Damen jumped in and scared her."

"I didn't scare her," Damen's outrage was palpable. "And what he isn't telling you is that she got on her knees. As if she was still a slave. And as if that wasn't bad enough—"

Revin was rapidly losing control of his temper. “She did that because you frightened her with your loud voice and temper.”

Damen continued as if Revin hadn’t spoken. “Having her call you master is unforgivable.” He turned to Sarin. “I demand Revin be taken off guard duty rotation and no longer allowed near the female.”

Sarin’s expression was tired instead of outraged. “She called me master too,” Sarin told Damen. “I watched her struggle to stop calling me master. She’s used the title her entire life, it comes naturally to her.” Sarin moved his gaze over to Revin. “What did you say to her?”

“I told her she wasn’t in trouble, and no one was mad at her.” Revin threw Damen a frustrated look. “I don’t think she believes me because this one was yelling and then jumped on me. The next thing I knew, we were fighting.”

“I wasn’t yelling at her. I was defending her from you!” Damen’s voice was loud enough to make Sarin wince and Revin itched to knock the loud man unconscious if nothing else than to give his ear holes a rest.

“It doesn’t matter if you were yelling at her or not,” Sarin jumped in before Damen could continue his tirade. “All interactions around her should be calm and composed. What kind of impression are you giving her if you attack the male protecting her?”

That brought Damen up short. “What?”

“Even if the violence wasn’t against her, it was happening around her. That could be enough to send her into a panic. Think about it, Damen. How often are slaves abused simply because they’re in the wrong place at the wrong time? All it might take is some yelling to make her fear for her safety,” Sarin said, rubbing a hand over his forehead and down his face. “I wish we had enough mind menders to have one on board every ship, but addressing her mental health will have to wait until we’re back on Hissa.”



Damen opened and closed his mouth a few times before he finally spoke. "I didn't realize," he whispered before slumping down in a chair. Bracing his elbows on his legs, he leaned over and buried his face in his hands. He mumbled a few things before raising his head to look at Revin. "You weren't holding her down?"

"Never," Revin spat out, taking the other seat. "I was trying to make her feel secure enough to at least look at me. She was shaking from fear because you were yelling."

If possible, Damen looked even more devastated. "What can I do?"

"Help me with the crew," Revin suggested. "We need to stop frowning around her, and no raised voices."

"Raised voices makes sense, but frowning?" Sarin asked.

"She thinks all the scowling we do when we see her scars is out of anger," he explained, only to be cut off by Damen.

"But we are angry," he pointed out, sounding confused.

Revin fought to keep his temper in check. His face still stung from Damen's attack and the man's lack of understanding was fraying the tenuous hold on his calm. "Yes, but she doesn't understand that the anger isn't directed at her. I watched her when Menders Honil and Favil examined her. They were constantly frowning, making her more and more anxious."

"You want me to ask people to smile at her?" Sarin asked hesitantly. Said out loud, Revin had to admit it sounded like a strange request.

Surprisingly, Damen didn't find it odd at all. "Yes! We should all be greeting her with cheer and smiles. Our faces should reflect the happiness she'll find in her new life with us!"

"I'll talk to a few people to spread the word. It won't take much, all the men wish to garner her attention," Sarin

said, then addressed Revin. “Is there anything else we can do to make her feel better?”

“You’re not going to like this next idea,” Revin warned him.

“Anything, just tell us,” Damen demanded. “We can do anything she needs. Has she asked you for something specific? What is it?”

“She raised minari her entire life. Lived with them and cared for them,” Revin started, and Sarin snorted with distaste.

“Don’t remind me. She reeked when we found her. The smell of those animals was all over her.” Sarin gave a shudder of disgust. “To think she lived in that building with them, as if she was an animal too.”

“She didn’t see that part of her life as bad,” Revin pointed out. “Those minari were everything to her. She suffered a broken arm trying to save a minari cub when she was young. She spent her days caring for them like they were her children. She feels lost and alone without them.”

“Please tell me you’re not suggesting we get her an entire pack of minari?” Sarin begged.

“Not a pack, but maybe two or three,” Revin said, grinning at Sarin’s obvious discomfort. “We could use hangar three. We’re only using that for parts storage because the blast doors keep sticking when we try to close them. It’s enclosed, so the animals are unlikely to get loose on the ship and there’s plenty of space for her to run and play with them.”

Sarin expelled a resigned sigh. “And this would make her happy?”

“I know it will, especially if we can get some of the ones from the pack she cared for on Anavac. Having the animals would go a long way in making her feel safe and welcome among us.”

“They would also act as a test for any male who wished to court her,” Damen pointed out. “From what I’ve heard about the minari that Mouse and Yopin have, dealing with those beasts isn’t for the weak.”

Revin laughed at Damen's observation while Sarin scowled. "We can't buy them ourselves," Sarin said, voice tight with anger. "Tilin and I were harsh with one of her former owners. I don't think he'll sell his animals to any Hissa after that."

"We could go through a third party," Damen suggested in an excited, loud voice. This male needed to learn to curb his volume. "There are plenty of independent freight haulers that would be willing to negotiate with Kamaril's former owners and then transport for us. How many do you think we should try to get?"

"I'm not sure how many were in the kennels," Sarin told them. "I know one of the females had just given birth and Kamaril was very happy about it. Maybe we can get that female and her young."

"She seems to have great affection for the pups," Revin agreed. "When she talks about them, it's with the pride of a mother."

"I'll make arrangements for the purchase and transport," Damen announced, his voice filling the room as he pushed to his feet and hurried out.

With Damen gone, the tension left the room.

Revin looked back to Sarin. "He needs to learn to speak with a softer voice."

"He mostly works in bays one and five. All the Hissa who work in the big bays talk like that," Sarin commented with a faint trace of amusement. "They forget how to talk in more confined places."

"Are they all that obnoxious?"

A grin flashed across Sarin's face. "I think that might be specific to Damen." He focused on Revin's face, his expression turning serious. "How are you doing?"

"I'm struggling, my friend," he admitted. "It's hard to look at her and see the scars and her tentative and fearful expressions. She makes my heart hurt."

“They all make our hearts hurt. I’ll never understand the humans’ willingness to sell their own,” Sarin confessed.

“Perhaps because they’re Decanted humans, grown in vats instead of born, the other humans don’t consider them real,” Revin guessed.

“Who knows?” Sarin replied with a face full of sorrow.

“How long until we reach Hissa?” Revin asked, changing the subject.

“We’ll need to reverse burn briefly to allow an independent hauler coming from Anavac to catch up with us. That will put us behind schedule.” Sarin explained as he tapped his data pad.

“Someone should contact homeworld to arrange a place for her and her animals,” Revin commented.

“Why don’t you take care of that?” Sarin said and waved him away. “I’m going to assign you and Tilin to her for the rest of the voyage. You seem to understand her well and Tilin will listen to you. Do whatever you need to make her comfortable.”

Revin gave Sarin a curt nod and rose to leave and then thought of something else and turned back to Sarin. “She requested chocolate.”

“I’m not surprised,” Sarin said with a wry grin. “She ate the chocolate ration packs I gave her so fast I was worried she’d accidentally eat the packaging too.”

“She did specifically request more chocolate ration packs,” Revin informed him with a small smile. “She said she would be perfectly content to eat chocolate ration packs for all her meals.”

Sarin grinned back at him. “I’m sure we can do better than ration packs.”

“Agreed, I just wanted permission to contact the Enchantment. I think it’s in this sector.”

Sarin gave him a confused look. “Why the Enchantment?”

“It’s a bazaar ship that travels all the way to the human solar system. They might have chocolate in stock. I’d like to purchase what they have. Most of the human women seem to enjoy that stuff.”

Sarin dipped his head in an encouraging nod. “That’s a good idea. Do me a favor, hold back a few items for me when it arrives. I’d like to have my own stash to woo a human if I get a chance.”

“I will,” Revin agreed, already anticipating the delight on Kamaril’s face when he presented her with the sweet dark dessert instead of the poorly flavored ration packs. “We might want to see if it’s possible to cultivate this substance.”

“I’ll assign that to Netin. He’s good at research. I can only hope it comes from a plant and not some horribly smelly animal. The minari are going to be hard enough to deal with.”

That comment made Revin laugh. “Even if it did, we’d still do it. We’re helpless in the face of these women.”

“And happy to be so,” Sarin agreed with a chuckle of his own.

## CHAPTER 7

### Kamaril

Kamaril tried to sit. It lasted all of one breath, and she was up again and pacing a circle in her room. Excitement and anxiety warred inside her, making it impossible to remain still. Revin promised to come back before midday with food. Not long after he left, a droid arrived with sealed trays full of food and several apologies written in Space Standard on memory paper. She'd shoved the trays and the notes into the storage cabinets without touching them. She wasn't going to eat until Revin got here!

It felt like she wanted to do everything with, or for, Revin.

She'd jumped into the cleansing unit the moment he'd left. The cleansers the Hissa provided were much nicer than what she was used to. She read each bottle carefully and took extra time using various products on her hair and skin.

Now she smelled similar to a field full of wildflowers. She wasn't sure if she liked it, but if this was what the Hissa were accustomed to, then she'd get used to it.

Thinking about how she smelled made her glance over at the bed. Her old clothes were in a bag and hidden under the pillows. These Hissa were fastidious and would probably want to dispose of them, but they still smelled like her minari. She couldn't let them go yet.

"I miss all of you," she whispered. "I hope Ti finds someone to be a good keeper and trainer."

Trying to take her mind off the minari, she looked down at her outfit. The Hissa had provided her with many changes of pants and shirts, all of them in soft, plain colors she liked and most of them a little big for her.

She'd changed out of her sweat-soaked running outfit into a pair of dark brown pants, but then she'd slipped on the shirt Revin gave her. The soft, rich fabric smelled faintly of the

warrior. Watching the color change and shimmer as she moved had kept her entertained for minutes at a time.

Absently, she checked her appearance in a reflecting service on the wall. It took forever for her long hair to dry so she'd left it loose. Now it was starting to get fluffy, and she debated braiding it. Would Revin like her hair pulled back and out of the way or loose and flowing? The Hissa didn't have hair. Maybe he'd like her better if she shaved it off.

How attached was she to her hair?

Before she could decline into a spiral of doubt and worry, a sound at the door drew her to the center of the room. Lips curling up into an excited smile, she hurried to stand in front of the door and waited for it to open.

It had to be Revin. She was about to see him again!

She waited but nothing happened, except the sound rang out again.

"Kamaril?" Revin's voice came through the comm display in the wall next to the door. "You need to touch the pad next to the door to let me in."

"Paw-rot!" she cursed and rushed to touch the pad. She forgot she controlled the door to her space, even though Sarin repeatedly told no one would enter without her allowing it except for dire emergencies.

The door slid open, revealing Revin smiling and holding a large tray. She backed up to let him enter, and the smell of the food made her stomach grumble. She was hungrier than she realized.

"I hear the beast in your belly calling for food," Revin said with a chuckle.

Embarrassed, she ducked her head down, her hair falling forward and hiding her expression. She watched him through her hair as he walked past her and set the tray down on the table.

"No need to hide that beautiful face. I'm hungry also," he insisted and dropped into a chair with a jovial expression.

“Join me and let’s eat!”

She pushed the pad to close the door and hurried over to sit across from Revin at the small table, surveying what he’d brought. There were six heaping plates on the tray, and she leaned over the steaming plates. It all smelled wonderful, but none of it was chocolate. Hiding her disappointment, she looked up at Revin, waiting for permission to eat.

He stared back at her, concern in his eyes. “You don’t like any of this food?”

“I don’t know what it is, but it all smells very good,” she assured him quickly. She’d never eaten with anyone but the minari. She’d always fed them first before letting herself have a meal, and they didn’t care about her table manners.

What were Hissa protocols around eating? Should he eat first? Should she say something?

Revin let out a sigh before his mouth turned up in a half smile. “You can eat. You don’t need to wait for permission.”

“I wasn’t sure and didn’t want to do anything wrong.” She reached for some of the food on the closest plate. There were no utensils to eat with, like the Anavac used, but she’d seen several visiting species eat with their hands so knew it was a common practice.

The first bite hit her tongue in an explosion of flavor. Everything she’d ever been fed was bland. Anavac did not like spices with their food. What she hunted was eaten after being quickly cooked over an open fire.

Hissa food was vastly different than anything she’d had before. She hadn’t known there were this many flavors in the universe!

Without thinking, she reached for food on another dish. Then another. It was all superb! She started shoving food into her mouth, eating with a speed she knew would give her a stomach ache later, but she couldn’t help herself. This was a feast fit for the rich and powerful!



When she looked up, she saw Revin watching her with an amused expression. With dawning horror, she realized he hadn't touched a bite yet.

"You're not eating," she said, licking her fingers clean. "Am I supposed to feed you?"

His expression went blank before his scales turned a deep purple and he let loose a low growl.

Startled, she shrank away. "Did I offend you? Please tell me how to make amends. I'm very sorry. I won't do it again," she pleaded, easing herself out of the chair so she could drop to her knees.

"Stay," Revin commanded, making her freeze half out of the chair. "Please resume your seat, Kamaril."

She plopped back down but scooted the chair away from the table in case she needed to move quickly.

Assured she wasn't going to change position; Revin closed his eyes and took a few deep breaths. When he opened them again, he seemed calmer, and his scales were more greenish-blue than purple. "I'm going to be blunt with you."

"Yes, that would be good," she agreed, feeling a sense of relief. "I need to know what I did wrong."

"You didn't do anything wrong. The sound I made was...uh..." His expression turned uncertain and maybe even a little embarrassed. "Sometimes we Hissa growl when we're, uh, excited."

She blinked. "What?"

Revin rubbed a hand over his face and then met her eyes again. "The idea of you putting food in my mouth, touching me with your fingers, is very tantalizing." His eyes gleamed as he looked down at the crotch of his pants. She followed his gaze to see the fabric tented.

A flush spread through her body. He wasn't angry; he was lustful! That was good. If she had to pick a new master, she wanted it to be Revin. She liked how he smelled, and his touch felt good.

“Are we...can we...I mean, is it possible to, uh...” She was normally very good at communicating in Space Standard, but words were failing her. Asking flat out wasn’t working so she tried something else. “There is an animal called an unari. They’re a little bigger and slower than minari and have a rounded head but the two can interbreed without any difficulty. Are we minari and unari?”

Pushing the tray of plates out of the way, Revin placed his arm across the table, palm up. It was a clear invitation for her to touch him. Slowly, she let her palm come down to rest on his. His skin felt warm and when he rubbed his fingers against her wrist, all kinds of electric sparks shot up her arm.

“You and I are like the minari and unari,” he agreed. “We can even have children together.”

The thought of having a child distracted her from Revin’s fingers. She gripped his hand tightly with excitement.

“I could have a child?” Another thought hit her like a blow. “Do I get to keep my child, or will you sell them after weaning?”

Revin went perfectly still; his scales flashed black before going back to the normal color. “You’ll never have to part from your offspring. I promise you, Kamaril, any child you have will be protected and adored by both the father and all of Hissa.”

Mentioning a father turned Kamaril’s attention back to the feel of Revin’s hand under hers. “And I can pick the sire of my child?”

A shudder went through Revin and his scale pattern shifted to a shade of purple again. “Yes, you are free to pick any of the unattached males among the Hissa. I promise, all of them would be receptive.”

“Then I can pick you, yes?” she clarified.

Revin’s fingers grasped her hand, and his scales turned a deep purple, all hints of green gone. “You can.”

This must mean purple was a good sign! “Then I want you. Do we breed now?”

His entire body jolted. “You want to have sex with me?”

“Does sex mean breeding?” she asked, wanting to make sure there was no confusion. “Breeding is what the minari do to get the female with offspring.”

“Yes, having sex with me could cause pregnancy,” he agreed, looking wary.

She felt a wide smile unfurl across her face. “Then I’d like to breed, um, I mean, I’d like to sex with you. Please?”

When she tugged at her hand, his fingers tightened momentarily and then let her pull free. Standing up, she turned her back to him and leaned over. Bracing her hands on the seat of the chair, she waited for him to mount her.

“What are you doing?” he asked instead of standing up and taking the spot behind her.

His confusion made worry douse her growing excitement. Straightening up, she turned to face him. “I was presenting to you for breeding.”

He sat frozen. “Like a minari?”

Now she saw the problem and his confusion. She was wearing pants! How was he going to penetrate her if she was wearing pants? Feeling both relieved and a little silly, she grabbed for the waistband of her pants.

“Wait, let me get these off and then you can mount me.” She didn’t get a chance to do more than touch the fabric before he was standing. With a speed she didn’t expect, he was suddenly in front of her, trapping her hands with his.

She stared down at their hands, mesmerized by the gentleness of his grip despite the obvious strength of his fingers.

“Revin?” Her voice didn’t waver. She was confused, not frightened.

He swallowed several times before finally speaking. “Make no mistake, I want you. But I’m not going to breed you

like a minari stud going after a female,” he growled. “I’ll worship your body as you deserve.”

Then his lips descended onto hers. His words might have been spoken in a rough tone, but his lips were soft and gentle against hers. With a quiet moan, she opened to him, letting his warm tongue invade her mouth. She’d heard about kissing among other species but never experienced it herself. Anavac and humans weren’t breeding compatible and more than that, Anavac considered Decanted humans a low-intellect species on the same level as clever minari.

Not only was this her first kiss, but it was also the first time she had urges she couldn’t explain. She wanted the kiss to go on forever but at the same time she wanted to feel his lips on the skin of her neck and shoulders. The need to touch him was also pushing at her. It wasn’t enough to have her hands in his; she wanted to run her fingers all over his body, trace every ridge and curve.

He was the most beautiful being she’d ever encountered, and she wanted to know him in all ways.

Dampness was building between her legs and the flesh there throbbed to be touched. Her nipples beaded tightly, as if she was cold, and her breasts ached. These were all new sensations and made her whimper.

When Revin drew away, she wanted to cry.

“Kamaril? Open your eyes, sweetling.”

Blinking them open, she looked up to find him watching her closely. “Please don’t stop,” she begged.

“You like this?” he murmured.

“Yes,” she breathed. “Is there more? I want to do things, but I’m not sure they’re allowed.”

“You can do anything you like to me,” he promised.

“And then you’ll mount me?” she asked.

Revin looked regretful but determined. “No, sweetling, not yet. There’s a problem between us, and until it’s resolved, it wouldn’t be right for us to go too far.”

“Problem? What problem?” she asked, looking down at herself. “Do you mean my clothes? I tried to take them off, but you stopped me.”

He chuckled. “Not your clothes, sweetling.”

She let out a frustrated breath. “Then what? I’m willing and excited to breed, and I don’t mind if it hurts.”

“Hurts?” he echoed, his scales moving from purple to blue.

“There are training vids they show us before shipping us off to our owners,” she explained. “One of them was about sex and reproduction and it said that the first time can hurt for females. It’s fine. I don’t mind.”

Revin pulled in a deep breath and let go of her hands. Before she could do anything, he leaned over and picked her up. She hadn’t been picked up since she’d left the production facility as a child.

She gasped and wrapped her arms around his neck. “What are you doing?”

“Getting comfortable,” he said, retaking his seat and settling her on his lap. “The first thing you need to understand is that there is no level of ‘acceptable pain’ between us. Whatever we do will be enjoyable for both of us or we won’t do it.”

“But what if I’m not capable of enjoying breeding?” she countered. “I want a baby, and I have a high pain tolerance. You said you want me to. Why are you refusing me?”

“Easy, Kamaril,” Revin murmured, nuzzling the side of her face. “I’m not refusing, only delaying. I need to make sure your thinking isn’t still muddled by your former life.”

Closing her eyes, she relaxed against his warm bulk. “Muddled?”

“You need time to realize that we’re equals. There’s no collar around your neck, but you still think and react like a slave.”

Shame made her want to curl into herself. “I’m sorry.”

He rubbed her back soothingly. “I don’t say that to make you feel ashamed. You’ve spent your life as a slave. For you, freedom is new and even scary at times.”

“Yes,” she agreed with him, moving her body a little until she could rest her head on his shoulder. Leave it to Revin to understand how bewildering his world was for her.

“That’s why I want to give you time,” he continued. “You need time to realize that you are well and truly free. I’m scared that sex would be a kind of rape.”

She stiffened and sat up so she could look him in the eyes. “You wouldn’t force me; I know you wouldn’t. Why would you think such horrible things about yourself?”

He made a comforting sound and drew her back against him. “I’m not talking about holding you down, but I worry that you wouldn’t say no. That you’d pretend to enjoy it to placate me because you’ve been trained to do or say anything to keep your masters happy.”

She chewed on that, trying to figure out what that meant for the two of them. “How will I know when I’m thinking like a free being?”

“I’m not sure,” Revin admitted. “I think we’re both going to have to take it slow.”

Going slow didn’t sound fun, but she’d never deny Revin anything. Still, she knew there was always room for negotiation. “Even if we aren’t going to breed, can we kiss? I liked it.”

“We can kiss,” he agreed. “And do other things that are pleasurable that don’t include penetrative sex.”

That cheered her up. Even if he wasn’t going to give her a baby, at least he wasn’t going to stop touching and kissing her. “Yes, let’s do the other things.”

## CHAPTER 8

### Revin

Kamaril watched him with wide, excited eyes. It took an intense amount of willpower not to toss her onto the bed. The one thing that helped was the almost total lack of lustful smells coming off her. She was eager to please him but wasn't turned on by him. Or at least not turned on enough to produce a strong scent.

He knew what lust on a Decanted human smelled like. He'd gotten a nose full of Mouse when she'd been excited to be alone with Woken. Kamaril smelled like nothing but flowers. She must've bathed thoroughly to have washed off every trace of her natural scent. All he could smell was the standard cleansers they stocked for all the Decanted humans.

He was determined to make her smell like herself and even more, fill his nose with the scent of her unique human desire.

"You must still be hungry. We have time, let's eat before doing anything else." he murmured. Predictably, she tried to get off his lap and return to her seat. "Please stay here."

She looked confused for a moment, then grinned and shook her head. "You want me to sit on your lap while we eat? I'm too big and heavy for that."

Revin made a negative sound and wrapped his arms around her for a quick hug. "Never, sweetling. You're the perfect size for me. If anything, you need to get a little heavier. Remember what Mender Honil said? You need more fat on your body."

"I've never been told to eat more," she said with a quick grin. "Master Ti was always telling me I'm a greedy eater."

"That's only because the Anavac are stingy with their food," Revin countered, working hard to keep his easy grin.

He couldn't frown when she mentioned her past, or she'd stop talking about it.

"You make a warm chair," she said. "I like it." Then she leaned close to his face and pressed her lips briefly to his forehead. She drew back quickly, as if afraid she was being too bold.

"I like it when you touch me," he assured her. "You have my permission to touch me any time you feel like it."

She ducked her head, still smiling. "Even if we're around others?"

It took him a moment to understand why she'd ask that, then remembered the Anavac had strict taboos about touching in public.

"Anytime," he repeated firmly. "We Hissa believe in showing affection to each other even when other people are around."

"I like that," she murmured. Her long white hair was loose around her shoulders and half hiding her face. Pulling aside the curtain of hair, she tucked it behind her ear. "I'm sorry, I should've braided it back. We can cut it off if you don't like it."

"Sssshh," he hushed her. "Your hair is beautiful and silky to the touch. Someday, I'd like to learn to braid so I can help you care for it. For now, all we need to do is make sure it doesn't fall into the food."

She looked at the table, as if she'd forgotten there was food there. "Oh, yes, dinner!"

Stretching out his arm, he got his fingers hooked on the edge of the tray and dragged it across the table. With all the dishes in reach, he picked up a bit of food and offered it to her. "Will you eat from my hand, Sweetling?"

She carefully accepted the food, then audibly moaned. "It tastes so good. Is today a special feast day of some kind?"

"Uh, no," he answered with a huffing laugh. "This is an average meal. Maybe a little larger than most because the



galley wants to make sure you have plenty of whatever dish you decide is your favorite. They'll also stop sending anything you're not fond of, so don't feel as if you need to eat everything."

"I can't believe you eat like this every day," she murmured before accepting another bite of food. "I didn't know so many flavors existed."

"And this isn't even all of them," he warned her, thinking of all the food commonly prepared on Hissa.

Her eyes went wide, and she swallowed quickly. "There's more? Can I try them, please?"

"Of course, sweetling, but you might have to wait," he said, surprised at how excited she was about food. But then again, if he had to deal with the bland Anavac diet, he'd probably be obsessed with flavors also. "We don't stock a lot of variety on the ships, but when we get to my home planet, I'll prepare you a feast every night."

"Surely not a feast as big as this," she said, pointing to the table.

"Bigger!" he declared, loving the way she looked so very impressed by his promise. Then her expression turned wry.

"You're teasing me," she decided. "No one eats this good all the time."

"We do," he insisted. "Although traditionally, we only have two meals a day. We've begun changing our eating habits since Decanted humans started living among us."

"Tell me about your home planet," she demanded.

"I'll talk as long as you eat," he offered, holding another morsel to her lips. She accepted it by pulling his fingers into her mouth and sucking on them.

The feel of her hot mouth on his fingers made his brain short circuit. No thought made it in or out as blood rushed to his groin. For a moment, he thought he might come in his pants like an untried youth.

Then she pulled away and chewed the food, watching him with interest. Right, she was waiting for him to answer. What was the question?

Oh, yes, his home planet!

“Hissa is a tropical planet covered in dense jungle,” he said, feeling a little like an educational display but unable to do anything but ramble off the facts he could remember most easily. “We only have a few small, open bodies of water. We have many thermal vents we use to power almost everything on the planet. Up until recently, we grew and manufactured most of what we needed. We used to trade in a few agricultural products. That was enough to purchase the things we couldn’t make. There used to be three major cities on Hissa, but now there’s only one. It has a large port, though, and we work hard to make it beautiful and welcoming.”

“Why do you only have one city now?” Kamaril asked.

“A plague hit us,” he explained. “We call it the Great Death. It wiped out all our females and half the males. With so few of us left, we all moved to live in one of the cities. The other cities and many houses were swallowed by the jungle.”

Her expression turned sad. “I’ve heard of a disease that nearly wiped out several species. I’m sad to find that the Hissa were one of them.”

“It was ten years ago, but most of us remember it like it was yesterday,” he said, thinking of his mother. “Not only did we lose many loved ones, but soon after that, we found both our moons, Diminish and Brimming, are rich in dimmerion. We went from a relatively poor species to very rich overnight, and then we were attacked for our wealth. We were so few that all of us had trained as warriors along with other jobs.”

“And the wealth is why you’re able to buy Decanted women,” Kamaril said. “To breed with and rebuild your species. I’m sorry for what happened to you, but I’m proud to be owned by the Hissa. You’re a kind species.”

Revin winced at the use of the word *owned*. “You’re a free person, Kamaril.”

“Yes, sorry. I’m proud to be, um, here with you,” she said instead. “What are your quarters like on Hissa? Do you live in multifamily dwellings like the Anavac or does everyone have a single room home and gather in communal buildings like the Fenkle?”

“We have individual domiciles,” he said, thinking of the home he grew up in. “Families will often stay close to each other. My mother’s sister lived nearby with her mate and children. I grew up playing with my cousins and had adventures in the wilderness behind our homes. And my father’s parents lived close too.”

Her expression turned wistful as she swallowed the bite he’d just given her. “Having so much family must’ve been nice.”

“You’ll have that too,” he insisted. “The Decanted women mean that there are families on Hissa again, and you can live close to them. Or further away. It’ll be your choice.”

For a brief moment she seemed excited, then a cautious expression flashed across her face before she forced a pleasant smile across her lips. “Can I feed you too?”

He nodded his head, and she picked up a bowl of tollmint. Scooping some of it onto her fingers, she held them to his lips. As she’d done to him earlier, he pulled her fingers into his mouth. He took his time cleaning each digit with his tongue, his eyes focused on hers.

“Oh!” she breathed, eyes dilating. Then he smelled it. Her feminine scent unfurled, cloying and hard to catch but unmistakable.

She pulled her fingers from his mouth slowly, then blinked a few times before digging them back into the tollmint and hastily holding them up again. She was enjoying the sensation of having her fingers sucked on. He was happy to oblige, but she needed to eat too.

“We need to take turns,” he insisted, picking up another bowl and holding some food to her mouth. She ate it fast then pressed more food to his mouth. He hid his smile by accepting her offering and taking his time sucking and licking her fingers.

They continued to eat this way until half the food was gone and her scent had grown strong. If she could be this turned by something so simple, he couldn't wait to see how she'd react to further touching and kissing.

“I think I'm full,” he murmured, setting down the bowl he was holding. She looked confused and a little dazed. He took the mostly empty bowl from her hand and set it down before gripping her wrist and kissing her palm.

“We're done?” she asked, sounding disappointed.

“I'm done eating food, but I'm not done with you,” he promised, keeping hold of her wrist. He pushed the sleeve up and kissed up to the crook of her elbow where the fabric was too bunched up to allow him to go any further. Then he licked the inside of her elbow, making her suck in a hard breath of air.

“Why does that feel so good?” she whispered in awe. “Is this part of Hissa breeding? Does this make you feel good too?”

“Yes, sweetling,” he agreed. “This feels good to me. Can I put my mouth on other places on your body?”

She nodded her head rapidly. “Yes, please!” She pulled out of his grip to pull the sleeve of her other arm up, but he stopped her.

“Can we take your top fully off?” he requested.

She hesitated. “Only my top?”

“Maybe more later,” he said. “But only your top for now. I can dim the lights if that would make you feel better.”

She nodded her head slowly. “Very dim, please. I'm not built like you; you might not like how I look under my clothes.”

“I can promise you I’ll love how you look because you’re perfect,” he assured her, putting his fingers on the bottom hem of her shirt. “Light at ten percent,” he called out.

Kamaril blinked at the sudden change then smiled. “This is better.”

He didn’t tell her that he could see as well in this light as the light from earlier. It wasn’t about that; it was about making her comfortable. He tugged at the hem of her shirt, asking for permission. She looked down at his hand and bit her lip.

“It would make you happy if I wasn’t wearing a shirt,” she reiterated. “Even though I have breasts and you don’t?”

“The fact that you have them makes me giddy,” he said. “Remember, I said I want to put my lips on everything. That includes your breasts. If you don’t like it, we can do something else. We can even sit and talk. This is about both of us enjoying ourselves, sweetling.”

As if making up her mind, Kamaril tugged the shirt from his grasp and pulled it off over her head. She wasn’t wearing a binding garment underneath so her gorgeous breasts were suddenly on full display almost in front of his face.

With his mouth watering, he dropped his head and sucked a nipple into his mouth. He wrapped both arms around her back to loosely hold her in place as he teased the sensitive flesh.

“Revin!” Kamaril gasped and arched her back, pushing her chest out. Her faint feminine scent blossomed into full-blown lust, filling his nose and making him groan. Blood rushed to his dick, making him feel oddly cold for a brief moment before heat raged through him.

When he released Kamaril’s breast, she made a noise of protest as he pulled his mouth away. “Revin?”

“I’m not done,” he soothed her, letting go of her so he could pull his own shirt off. When she saw his bare chest, she licked her lips and brought her hands up to splay them across his pectorals.

“So pretty,” she breathed, running her hands lower. She stopped at his waist and then pulled back.

“No, please don’t stop!” he begged. “Remember, I told you to touch me anywhere and everywhere. You could even stick your fingers up my nose, and I wouldn’t protest!”

“That’s disgusting,” she laughed before returning her fingers to the waistband of his pants. He went perfectly still as she slipped her fingers inside. It didn’t take her long to find his hard cock trapped against her thigh.

“That’s what I feel,” she breathed, raising her gaze to his eyes. “Do you get any bigger?”

Revin almost laughed. “Does my size disappoint you?”

“No!” she said quickly, blushing. “Minari have shafts that triple in size once they’re in a female. I was already worried you wouldn’t fit at this size!”

“This is as big as I get,” he assured her, then sucked in a harsh breath as she wiggled her fingers around him.

“Did I hurt you?” she asked, withdrawing.

“No,” he gritted out, letting her pull her hand free of his pants. “But I think we need to change positions.”

Without warning her, he grabbed her by the hips and swung her around so he could pull her back flush to his front. Her lush ass pressed hard against his erection, making him thankful for the two layers of clothing between them. He wanted to focus on her pleasure, not his own, and this position would make it easier.

“Revin, it’s hard for me to touch you this way,” she said, sounding close to pouting. She wiggled a little on his lap, making him groan and wrap his arms around her.

“Next time, you can touch me all you want,” he offered. “This time we need to do it this way or I might embarrass myself.”

“How would you embarrass—” her question was cut off by a soft moan as he cupped her breasts in his hands. He

kneaded the flesh as he pressed kisses to her shoulders. When she tilted her neck to the side, he moved his lips there.

Then he scraped his teeth over her flesh, and she shivered and moaned again. “More,” she begged.

He alternated between kissing and biting every part of her neck and shoulders. She placed her hands over his. At first, he thought she was going to pull his hands away from her breasts, but she pressed them down harder, clearly asking for more pressure. When he did so, she gasped and dropped her hands back down to her sides.

“I feel strange,” she whispered, her breathing coming faster.

“How do you feel strange?” he asked between nips of her skin.

“It’s like I’m tense in a good way. I want you to touch me more, but everywhere all at once. And I need...I throb between my legs.”

He ran one of his hands down her sternum and rested it over her belly button. “I want to touch you where you throb,” he whispered, voice hoarse with need.

She undulated her hips and made a begging sound. He slipped a hand under the loose waistband of the pants, his fingers quickly finding the soft curls. Sliding through the curls, he found her hot, wet sex. The moment his fingers grazed the swollen numb, she cried out and shoved her hips up hard against his hand.

“Not yet, sweetling,” he whispered, moving his fingers further down to find her core. He slid a finger inside her feminine channel, warm slick coating his finger. It was with great relief that he found no barrier there. He’d read all the information put out by the council about human women and knew that virgins often had a thin barrier there that could hurt when breached. Some broke them simply by being active as they grew up and it looked like that was the case for Kamaril.

“More,” she demanded, panting and trying to push herself harder against his hand.

He withdrew his single finger from her channel, making her whimper in protest. When he pressed two fingers back in and pumped them inside her with slow, gentle strokes, she gasped and threw her head back, almost catching him in the nose.

“Good?” he asked, kissing the side of her face.

“Please,” she begged, turning her flushed face to his. He captured her lips in a kiss. Greedily, she returned the kiss, raising one arm to wrap around his head and hold him in place.

Maintaining the kiss, he gently withdrew his fingers and returned to the little bundle of nerves. With his fingers well coated in her slick, he rubbed there with minimum pressure at first. The more she wiggled and bucked, the more he increased the pressure until she withdrew from the kiss so she could pull in big lungfuls of air.

“There!” she shouted.

He wrapped one arm around her waist to keep her from falling off his lap as she flailed. He kept the same pressure on her clit as she went stiff and gave a keening cry of pleasure. He could almost feel the pleasure radiating off her. Hoping to draw out the orgasm, he kept pressing and rubbing, making her shiver and jerk.

It was only with reluctance that he pulled his hand out of her pants after she whimpered a little and mumbled something about “too much.”

Once his hand was out from between her legs, she turned sideways and cuddled up to him, panting and kissing his face.

“I’ve never felt like that before,” she said with dazed wonder.

“I can make you feel like that as often as you want,” he promised. The smile she gave him was one of pure bliss.



## CHAPTER 9

### Kamaril

She finally understood why Anavac couples had so many children. What she and Revin had done wasn't even full sex, and it had been amazing! She couldn't wait to feel that again.

Cuddling in his lap, she'd watched him lick his fingers as if she tasted as good as the food they'd been eating. It made her want to taste him too. Honestly, she wanted to put her mouth all over him and kiss him like he'd done to her.

Finished licking his fingers clean, he wrapped his arms around her and hugged. She nuzzled his face. "Will you stay?"

"I want to, but I don't think it would be wise," he said, moving his hips a little. She could feel his hard male shaft pressing against her.

"Let me give you pleasure too," she demanded, guilt making her try to push away from him so she could reach down his pants. He tightened the hug until she stopped trying to move.

"Not this time," he said, kissing her forehead. "I want this time to be all about you. Before you argue, let me say that it makes me feel good that you enjoyed yourself. Let me have this feeling for a little while."

She acquiesced and settled back down in his lap. "When will you come back?"

He nodded his head in the direction of the door. "Do you see the colored symbols on the display?"

She nodded, and he gave her a quick lesson in Hissa time keeping. Their system wasn't overly complex, and Revin was a good teacher.

"Then you'll be back at first trill with breakfast," she clarified after he was done. "And we'll spend the day together."

“Yes,” he agreed. “I want to show you the exercise room and we can go for another run. And there is more food for you to try.”

“I’d like all of it,” she agreed readily. “Tell me more about Hissa, please? I like the sound of your voice.”

“Did I tell you about tillintails yet?” he asked.

“No, what are they?”

“They’re little animals with bright red and orange scales and big, adorable eyes. It’s considered good luck if they build a burrow near your house,” he said, telling her stories of a family of tillintails that had moved into his grandmother’s garden when he was a small child.

She tried to stay alert but between the food, orgasm, and cuddles, she started yawning. The day was catching up to her and her side started to ache badly.

It had been bothering her since Sarin had bought her for Ti but seemed to be getting worse. Sitting snuggled up against Revin and slightly scrunched on his lap wasn’t helping, but she didn’t want to give up the warmth of his body yet. He’d be leaving soon, and she could lie on her back again to ease the ache.

She briefly thought of telling Revin about the irritation but dismissed it. It was a tolerable level of pain. There was no need to make a fuss.

“You need to get some sleep,” he announced after her third yawn in a row. She wanted to protest but remained silent as he stood up, cradling her in his arms. He settled her on the bed, then tugged off her pants. She was entirely naked now, and she thought he was going to do something for a moment, but instead he settled a soft blanket over her.

“Rest, sweetling,” he said, brushing a kiss across her lips. “I’ll be back soon, and we’ll spend the day together.”

“I want that,” she agreed and only closed her eyes after the door shut behind Revin. Settling on her back, she ignored her pain and focused on falling asleep so the time would pass more quickly.



The discomfort Kamaril had been ignoring the previous day only grew worse as the night progressed. By the time the display told her Revin would be arriving soon, she was in agony. The pain radiating from low on the left side of her ribcage grew and ebbed with every lung full of air.

Curled up on her side, she regarded the pad next to the door. The mender said to contact him if she was in discomfort. Except, what if the pain went away? Then she'd be bothering them over nothing.

It took some effort, but she finally made it to her feet. Dripping sweat, she staggered into the cleansing unit, hoping cool water would help make her feel better. It didn't.

Even after the cold shower, she couldn't straighten all the way up or pull in a full breath of air. Every step was agony, and she almost passed out, making her way from the cleansing unit to a nearby chair. Still, she hesitated to contact the mender.

The Anavac doctors only treated her twice and both times were agonizing and humiliating. The second time had been the worst. The doctor insisted on tying her to the operating table to take out a rotten tooth and they'd left her there for almost an entire cycle. The pain of having a tooth pulled had been horrible but being left immobile for so long had been as bad, if not worse. She was left for so long that she was forced to soil the table. When someone finally returned to release her, they yelled at her for having so little control.

She might be in pain, but she feared what the menders might do. Besides, she'd suffered through plenty of injuries in her life. Given time, they healed. It would be hard to pretend nothing was wrong when Revin was around, but she'd do her best.

Her clothing was soaked with sweat now, an obvious sign something was wrong. She crawled to the stack of clothing and tugged on a fresh set. It was too bad she didn't have it in her to bathe again. In fact, she couldn't even make it

back to her chair. She slumped over on the floor, her vision graying out around the edges.

That's when she realized she wasn't going to be able to keep this hidden from Revin.

As if summoned by that thought, the door chimed. The display was a little fuzzy, but she could just make out the time and request to open. It had to be Revin.

"Admit," she croaked out, hoping it was the correct word. Nothing happened, and the chimes rang twice in rapid succession.

"Give access." Nothing.

"Allow access."

That was the right one because the door slid open to reveal Revin holding a platter of food with a bag slung over his shoulder. His gaze dropped to her, and he rushed across the room. Setting his burdens on the nearby bed, he knelt next to her.

"I'm sorry," she grunted before he could say anything. Her first instinct was to apologize. "Something hurts. I'm sorry, please don't be mad."

"I'm not mad," he assured her. "I need to get you to medical, and I don't want to wait for someone with a med-hover. I'm going to have to pick you up, sweetling."

He gathered her in his arms and lifted. She whimpered at the change in position, burying her face against his neck. His warm, familiar scent filled her nose, as comforting as the minari she considered family. Lifting her into the air, he cradled her against his chest.

"It's going to be okay," he promised, his voice tight with concern. He tried hard to be gentle as he ran, but every step was agony. To keep from crying out, she bit her lip until she tasted blood.

"We're almost there, sweetling," he said as the halls blurred past her. "The mender will fix what hurts. You're

going to be fine. I have a gift waiting for you when you feel better. But first you must be brave for me.”

She could hear the barely suppressed panic in his voice. Did this mean she was dying? “Stay with me. I don’t want to die alone.”

“I won’t let you die,” he promised. “I’ll be at your side at all times. If I have to, I’ll fight death.” He kept talking but a loud buzzing filled her ears, and it was hard to see. When she could focus again, they were entering the medical bay.

“It’s Kamaril,” Revin shouted over his shoulder while carefully laying her down on the med-bed nearest the door. “Hurry!”

Staff flooded into the room. She recognized Menders Honil and Favil, but the rest were strangers.

“What’s happened?” Honil asked Revin, his expression almost looked like rage. He reminded her of the Anavac doctors who’d been so cruel to her.

Revin’s hand was resting on her shoulder, and she grabbed it with both her hands and pulled him down towards her.

“Please,” she begged. “Please don’t let them tie me down. Please. I’ll be good. I won’t struggle. I’ll be still. I can be still even if it hurts, but don’t tie me down.”

He gripped her hands with his, putting his face next to hers. “No one’s going to tie you down. We’ll make the hurt stop.”

His words made some of her fear subside. She trusted Revin to keep her safe from the menders. Even if they decided to restrain her, she was sure Revin would release her the moment he could.

“I believe you,” she whispered, panting.

Honil leaned over Revin. “Kamaril, where does it hurt?”

She let go of Revin long enough to point to her side. “Here. Hurts like something broken.”

The sound of equipment and bodies moving around her combined with many worried voices talking over each other. All of it made it hard to hear Honil's next question. Thankfully, Revin was able to answer for her.

"She ate well last night and didn't complain of any pain or discomfort," he said. "I saw no stiffness in her movements either."

"Did she fall yesterday?" the mender asked as Favil and someone else moved machinery around. They were forced to move her med-bed a little to get the tech close to her instead of making her move to the machines. Later, she'd thank them for the kindness. Right now, she focused on staying conscious.

Revin gave Honil a quick rundown of everything they'd done the previous day after leaving the med bay. The mender tapped on a data pad and grunted but didn't ask any questions.

"None of that sounds worrisome, which is worrisome," Honil pronounced and looked down at her. "Remain still for me, Kamaril. We're going to run a quick scan."

"I can be still. Don't tie me. I won't move at all," she promised, talking in short panting breaths.

"See if you can roll on your back," Honil requested. She could hear the scan machine whirring, Favil waiting next to it, ready for orders.

She tried to roll onto her back but found she couldn't move. Big, fat tears rolled down her face as helplessness mixed with the pain, devastating her. "I can't. You'll have to move me. I'll try not to scream."

"No, don't move," Honil barked. "I can make it work." Honil spoke to Favil in Hissa. More movement around her, then a faint whine of the scanner.

"Can't you give her something for the pain?" Revin asked.

"I need to make sure what I give her won't kill her," Honil shot back.

She was worried Revin would get in trouble with Honil. She wanted to tell Revin not to worry, that it wasn't too bad, but a fresh wave of agony stole her breath and words.

She gripped Revin's hands, taking comfort in his nearness. He whispered words of comfort, but he'd slipped back into Hissa so she couldn't understand. Knowing what he was saying wasn't important. Only that he stayed with her.

More movement around them. Tapping, talking, muttering, then machinery being moved away from her.

"It's not as bad as I feared," Honil announced to the room, relief in his voice. "It looks like an old injury that's been aggravated recently. Did you fall in the last few days?"

"Give her the pain medication," Revin demanded, voice angry and commanding. "Then ask questions."

"Yes, of course," Honil said, then spoke rapidly to Favil. She felt pressure against her neck and within seconds, the pain started to retreat. She pulled air into her lungs with no pain. Relief made her feel light, as if she might float off the table. She kept her eyes closed and relaxed into the med-bed.

"Thank you," she said, surprised at how hoarse her voice sounded. "That's much better."

"I told you I'd make it all better," Revin said, placing a soft kiss on her cheek.

"I think we had something to do with it too," Favil teased.

"There's still an injury here to deal with," Honil reminded them. "It seems odd that this old injury would suddenly become a problem now. You mentioned running, were there any falls or even a misstep?"

"None," Revin assured him. "She's strong, fast, and nimble. She could out pace almost anyone on the ship with her endurance."

Eyes closed, Kamaril smiled at Revin's assessment. Strong, fast, and nimble were all good traits to have and might

be admired among the Hissa. It was an assurance they'd want to keep her, even after all the trouble she caused.

"Even if she was hurt, she probably masked it," Revin continued, sounding sad. "Slaves who complain are punished."

She didn't like when he was sad. She pursed her lips to kiss him but couldn't get the energy up to open her eyes. Thankfully, all she had to do was move her head slightly and part of his warm body was there. A part of an arm? It didn't matter, she gave it a kiss then relaxed again. This med-bed was nice. So soft, like a cloud!

Her mind drifted around the word cloud. Cloud, the fluffy kind. Cloud the minari. Cloud with newly born pups. How was the pack doing? Were they getting to hunt enough? Was Ti giving Toe the supplements she needed or keeping an eye on the wound on Hallow's back foot?

"Did you read the report Sarin issued about her collection?" Revin asked. His deep voice was hard to understand, but the sound was comforting. She could listen to him talk about anything.

"I did," Honil answered slowly, then he sucked in a breath. "She was given a nasty shock with the slave collar. It was bad enough to drop her to the ground. Yes, that might have done it."

That's not a connection Kamaril would've made. A simple fall to the ground caused this much pain much later? It was the same side she injured not long ago when she didn't clear a ravine and took a nasty tumble. She'd limped home and had to rely on the minari's good behavior and obedience to help her keep them because it was months before she was able to do all her normal duties again. She'd lived in fear of being discovered and sold off the entire time.

Dread chased away the happy, floating feeling.

"Please don't sell me," she whispered to Revin. "I want to stay with you."

She heard a rustling of cloth and then his warm breath on her ear. "No one will ever sell you again. I will be at your



side for as long as you want me here.”

As Revin whispered assurances, the other men spoke rapidly in Hissa, sounding angry and upset. Her body was urging her to sleep, but she fought it. They might need to ask her questions or need her to move. She wanted to be good so she could stay with Revin.

Without warning, something was clicked around her wrists, sending her straight into a panic.

Letting go of Revin’s hands, she opened her eyes and sat up. Even if it meant she’d be sold, she couldn’t let them restrain her again. There was no stopping the panicked response that rose up inside her.

“No!” she screamed, reaching for the cuff around her wrist.

“Stop her, she might hurt herself!” Favil cried out. Many hands grabbed her and pushed her back down on the bed. She fought against them, looking wildly around for Revin. He promised he wouldn’t let this happen. He promised!

“Don’t struggle,” the mender commanded.

The more the hands tried to hold her down, the harder she fought to get away. They were all shouting in a mix of Hissa and Space Standard. Desperate to get away, she grabbed the edge of the bed and tried to pull herself out of the men’s grip.

“By the moons, she’s strong,” one of the men commented as he got her leg in a hold she couldn’t pull free from. Even with so many Hissa grabbing and holding her down, she didn’t lash out. Violent slaves were disposed of.

“We need to immobilize her, she could be doing more damage to herself,” Honil barked. “Favil, grab her left arm. Simul, get her right.”

Honil’s orders organized the Hissa and within seconds, both her legs and one of her arms were held down.

“Please don’t!” she sobbed out, even though she knew begging was futile. They were going to tie her down, hurt her,

and leave her alone. She was helpless to stop them.

“Everyone let go!” Revin’s roar filled the room, making everyone, including her, flinch.

She could barely see him beyond the men surrounding the bed. Then he grabbed two of the men and pulled them roughly away from her. “You’re all scaring her! Let go or I’ll send all of you to the cold depths of the Unseen moon!”

Hands let go as he forced bodies away from her. He looked disheveled, as if he’d been knocked back during the scuffle around her med-bed. The last Hissa let go of her leg and she sat up and turned to face Revin. The pain medication they gave her earlier was letting her move, but she could feel the underlying agony wanting to surface. Ignoring it, she wrapped her arms around his waist, hugged tightly, and sobbed into his shirt. He hadn’t lied, and he hadn’t left. Revin was the only safe thing in her world at the moment.

“Shhhh, Kamaril,” he soothed, his voice far from the earlier roar. “No one’s going to tie you down. You’re safe.”

His deep voice seemed to vibrate into her, and her heart slowed. She rubbed her face against his chest through his shirt, trying to get as much of his smell into her as she could. She wanted to wrap herself in his scent.

The fear eased, and she looked up at him. “I trust you.”

He put his face next to hers and gave her a small kiss on the forehead, then looked at the men standing around, silently watching them. Were they waiting to pounce on her? Did she need to fear for Revin’s safety too?

“We are going to go nice and slow and we’re going to explain everything that’s about to happen,” he announced to the room. The other men murmured their agreement, and she relaxed slightly. Revin was strong. He didn’t even need to hit the other men to make them stop or listen to him, and he kept his promises. She picked a good Hissa to be the sire of her offspring.

## CHAPTER 10

### Revin

Revin silently cursed to himself as Kamaril clung to him, shaking and crying. He'd seen Favil reach over to put the monitoring cuff on Kamaril and hadn't thought anything of it. He should've known better. It was clear that Kamaril had been abused by her owners, and she'd begged them not to tie her down. Being restrained had to be a strong trigger for her. The monitoring cuff wasn't a restraint, but she couldn't have known that.

This was all his fault, but it was Kamaril who suffered.

"I'm right here, sweetling," he reminded her. "Can you lie back down for me?"

She made a negative sound against his chest. She was like a frightened animal seeking safety and shelter from him. He hated that this was happening on top of the pain she'd already endured.

"I think everyone needs to take a big step back," Revin said, eyeing his fellow Hissa. Clearly distressed, they all took clumsy steps back.

Favil spoke in a voice barely above a whisper. "We never meant to upset you."

"I only want to make you feel better," Honil added at the same volume. The four other Hissa in the room all murmured agreements keeping their voices quiet.

"No one's going to tie you down," he promised. "All everyone wants to do is make you feel better."

Kamaril turned her head enough to eye the men in the room distrustfully. "Do they have to touch me?"

"Only a little, and they'll explain everything they're going to do," Revin assured her, rubbing her back. She was holding onto him as if he was the only solid thing in her world.

“I feel fine now,” she countered. Her eyes were full of terror, but her mouth was set in a stubborn line.

“The pain medication will wear off,” Honil warned her. “If I don’t fix the underlying issue, the pain will come back. Even worse, it will kill you eventually. We’ll only touch you a little, and Revin will be at your side the entire time.”

“If I have to lie down then he has to lie down with me,” she whispered, as if afraid of voicing the demand too loudly would make everyone angry.

Revin eyed the med-bed she sat on. “I don’t think we’ll both fit on there. I’ll sit next to you, and you can hold my hand the entire time.”

She buried her face against his chest so her single word reply was muffled. “No.”

“We could push a second bed against hers,” Favil offered. “They are designed to be linked together.”

Revin gave him a nod and Favil with several others went to work moving a second med-bed into place. He could hear the clink of the beds latching onto each other. Neither one had bedding and there was a small flurry of activity and pillows and blankets were brought out. Once the bed was made up as well as possible with Kamaril still sitting there, they all stepped back.

The men had moved with light feet and none of them touched her, so Kamaril was calming a little. She’d stopped shaking, but she hadn’t loosened her grip on him.

“If you lay back, I’ll come with you,” Revin said. “Everyone will work hard to make you feel better, and I’ll be here the entire time.”

Kamaril lifted her head and took in the linked beds and hovering Hissa. Sniffing, she released him from her hug but grabbed his hand. Rolling clumsily onto the bed with a gasp of pain, she pulled him with her.

It took some shifting, but they ended up with Kamaril on her back and Revin on his side pressed tightly against her. She pulled one of his arms across her chest and hugged it with

both of hers. It was a little awkward, but it obviously made her feel better. Her eyes moved constantly, watching the men standing around, poised to move.

“Favil, could you explain the medical bracelet?” Revin prompted.

Favil took a small step forward and held up the cuff. “This needs to go around your wrist. Normally, we’d put a medical shirt on you, but because of your injury that’s not practical. This will help us monitor you. It can’t deliver a shock or hurt you. And it can’t restrain you.” He put it on himself and showed her how easy it was to tug off. “See, you can pull it off at any time. Can I put this on you now?”

“Put one on me first,” Revin ordered and straightened the arm Kamaril was hugging. Favil stepped close and clicked it around his wrist. A halo-display at the foot of the bed came to life with all types of rectangular blocks of characters and charts Revin couldn’t understand.

Kamaril watched all this and brought Revin’s wrist closer to her face. She pulled the cuff off and put it back on several times, her eyes moving from his wrist to his face, watching for a reaction. He gave her an encouraging smile.

“It doesn’t hurt,” he assured her. “I can barely tell it’s there.”

Closing her eyes and turning her face against him, she held out an arm to let Favil put one on her. She flinched when it closed and then went perfectly still. It took Revin a moment before he figured out that she was waiting for a shock of pain.

When nothing happened, she pulled her face away from Revin and brought her wrist close, examining the cuff. There was a second halo-display at the foot of the bed now. Honil was staring at it, then said something to another tech, then moved to stand on Revin’s side of the double bed.

“You have an old injury on your side,” Honil explained. “You must have hurt yourself badly in the past. You broke one of the bones there. Humans call it a floating rib.” He pointed to the bottom most bone in his ribcage. “The bone

didn't heal quite right. When you were shocked and fell, you hit the spot in just the wrong way and caused a shard of bone to come loose. Over time, it moved and punctured a spot lower in your abdomen. I know it hurts a lot, but it will be an easy thing to fix with some medication and nanos."

"You don't need to cut me open?" she asked.

Honil sucked in a breath and Revin could see he was fighting to keep his expression pleasant. "No, Kamaril, I don't need to cut you open. All I need you to do is lift your shirt. You don't even need to take it off."

The elbow of his arm was in the way of her pulling up her shirt, but when he tried to move, she whimpered and clutched at him.

"I'm only going to shift a little," he promised. "Then you tug up the hem of your shirt so Mender Honil can help you."

"I've got the nanos programmed and the limiter ready," one of the techs said, coming to stand behind Honil. He was holding an injection gun and liquid medication.

"In a moment," Honil said, keeping his eyes on Kamaril. "Would you let Revin move your shirt? He can keep his hand close and block anyone from trying to hurt you when we inject the nanos."

The mender's suggestion worked. Kamaril nodded her head and moved her grip to Revin's upper arm, gripping his bicep tight in both hands. Moving slowly, Revin pulled the shirt up until it was gathered below her breasts.

"You can lower your arm right there," Honil told him, helping to guide his arm into place. "That will keep the shirt pinned up and out of our way."

Revin let his arm relax and Kamaril shifted slightly. With his arm at this angle, she could hide her face against his pectoral muscle. He could feel her hot breath through his shirt.

"That's good, sweetling," Revin murmured.

Honil explained every step and waited for Kamaril's verbal assent before doing anything. It meant the process took much longer than normal, but the mender and all the techs showed no signs of impatience. They prepared her skin, injected the nanos, and monitored their initial progress on the halo-displays. Over the course of the next few hours, there were several more injections and a lot of talking between the mender and the techs. A second mender joined them, but he stayed at the far back of the med-bay where he watched everything on a display on the wall instead of the med-bed.

By the time Mender Honil was satisfied, Kamaril was nodding off to sleep. She would wake the moment someone got close, then relax as they moved away. To Revin's relief, even when she watched the other Hissa, it wasn't with abject fear any longer, only a lingering wariness.

Honil stepped within easy conversation distance of the bed but no closer. "Kamaril?"

"Yes, Mender Honil?" she answered, tightening her hold on Revin.

"We're all done," Honil announced softly with a relieved smile. "The nanos successfully dissolved the bone and decommissioned themselves. Your urine might appear cloudy for a few days, that's nothing to worry about. You shouldn't even be sore by tomorrow."

"I can leave?" Kamaril asked.

Honil sighed. "Not yet. You need to stay for a full cycle so we can keep monitoring you. It's rare, but occasionally there are side effects to using nanos. We're going to dim the lights and only Mender Vazil will stay." Honil pointed to the quiet mender sitting in the back. "He'll monitor you and call us back in if there are any issues. Try to sleep if you can. Rest will be good for you."

"I'm staying with you," Revin said before she could ask.

"As long as you're with me, I don't mind sleeping here," Kamaril murmured, snuggling down against him. After

the first round of nanos, she was able to turn on her side. Rolling over, she'd pressed the front of her body as close to his as possible. He'd wrapped her in his arms, a willing shield between her and the universe.

"Thank you for not hurting me," she said to Honil, her voice muffled against his chest.

"No one will ever hurt you again, Kamaril. You're a part of our society now." A longing expression crossed Honil's face before he turned on his heels and strode out of med-bay. Techs finished putting items away and left as well. Soon it was them and Vazil. He set the lights to a minimal level and turned the halo-displays on the bed off.

"I can monitor from here," he said, holding up a data pad before resuming his seat.

With everyone out of the room, Kamaril finally, truly, relaxed. Within minutes, her breathing evened out and her body went lax with sleep. Revin drifted into the half sleep all warriors developed, allowing him to rest but remain alert enough to act swiftly if needed. He'd promised to guard Kamaril, and that was what he planned to do, even from his own people if necessary.



## **Kamaril**

"Talk to her before you touch."

Revin's stern voice woke Kamaril. Startled, her eyes flew open. Mender Vazil was standing over her with his arm out, about to touch her. His eyes went wide, and he stepped back.

"I wasn't thinking," he apologized. "I was only trying to check the injection site while you slept, but I can see that was a bad idea."

The lights were still dim, and Kamaril couldn't tell how much time had passed. She felt groggy and disoriented, but Revin was with her, keeping her fear at bay. She was lying



on her back with one of Revin's legs thrown over hers and his arm draped across her chest. She must've moved in her sleep. At least this position made it easy to shift the blankets covering both of them and pull up her shirt.

The air felt cold, making her shiver and her skin break out in gooseflesh. Vazil looked over the spot and made a sound of approval.

"Very good," he said, then focused his gaze on Revin. He looked frustrated and sounded annoyed as he spoke. "I've spoken with Mender Honil, Sarin, and Section Commander Demor about this issue turning critical when we could've easily dealt with it sooner if we'd only known. This can't be allowed to happen again. She's obviously made her choice. That means it's up to you to make her understand. She has to communicate with us."

Panic washed over Kamaril. "I'm sorry I caused a problem. Please don't send me away." Something else occurred to her that made her burrow under the covers and into Revin's warm bulk. "Don't take Revin away either. I'll never be a bother again. You can cut my rations and take my room back. I don't need all that space; I can sleep on the floor somewhere."

"No Kamaril, that's not...this isn't..." Vazil rubbed a frustrated hand over his scales before meeting Revin's gaze. "Fix this."

With that, he walked back to his seat and flopped down with a disgruntled sound.

"I guess he hasn't gotten any better at talking," Revin muttered. "There is a reason Honil is your primary mender. Vazil is brilliant, but he doesn't understand how to communicate at all. It doesn't matter with the warriors, but the Decanted women need a lighter touch."

"I'm not upset," she lied and felt her face get hot at the knowing look Revin gave her.

"Of course you're upset," he countered. "I would be too if someone had been as blunt and unhelpful as Vazil."

“But what did he mean?” Kamaril pushed. “He said I don’t communicate. I can learn Hissa, but it will take me time. Would it be better if I didn’t talk to anyone until I learn?”

“That is the exact opposite of what Vazil and everyone else wants,” Revin said.

“Opposite?” she repeated. “They don’t want me to learn Hissa?”

Revin snorted. “This conversation bounced out of control faster than a gamma ray in a capture field. Let me start over and try to explain things better.”

“Please,” she agreed, rolling onto her side so she was facing him again. Their heads were on the same pillow with only a hand’s width separating their faces. Their legs were still tangled, and she found his hands to hold in hers. “I want to stay with you and not be sent away. Tell me how to be a good, um, Hissa?”

Revin beamed at her. “You’re already on the right path. Here is the most important thing you need to do to be a good Hissa: talk to us.”

“Talk to you in Hissa,” she clarified.

“In any language,” he answered. “When we were eating the other day, was your side bothering you?”

She tried to judge if it would be better to lie or tell the truth. The longer she was silent, the more Revin’s smile dimmed.

“You don’t have to say. I know the answer now,” he said with a tired sigh. “You might not have been in pain, but you weren’t comfortable. You should’ve told me, even if you thought it was nothing. All the agony you suffered could’ve been avoided with a trip to Mender Honil.”

Kamaril opened her mouth to apologize again, but Revin cut her off.

“I’m not upset with you. No one is upset with you, despite how it might have sounded when Vazil was talking.”

Revin went quiet for a moment, his eyes going unfocused as he thought. “Maybe I can make you understand using minari.”

That made her chuckle. “Minari are even farther from being Hissa than I am!”

He smiled at her amusement, then asked her a question that changed her entire perspective. “How would you feel if one of your minari hid an injury?”

# CHAPTER 11

## Kamaril

They talked at length about Kamaril learning to confide more in both Revin and other Hissa. Revin's comparison using her and the minari made her understand that she needed to speak up, but it also made her feel like a prized pet. That was better than a slave, but still something that was owned.

In the end, Kamaril was relieved when Mender Vazil did a last check and said they could leave. Her brain was tired of navigating Revin's words and her own feelings.

The medical bay lights were on full as she stood up, Revin next to her and Vazil watching her every movement with intense focus. She went slowly, expecting to feel pain, but there was nothing. Not even a twinge.

"I'm fine," she announced with a relieved smile that was mirrored on both Vazil's and Revin's faces. She stretched as Vazil told them to come back the following day for a check in. Revin tugged the medical cuffs off their wrists and handed them to the mender. Vazil took them and made a sound of dismissal.

"Go eat and relax," he ordered.

Kamaril didn't feel tired or hungry. The menders and techs had pushed her to consume a thick drink often, and she still felt full from the last one. She'd also been able to sleep when Revin was at her side. She couldn't remember if Revin drank anything, and he'd been awake and vigilant every time she woke up. He might be hungry and tired.

Revin put a hand on her lower back and guided her out of medical. The corridors were empty, and she felt a little chilled, so she pressed herself to Revin's side. He wrapped an arm around her shoulders and made a comforting sound.

"We should probably—" his comment was cut off when his data bracelet pinged. He brought his free hand up to look at it and then stopped in his tracks.

“Revin?” Kamaril asked, worried at his strange expression.

“There’s a surprise waiting for you in bay three,” he said slowly, as if choosing his words carefully. “I’m not sure if I should take you there right away or get you food and rest first.”

“A surprise?” she questioned, deeply curious.

Revin looked at her, his expression considering. Then he turned them around and started walking. “I think this is more important and will help you adjust.”

Kamaril didn’t protest or demand answers. Soon they were in corridors with Hissa working and moving around. As they passed, every single male made a show of stopping, smiling at her and tapping their fingers over their hearts. It was only after several men did this that she remembered to tap at the base of her neck back to them. When she did, their smiles turned brilliant.

“They’re all smiling,” she murmured. “No one looks angry anymore. Is the surprise in bay three for the whole ship?”

“No, sweetling, it’s entirely for you,” Revin said with a chuckle. “But I think the men are starting to realize that their frowns were disturbing for you. They’re trying very hard to make you feel welcome.”

“Oh, um, that’s nice,” she responded. She was going to say something else when a familiar sound caught her attention. Without thinking, she pulled away from Revin and started running in the direction of the sound.

Laughing, Revin kept pace with her. She could see excitement and eagerness on the faces of the Hissa she passed.

“They’re impatient to see you too!” someone called out as she flew by.

“You’re going to have your hands full with this one, Revin!” another shouted.

She ignored them and increased her pace as a familiar scent hit her nose. With her heart in her throat, she crossed the wide-open threshold of bay three to find all her minari in travel cages, yipping, growling, and howling. Skidding to a dead stop, she took in her entire pack with wide eyes.

“We were originally only going to buy the one who’d whelped just before we collected you and one other. When the Tavarian trader we commissioned tried to buy a few, they offered him the entire pack for almost the same price.”

“That can’t be right,” Kamaril said with a shake of her head. “Ti would never lose money like that.”

“I think he was concerned about losing a limb,” someone shouted from the hallway. “The Tavarian said the minari became unmanageable and the Anavac family wanted them gone.”

She looked over her shoulder to find several faces watching through the bay’s half-open doors. They were watching in curiosity and a little fear. Minari had a fierce reputation for a reason.

“What’s wrong with the animals?” someone else in the doorway asked. “They’ve been causing a ruckus all day and now suddenly they go quiet?”

Kamaril turned her attention back to the perfectly still and silent minari, all of them staring at her with their bright yellow eyes. Then Cloud lifted her big, blocky head and howled. Every single one of the pack joined it. It was the howl of finding, when a minari pack discovered a wayward member they’d been looking for.

“I missed all of you too,” Kamaril whispered, emotions clogging her throat, making it hard to talk. She turned to Revin and wrapped her arms around his chest, trapping his arms at his sides. “You’ve given me my family back. I’m yours forever!”

Then she let go and hurried to the nearest transport cage, leaving Revin standing there stunned.



## Revin

Yours forever? Did that mean she loved him? There was no doubt that she saw him as safety and comfort, which made sense. After she'd been rescued from captivity and was confused and scared, he'd been the first to understand how she was interpreting all the scowling faces. Any observant Hissa could've done the same.

What truly terrified him was the thought of her realizing that he wasn't special among the Hissa and coming to resent him. It was all complicated and frustrating in his head and he kept second guessing everything he did with her.

Seeing Kamaril kneel and unlatch a cage door broke Revin out of his thoughts and into action.

"Kamaril, perhaps you shouldn't let them out yet," he requested, hurrying to her side. He reached out to relatch the door, but Kamaril was already swinging it wide open. Revin froze in place standing right behind her, unsure if he was about to get mauled.

"Look at your pups, Cloud!" Kamaril cooed. Cloud made a grumbly sound and stood in the open door of the cage. She closed all six eyes and nuzzled Kamaril's chest with her big blocky head. Kamaril wrapped her arms around the minari's body with a joyful sound. "I'm happy to see you too."

The howling got louder as if all the minari were demanding Kamaril's attention. Startled faces disappeared from the doorway of the bay and several fully armed Hissa hurried into the room. The minari went from howling to growling at the sight of the approaching Hissa.

Confused, Kamaril let go of Cloud and sat back on her heels to look around. Revin stood to face the new arrivals, but Kamaril confronted them first.

"No, they won't hurt anyone!" she cried out, scrambling to her feet and putting herself between the armed Hissa and the caged minari. Cloud growled and hurried to

stand at Kamaril's side. Her round, unsteady pups tumbled out of the cage trying to follow their mother.

Kamaril put a comforting hand on Cloud's head. "Hush," she whispered to the minari. The beast stopped growling but didn't take her brilliant yellow eyes off the line of armed Hissa.

"Revin?" one of the men called out. "Do we need to act?"

Revin was a little ashamed that he was slow to move. In his defense, Cloud was an impressively large and intimidating animal who obviously adored Kamaril but would probably bite a limb off anyone else.

He liked all his limbs and wasn't eager to be parted from any of them. Keeping a wary eye on Cloud, Revin stepped up to stand on Kamaril's other side.

"Everything is fine, Vinor," he called out, recognizing one of the men. "The minari pack missed Kamaril and wanted her attention."

"The travel cages are too small, and they all want to greet me," Kamaril whispered to him, her face earnest. "Can we let them out? I promise they won't do anything bad."

Revin had misgivings about releasing all the minari, but he had to trust Kamaril. "All of you can leave and seal the bay doors."

No one moved.

"That seems like a bad idea," Vinor answered.

Revin could see Vinor's point. If the roles were reversed, he wouldn't leave a precious Decanted woman in a bay full of vicious minari either.

"Can you show them how well you command the minari?" Revin asked Kamaril, unsure what to expect. Except for Gruff, he had no experience with minari. Gruff had been devoted to a Decanted human named Mouse, but she had a special ability to influence and manipulate minds so he



couldn't know how much of what Gruff did was due to training or Mouse's powers.

Kamaril looked relieved at his suggestion. "Yes, of course I can."

She looked down at Cloud and said something in Anavac. The minari laid down so fast she almost squished the pups that had finally caught up with her. Chuckling, Kamaril leaned over and scooped up the pups into her arms. They wiggled for a moment, then settled down, content to suck and chew on her shirt.

"Don't shoot her," Kamaril called out to the men. "I'm going to give her a few commands."

"We won't fire unless she threatens us or you," Vinor called out. Kamaril frowned at their weapons all trained on Cloud, but then looked back to the minari and said another word in Anavac.

Cloud jumped to her feet and ran behind Kamaril where she stood stock still facing away. "That's the command to guard my back," Kamaril explained, then issued another command. Cloud raced across the bay; her speed breathtaking. Revin couldn't imagine what it would be like to be hunted by one of these animals, let alone a pack.

At Kamaril's shout, Cloud skidded to a halt and crouched, waiting for her next command. Another word had Cloud jumping to her feet, pivoting, and running back to Kamaril at the same fast pace. The minari slid to a stop next to Kamaril, her big mouth open as she panted. That was an impressive number of teeth.

Kamaril praised the beast, and Cloud made some low thrumming sounds as she pressed her body against Kamaril's legs.

"You can command all of them that well?" Vinor asked.

Kamaril nodded, then shook her head. "All of them except these." She lifted her arms a little to indicate the pups she was holding. The three of them made sounds that had

Cloud raising up on her hind legs to investigate. Kamaril soothed her with a few words and tucked the pups back against her body where they promptly went back to gnawing on her shirt. Satisfied that her pups were fine, Cloud settled back on all four feet and leaned against Kamaril again.

“These three are too young to know any command yet,” Kamaril explained. “But they can’t hurt anyone at this size, I promise.”

Kamaril’s earnest assurances about the pups made Vinor and the other men chuckle. “We’re not worried about the young ones, Kamaril. Only the mother and other adults.”

“If you’re scared, then simply shut the doors to the bay,” Kamaril offered. “None of them know how to operate hatches.”

That was met with outright laughter, and the men finally lowered their weapons. Revin could tell they were still tense but willing to follow Kamaril’s lead.

“Revin, are you sure about this?” Vinor asked.

“Yes,” Revin lied. “I have faith in Kamaril.” That wasn’t a lie.

“We’ll be stationed outside the door,” Vinor offered and then spoke up before Kamaril could object. “It’s only a precaution and if everything is fine after a few hours, we’ll leave.”

“Thank you,” Kamaril said.

Vinor and the men all tapped their fingers over their hearts, waited for Kamaril to tap at the base of her neck as best she could while holding the pups, then stepped out in the wide corridor and ordered the heavy reinforced doors shut.

“Kamaril, we should probably—” Revin started to say but Kamaril was already in motion. Setting the pups down next to Cloud, she ran to the next cage and opened the door wide open to let another massive female minari out.

Eyes wide and adrenaline pounding through his system, Revin went stock still and watched Kamaril open all

the cages. He'd thought facing down an overwhelming force of Kaklans months ago had been hard, but it was nothing compared to so many yellow eyes staring up at him.

Then one of them focused on him and growled.

This was not how he expected to die.

"I regret nothing," he whispered to Kamaril as the beast stalked closer. "But I wish I could have seen our children."

## CHAPTER 12

### Kamaril

Kamaril snorted out a laugh when she saw Nibbler greeting Revin. The poor Hissa looked terrified and probably thought he was about to be eaten, but Nibbler's growl was one of interest not hostility. After they spent so much time cuddling and touching, Revin was covered in her scent, making him safe from the minari unless he acted with outright aggression.

"He wants to say hi," Kamaril explained. "You should drop to your knees and let him bump your chest with his head. Then make a fist and bump the front of his chest to reciprocate."

She let Tizzy out of her cage and demonstrated the process. Tizzy wrapped all her long neck tentacles around Kamaril's arms and drew her close. Tizzy was one of the biggest minari in the pack but conversely was also the least aggressive. This minari wouldn't care if she never got to hunt again as long as she got attention and snuggles.

While Tizzy cuddled into her, Kamaril looked over to see how Revin was doing. He'd dropped to his knees, but his body was stiff and his expression tense. Nibbler was pulling back from pushing his thick head into Revin's chest. Revin made a fist, but hesitated, eyeing the minari with distrust.

"You don't have to bump him back," Kamaril called out. "But if you don't, he'll think you're rejecting him. He's sensitive to things like that."

Revin met her gaze. "Sensitive? As in I'll hurt his feelings?"

"They're pack animals and very social," Kamaril chided him as she tugged her hand free of Tizzy and went to the next cage. "They'll accept you as part of the pack because you're with me, but it would be better if you could bond with them too."

Revin muttered something she couldn't hear and then gently pushed his knuckles into Nibbler. The minari exaggerated being pushed back, as if Revin was a pup being taught proper social cues. Then he bounded off to join the other minari gathered around her.

As she finished letting all the minari out of their cages, Revin stood up and watched with an uneasy expression. Once everyone was free and gathered around her, she looked around the bay. It was a nice large space with plenty of room for them to run and play. Except for a row of droids on charging ports at one end, it was empty of anything but the cages and piles of supplies.

A look at the supplies made Kamaril chuckle. It seemed that Ti had given them everything in the kennel building along with the minari. There were bags of feed, boxes of grooming tools, crates of bedding, medication, and all dishes and bowls for food preparation and feeding.

As she looked at their supplies, she thought about the practicalities of having the minari on a ship. Thankfully, one of the supply boxes was full of deodorizing absorption mats. She could line them up at the far end of the bay. Once she showed them and gave the proper command, the minari would know that was where they should eliminate when needed.

She could also spread their beds out so everyone had enough space to separate if they wanted to sleep alone. They might like living in a pack but some minari liked to stretch out while slumbering.

A scuffle caught her attention, and she found Nibbler and Eager tussling. She didn't know how long they'd been cooped up in the travel cages, but they could all probably use some exercise. She dug around until she found the prey ball.

"To me," she called out in Anavac to get the pack's attention. When she held up the ball, she could feel their excitement. Bouncing it once against the ground to activate it, she pulled back her arm and tossed it. All the minari watched the ball fly through the air and hit the ground. As it was designed to do, the ball veered off wildly, emitting chirping

sounds like a bokonic, a small animal her pack often hunted for extra food.

Even Cloud quivered, eager to chase the prey ball, but they all remained sitting, waiting for her command.

“Hunt!” she called out. There was a flurry of motion and the minari raced at the prey ball, all eyes open, tentacles laid flat against their bodies, their nubby tails straight back. Kamaril laughed as the pack moved as one to follow the erratic prey ball. The ball was designed to emit both smell and sound that mimicked a bokonic and the minari wouldn’t be able to catch it until the charge wore down.

“That’s terrifying,” Revin muttered as he stepped up next to her. He pointed to Whisper who was nudging Cloud’s puppies to follow the pack. “What’s going on with them?”

“Whisper is the pack’s nanny,” she explained. “He always stays behind with the pups when there’s a hunt. Because they’re so close, he’s urging the pups to follow and practice moving and hunting.”

“But isn’t Cloud the mother?”

“Sure, but they’re a pack,” Kamaril said. “No one does anything alone. Whisper has been helping raise pups for years and all the females trust him.” She laughed as the fattest puppy tumbled over his own feet while the other two easily outpaced him. Whisper was there with a gentle grunt and a helping tentacle to set the puppy back on his feet.

The pack came flying by, chasing the prey ball and causing the pups to change course and tumble into each other, emitting little yips of dismay. Whisper was quick to help them untangle themselves and get them moving again. As one, the pack crossed half the bay before the pups had even moved a few paces.

“I’m going to name the one in the back Bilo,” Kamaril decided. “The one in the lead will be Quick, and the one in the middle is Long.”

Revin gave her a curious look. “I understand naming the one going the fastest Quick, but why Long and what is

Bilo?”

“Long because her tail is going to be longer than normal,” Kamaril explained, then grinned. “Bilo is the word for the weight Anavac put on when winter is near. His little round body makes me think he was born ready for winter.”

Revin smiled as he turned fully to face her. “What do we need to do to make all of them comfortable for the rest of the journey to Hissa?” he asked.

Kamaril blinked at his question. She probably shouldn’t be surprised by his thoughtfulness, but she wasn’t used to anyone helping her or even thinking of the practical needs of the pack.

“There’s also the issue of figuring out where we’re going to sleep,” he added before she could speak. “I’m guessing you’ll want to bed down here in the bay, so we’ll need to bring some furniture and maybe some of the temp-walls we use in the exercise room.”

She gave the only response that popped into her head. “You are the best male.”

She grabbed him in a hug and almost cried because she was so happy.



The prey ball kept the pack entertained and active while she and Revin set everything up. They stacked all the travel cages out of the way then organized all the supplies they’d be using as their living space in the corner. Revin sent a list of items to Vinor and soon things started arriving.

At first, the Hissa in the corridor would only open one of the bay doors halfway and shove everything in quickly before shutting the door again. After the fourth time they did this and nothing happened, they started to relax. Soon they were opening the double doors fully and taking their time to bring in the items. By the time they were finished setting up temporary walls, a bed, and tables, the Hissa were openly watching the minari chase the prey ball and didn’t seem so apprehensive of the beasts any longer.

“Do they ever give up?” Vinor asked.

“Not unless I call them off,” Kamaril answered with a prideful smile. “My pack are master hunters. They’ve won awards for both skill and tenacity.”

Calan stood next to Vinor, but he was looking at the pups and Whisper. They’d taken over one of the beds and were all peacefully asleep. “These guys wore out fast though.”

Kamaril chuckled. “They’re not very old. Come back when they’re fully grown, and I can guarantee you Quick will be the lead minari in a chase. She’s already got the long legs of a good runner.”

“You really know these animals, don’t you?” Vinor murmured.

“They’re all I know,” Kamaril said with a little shrug.

“Can you show us some of the other stuff they can do?” Calan asked.

Kamaril frowned. “They aren’t show minari,” she warned him. “They don’t know tricks, only hunting and tracking skills. But there are a few other things I can show you if you like.”

The men nodded eagerly, and Kamaril put her fingers to her lips to let out a shrill whistle. She saw Revin wince and shot him an apologetic look then focused on the pack. The moment she whistled, they abandoned the prey ball and sped back to her.

When they were halfway across the bay, she shouted again. “Belly!”

They all skidded to a stop and dropped to their bellies. She shouted out praise then called commands to individuals. “Cloud, Tizzy, Eager, Hallow, flank left!”

The minari she named got up and ran to her left, stopping when she shouted the drop-to-the-floor command again. She kept calling out names and giving directions until she had groups of minari arranged in a large semi-circle.



“They’re so obedient!” Calan exclaimed as the prey ball went zipping past. Some of the minari watched with one or two sets of eyes but none of them moved.

“They’re better disciplined than the Kaklan soldiers we’ve faced,” Vinor said. “You should be very proud of your pack, Kamaril. They’re a tribute to your skills.”

Kamaril felt her face flush from the compliment. “Thank you, but I’m only their keeper. They are the ones with impeccable bloodlines.”

“They might be well bred, but you’re the one who saw to everything they needed, including training,” Revin argued. “My guess is that minari could be from the most distinguished of bloodlines, but if they’re not trained well, they won’t win awards.”

“Perhaps.” Kamaril hadn’t thought of it that way. She felt warmed by their compliments but also embarrassed by the attention.

The prey ball zipped past the minari at the very top of the semi-circle and Kamaril released all the minari to start chasing it again. They were off in a flurry of movement and excited calls to each other.

“There are a few more things we could demonstrate, but I need varied terrain to show you,” she explained. “There’s nothing for them to climb or jump on here.”

“We could put together something,” Calan offered.

“Our journey isn’t that long,” Revin pointed out.

“I guess, but there’s no reason the minari can’t have an obstacle course to play on even while they travel.”

The comment about their destination made Kamaril’s heart pound. “Will your home planet allow minari? Many consider them an invasive species and won’t even let domesticated ones in.”

Revin wrapped an arm around her waist and drew her close. “The minari will stay with you always,” he promised.

“If no one wants to be near them, we’ll go out into the jungle and carve out our own place.”

“You think other Hissa won’t want to be near them because they’re scared?” Kamaril guessed, snuggling into him. “I can show everyone how well behaved they are. I’ve only ever had a minari maul someone outside of my command once and that wasn’t Uli’s fault. I told the visitor not to use a shock stick on a minari, but he did anyway.”

Revin opened his mouth, but Calan spoke first.

“No one will get close enough to be mauled,” he announced cheerfully. “Mouse’s minari Gruff is smelly enough, but that’s only one minari. A whole pack of them makes me want to shove perfumed plugs up my nose.”

Kamaril’s jaw dropped. “You think they smell bad?”

They all turned to face her, equally surprised. Did this mean all the Hissa thought the minari reeked?

“Uh, no?” Calan answered even as he nodded his head slightly.

Revin stifled a laugh. “Smell is a personal preference. I’m sure no one else agrees with Calan.”

“You can’t trust his sense of smell,” Vinor said. “He was dropped on his head as a child.”

“And I drop him on his head at least once every few cycles during training,” Lerin said with a laugh. “It’s all added up to a male who isn’t sure what is going on around him.”

Calan looked both annoyed and amused before he spoke to her again. “My Space Standard isn’t as good as Revin’s or Vinor’s. I didn’t mean to say they smelled bad, only distinct.”

Kamaril knew he was lying but wasn’t sure how to respond. Most of the Hissa couldn’t be that offended by the smell of her minari if they’d brought her entire pack onto the ship.

“I could bathe them more often,” she offered.

“Forget what Calan said,” Revin told her.

Just then, the prey ball’s charge gave out and Jumper got ahold of it, shaking the ball vigorously. The rest of the pack gathered around, sounding triumphant howls and yips.

“We need to put out water for them,” Kamaril said. “And I don’t know when they’ve been fed last.”

“Tell us what to do,” Lerin offered. “We can help.”

“I’m used to doing it alone,” Kamaril argued, biting her lip with worry.

“Please, let us share the burden,” Vinor requested.

Making up her mind, Kamaril pointed to the stacks of dishes. “If you could start lining those on the table, we could begin prepping their meal.”

The look of approval on Revin’s face made her acceptance of help worth it.

## CHAPTER 13

### Revin

The amount of work that went into preparing a meal for all the minari was surprising. Revin assumed Kamaril would slop food into the dishes and then give them out. He was wrong.

Each minari had a bowl prepared specifically for their requirements, including portion size and supplements. A few were on medication that had to be added to the food. There was still more to do even after all the bowls were prepared. They'd spread out the mats so each minari could have a bed of their own with a little space in-between, except for Cloud, who got several mats pushed together.

One by one, Kamaril called each minari by name and led them to a bed. Obediently, they sat and waited as she gave them several commands that Revin guessed meant that was their new spot. Then she placed the bowls in front of them and walked away. Not a single minari ate until she finished and called out a last command in Anavac, then they fell on their food like ravenous beasts.

One animal bit the bowl by accident in his haste to get to the food. Now he understood why all the bowls were dented and misshapen. Those bowls weren't made of a lightweight metal either, they were heavy and solid. By the expression on the other men's faces, Revin wasn't the only one impressed.

"By the moons," Vinor hissed. "These animals are a force to be reckoned with. I thought they were ignoring the food because they weren't hungry."

"They're always hungry," Kamaril said with a grin. "I've never met a full minari, even after gorging themselves. Their stomachs can double in size to accommodate a large meal."

"That's a handy adaptation if you're not sure when your next meal might be," Calan commented.

“These animals ignored their own hunger on your command,” Vinor continued. “One of the most pressing base needs.”

“I told you they were good minari,” Kamaril replied, looking confused. Revin wasn’t sure they could explain to her that outside her pack, minari had a reputation of biting or eating their handlers. It didn’t happen often, but there were enough stories floating around that everyone heard about them. Revin had trusted that the minari had enough affection for Kamaril to be safe, but he’d never expected this astonishing level of discipline.

“Have you ever been bitten?” he asked.

She snorted. “Of course. When an animal is hurt or scared, they’re going to strike out. But it’s only happened a few times, and they never bit hard enough to break a bone or sever a limb.”

“How nice of them,” Vinor muttered, almost making Revin laugh. “While they’re eating, we should think about where you’re going to sleep, Kamaril. This bay is a little open.”

She gave him a confused look and pointed to the bed they’d brought in earlier. “There?”

Revin laughed at Vinor’s expression. “I think he meant that you might want more privacy. We have a few panels of the temporary walls left; we could put them around the bed.”

“Shift change is approaching, but we should be able to put them up before we need to leave,” Calan offered.

“And I’ll report to Sarin and Section Commander Demor that you don’t need guards at the door anymore,” Vinor added with a smirk. “I dare anyone to bother you!”

Revin laughed and Kamaril smiled along although it was obvious she didn’t understand Vinor’s joke.

It was quick work to set up the last of the temporary walls and create a separate “bedroom” for him and Kamaril. He noted that none of the men said a word or even gave him a suggestive look. It seemed they’d all accepted Kamaril’s claim

on him. After several mistakes were made, the Hissa had gotten much better at respecting the Decanted women's choices in warriors.

No sooner had the last male left than a delivery droid arrived with food for the two of them. All the minari had finished their meals and most were dozing or lazily grooming themselves. One of them whined a little bit when he and Kamaril carried their food into the bedroom, but a soft word from Kamaril had the beast settling back down with a huff.

"That's Stumpy. I usually let her bed down with me when it's cold," Kamaril explained.

"I might take up more room in the bed than Stumpy, but I'm sure I can keep you warm too," Revin offered with a grin.

Kamaril chuckled and set the food down on the floor next to the bed. They'd neglected to put a table or chairs in here, but he'd remedy that tomorrow. Sitting down and leaning her back against the bed, Kamaril let out a tired sigh.

"I'm not sure if I'm more tired or hungry," she admitted.

Revin cursed himself. No sooner did they leave medical than he brought her here to exhaust herself taking care of the minari. "How often do the minari need to eat?"

She blinked at him. "Once a cycle, unless the weather is very cold, then three times every two cycles."

Relief hit Revin. "That's good. You'll be able to sleep almost an entire cycle after you eat."

She smiled at him fondly. "I don't think I'll need that much sleep, but yes, let's eat!"

They chatted about minari care and Kamaril told him a few funny stories from her early days of learning to train minari. Soon the food was gone and Kamaril's eyes kept dropping closed. Standing up, Revin returned the empty food tray to the waiting delivery droid. After the droid left, he shut and secured the bay doors, then shut off all the lights. The running lights on the bay floor gave him plenty of light to see.

He returned to the bedroom area to find Kamaril where he'd left her, sound asleep.

Picking her up, he slid her into bed. He debated for a moment about getting in with her, but when she sleepily murmured his name and blindly reached out for him, the decision was made.

Stripping off his shirt and shoes, he settled himself in the bed next to her, elated when she curled up against him. He fell asleep to a chorus of minari snores in his ears and the sweet smell of his Kamaril in his nose.



## **Kamaril**

Kamaril woke up overheated and trapped. The reason for both was the Hissa snuggled up against her back with both arms wrapped around her waist and one leg thrown over hers.

“Revin?” she whispered, but he didn't respond. Guilt hit her. Had he slept at all while she'd been in medical? Then they'd come here and done nothing but labor. He had to be exhausted. As much as she didn't want to disturb him, she really needed to shift positions a bit.

“Revin, can you roll on your back?” she asked his sleeping form. Again, he didn't move. Maybe she could shift him without waking him up.

Grabbing one of his arms with both of hers, she lifted it off. He grumbled in his sleep but didn't fight her. Soon she was free and gently rolling him onto his back. By then, her eyes had adjusted to the dim light coming from the floor.

After stretching and pulling the covers off both of them, she moved onto her side to face Revin. She thought to snuggle up to his side and drape an arm and maybe a leg over him. She didn't think he'd mind.

She was about to get comfortable when she noticed something interesting that made her go still—the front of his pants was tented.

Sitting up, she leaned over to get a closer look. Judging by the clear outline the fabric provided, his cock was full of blood and ready to mate. It looked as large as it had felt pressed against her thigh back when he'd given her so much pleasure with his fingers.

After spending so many years caring and breeding minari, Kamaril was familiar with how mating worked. She'd even offered Revin sex by presenting to him. He turned her down but only because he worried that she felt obligated.

Embarrassment hit her as she thought of that moment. She shouldn't have tried to entice him like a minari would. He was a Hissa male, not a minari. He might even want them to face each other during breeding. Being able to watch his expression sounded like a good idea to her. It was probably good that he'd refused her then, but today was a new cycle. She didn't want to wait anymore.

Faced with Revin's stiff member, she debated taking the initiative. Wouldn't that prove that she wasn't doing anything out of a sense of indebtedness?

Yes, yes it would!

Biting her lip, she eased her fingers under the waistband of his pants. It was easy to overcome the tension in the fabric and draw it down far enough to allow his manhood to spring free.

*He's saying hello to me*, she thought with a grin. She gave herself a moment to admire Revin. His swollen cock was proportional and throbbed with a network of raised veins. The head was a darker green than the rest of him and as she watched, drops of liquid beaded at the hole there and dripped down the side.

What would he taste like? She debated for a moment before lowering her mouth and licking the head. A salty flavor hit her tongue that was all Revin. The warmth in her belly flared up and her skin felt hot again, but this time it had nothing to do with having too many blankets or being cuddled too tightly.



How far could she go before he woke up? Would he let her keep exploring?

Her internal debate was ended abruptly when the focus of her lust spoke up.

“Kamaril?” His voice was husky from sleep. “What’re you doing, sweetling?”

Fear hit her hard and fast. What she’d done might go against so many different gender norms or even laws! She was an idiot!

She moved her eyes to his, helpless to answer as fear choked her voice. To her astonishment, Revin didn’t look angry or upset. His expression was...confused?

“Did I do that in my sleep, or did you help?” he asked, eyeing his exposed cock. “I’ve had a few vivid dreams about you but nothing that pulled my pants down on their own.”

His amusement eased her tension. “I noticed you were, um, hard. I wanted to see what you looked like.”

“Did you lick me too?” he asked.

“Minari will sometimes lick each other there to, uh, judge if the other is receptive,” she admitted.

“I’m receptive,” Revin assured her. “Trust me, I’m very receptive. I don’t even mind if you want to lick or suck or even nibble me a little bit.”

“Then I can do it more?” she asked, realizing that Revin was accepting her sexual overture. “Can we breed?”

Revin went still for a moment, his expression blank. “How about we make love instead?”

“Will you enjoy it?” she asked, unsure about the expression. Love was an emotion. How did one perform it?

“Yes,” he answered simply. “And more importantly, so will you.”

“Then yes, let’s do that!” she agreed, then tacked on a quick, “Please.”

Reaching out, he drew her down on top of him and guided her lips to his. "I know I should wait," he murmured. "But I can't. Forgive me, sweetling."

Kamaril didn't get the chance to assure her there was nothing to forgive. Their lips met and thinking gave way to feeling as heat and anticipation washed through her body.

## CHAPTER 14

### Revin

Kamaril moaned as they kissed. It was probably a bad idea to be doing this so soon. He should give her more time to explore her freedom and understand what it meant. It would kill him if she ever looked back and regretted what they did together.

Then he thought of her hand on him, her tongue tasting him. That had to be enough to prove she'd picked him, didn't it? Besides, if he didn't get another taste of her, he might die of need.

Withdrawing from the kiss, he waited until her eyes opened. "I'm going to take my clothes off. Then I'm going to take your clothes off. Is that acceptable?"

She nodded her head quickly and reached for the hem of his shirt. He stilled her movement with his hands over hers.

"Let me do this," he requested. She let go and watched him with lust-filled eyes.

He maintained eye contact as he got off the bed. He lost sight of her briefly while pulling his shirt off. Once the fabric was out of the way, he found her staring at his chest with such intensity it was almost as if her gaze had weight behind it. He hooked his fingers in the waistband of his pants, drew them down and stepped out. Naked, he straightened and let her gaze roam over him.

It was hard, but he stood there and let her look. Her expression was serious as she took in his body, running her eyes over every part of him, even looking down at his bare feet. He'd never worried about being seen as inadequate before, but her examination made him want to shield himself.

Licking her lips, she got on her knees and moved closer to the edge of the bed. Relief hit him hard. She wasn't going to reject him. If anything, she looked excited again. Thank the moons!

He was close enough to the bed to make it easy for her to remain kneeling on the bed and reach out and lay both palms flat against his chest, the tips of her fingers resting on his collarbone.

“You’re so beautiful,” she breathed, running her hand down his chest.

He wanted to argue that she was the beautiful one, and he was only an average Hissa, but her touch stole his breath. She explored every ridge and valley as she slowly made her way to where his stiff cock was begging for attention.

“You don’t have any hair anywhere,” she murmured, her hot breath wafting across his skin.

“N-no,” he stuttered.

Kamaril’s expression turned clinical as she continued to examine him. Finally she looked up at him shyly.

“If you were a minari you’d have extra skin right here,” she said, rubbing her hand around the base of his cock.

All he could manage was a grunt as she continued to explore him.

“You wouldn’t have these,” she said, cupping his balls in her other hand. “Males keep these hidden and safe deep inside them. The skin here feels softer than the rest of you.”

She massaged his balls with care as she spoke, making his hard cock twitch in her grip, desperate for more attention.

“When males are interested in a female, they’ll bring her things,” she explained, eyes still focused down and her hands massaging him. “When Racer was courting Cloud, he’d bring her pretty rocks. She ended up with a small pile of them near her kennel. When she accepted his advances, he was ecstatic and did three runs around the building before he settled enough to mount her.”

“I haven’t brought you anything,” he argued, feeling like an inadequate male.

“It’s like you brought me an entire pack of minari as a courting gift,” she countered. “That is more than I ever

dreamed of asking for. I'm very receptive to you, Revin."

"H-h-how do male minari make females feel good?" he asked.

Kamaril raised her eyes to meet his. "They will lick her and touch her with their tentacles. When they penetrate, they do a rocking motion that the females enjoy."

Because so much of his blood was gathered in a place that wasn't near his brain at all, it took him an embarrassingly long time to figure out that she was telling him something about how she might like to be treated.

"Are the males gentle or forceful?" he asked.

"Both," she answered, a wide smile unfurling across her face. "They're slow and gentle until the female presents and then they'll be strong and hold her still under them. But they don't hurt the female. She'd rip them to shreds if they did something she didn't like."

Revin almost chuckled. "I'll make a note of that."

She gave him a little nod then looked to where her hands held him. "I want this. But I'm a little intimidated. You're probably experienced and all I know are Anavac and minari mating practices. Not Hissa or even human customs, only the most basic mechanics of the act."

Pulling a deep breath into his lungs, Revin tugged her hands away. Most of him didn't want her to stop, but the part of him that wanted her to experience joy was a strong motivator.

"Let me see if I can be a good minari male for you, my female," he murmured, reaching for her shirt. She let him pull it off over her head and then he urged her to lie down on the bed. "You should tell me if I'm not doing it right because I don't know how minari do things."

A relieved look crossed her features. "Yes, I can do that," she agreed and settled on her back.

"They're hunting animals," he commented as he knelt on the bed over her, legs on either side of her thighs. Going

down on all fours, he put his nose to the side of her neck. “They would rely a lot on their sense of smell. I’m already addicted to your scent.”

He ran his nose down her neck, pausing and kissing her skin as he moved. When he was at the swell of her left breast, he paused. “I haven’t seen anything like this on a minari, but if the females smell as good as you smell to me, then I’m sure the males would lick them thoroughly everywhere.”

“Yes.” That one word was a breathless whisper.

He licked over her tight nipple, then drew it between his lips. She moaned and arched against his mouth. He covered her other breast with his hand and squeezed gently, massaging the soft mound. Pulling away, he blew air over the turgid peak.

“No, bad!” Kamaril growled and wrapped a hand around the back of his head. She urged his face back down and he willingly complied, a grin on his lips.

She’d objected and in a forceful way! It made him ecstatic, and all his doubt at their coupling disappeared.



## **Kamaril**

When Revin pulled away again, she started to growl and grab at him, but he wasn’t stopping, only switching to her other breast. She moaned as he sucked that peak into his mouth. She knew the end goal would be his cock between her legs, and she wasn’t afraid. Not afraid at all.

Well, maybe a little afraid.

His fingers had felt so good when they’d given her pleasure back in her room the night he’d brought food. What if his cock didn’t feel as good? What if she didn’t get to have the same experience?

She was sure Revin would still make it feel nice, but could it possibly be as explosive as before?

Revin raised his head and looked at her. "I'm going to take off your pants," he warned her. Eager to help, she moved her hands down only to have him make a negative sound. "Please let me."

Stilling her hands, she watched him move down the bed. When he gripped the top, she lifted her hips so he could easily slide the garment down. Then she bent her knees, and he was tugging the pants off her bare feet and tossing them to the floor.

Grabbing her knees, he urged her legs apart and knelt between them. Suddenly, she felt horribly exposed as the cold air touched the most intimate parts of her. Hunching down, he put his lips on the inside of her thigh just above her knee. Then moved to kiss a little higher. He worked his way up, kissing and licking her skin while making happy sounds. Her breasts ached to be touched again, but this slow progress made her relax and realize he wouldn't rush her into anything.

By the time he was halfway up her thigh, she wondered how far he would go. Then his face nuzzled her sex, and he breathed in deep like a man who'd been starved.

"Your lust smells amazing," he murmured, fingers moving to part her labia. "I'll never get enough of your scent."

She thought he'd touch her with his fingers, like before. Instead, he pressed his face into her sex. Gasping, she went rigid and waited to see what he would do.

"So good!" he exclaimed, his voice muffled. She couldn't see his face, but she felt his tongue lick all the way up her sex in one long, languid movement. When it slid across her clit, she shuddered.

"There, please!" she begged.

His answer was to lick the length again. And then again, never staying long enough in one place to let her press against him. Every pass was pleasurable but far too brief and when he went to do it a fourth time, she growled and pressed a hand to the back of his head.

His chuckle vibrated against her skin, then he sucked the little bundle of nerves into his mouth. She screamed and reached above her head to grab the edge of the mattress in tight fists. Pleasure so intense it was almost painful washed through her body.

She couldn't think, couldn't speak, and for a moment, she couldn't breathe as a powerful orgasm hit her like a tidal wave. He didn't stop working his lips and tongue until his touch became too much and she pushed him away.

Panting, she looked down to find him staring up at her, eyes glowing a bright lilac and his scales solid purple.

“Mine!” he growled.

She was too dazed from the orgasm to do anything but blink at him as he rose up and grabbed her thighs. He flipped her over onto her stomach. Gripping her hips, he lifted her and pushed her legs apart with a knee. Folding his body over hers, he put his mouth to her ear.

“This is how a male takes a female, right?” he asked, his voice low and dangerous. “I'm going to take you, mate. When I'm done, we'll be covered in each other's scent, and everyone will know who mounted you.”

His possessive words made her shiver. Then he fitted his mouth to her shoulder and bit down, making her gasp. It wasn't hard enough to break the skin, but it was strong enough that it might leave some marks.

She loved it!

With her flesh held between his teeth, he growled, the vibration skittering across her skin and making her buck under him. She wasn't moving out of protest; she simply couldn't be still any longer.

Revin must've understood because he didn't let go. That's when she realized she was moaning and begging.

“Please, Revin! Please!” She didn't know what she was saying or begging for, but it seemed he did.



Releasing her from the bite, he kissed the abused flesh and moved a hand under her. He palmed a breast and kneaded the flesh before rolling the nipple gently between his fingers.

“I like it when you say my name like that,” he said. “Breathless and pleading. Beg me to mount you, mate.”

“Yes!” she agreed quickly, pressing her hips back against him. She could feel his stiff member against the back of her leg, and it only took a little maneuvering to have it between her spread legs. Slick trickled down the inside of her thigh as she tried to impale herself on Revin’s cock.

“No,” he growled, letting go of her breast to wrap an arm around her waist and hold her still. “We go at my pace.”

She whimpered, then cried out when he rubbed his length up and down her sex. The turgid flesh dragged lightly over her clit, making her body shudder. Closing her legs around his length, she tried to hold him against her.

With a growl, he moved his head to her other shoulder and bit down. With a moan, she opened her legs back up, and he started moving his shaft like before. It felt good, but it wasn’t nearly enough pleasure, and she could feel the edges of the next orgasm looming. She wanted it so badly and Revin was teasing her!

The hand holding her waist let go and went back to her breast as he released her flesh from between his teeth.

“Who do you belong to?” he asked in a guttural voice between licks to her abused skin.

“You,” she moaned without hesitation, tilting her head to the side to invite him to bite her again.

“Say my name,” he demanded, grazing his teeth against the sensitive skin there.

“I belong to Revin,” she repeated.

“And who do I belong to?” he demanded, nipping at her earlobe.

She didn’t understand what he wanted at first, then it hit her. “Me. You belong to me!”

“Good girl,” he praised. He stopped tormenting her breast to reach between her legs and grip himself. “I’m going to reward you, sweetling.”

She whimpered with anticipation as he slotted the tip of his erection against her entrance. She braced for him to thrust violently into her, but he didn’t. He eased himself forward until only the tip was inside her.

It wasn’t enough! She needed all of him!

She tried to press back, but his arm went around her waist to hold her still again. She growled in frustration and flashed her teeth at him over her shoulder. It was something a minari might do to warn a partner, and he let loose with a low, dark chuckle.

“My fierce Kamaril,” he said, his low voice vibrating against her skin. “My beautiful mate. Next time, we’ll make it so you can bite me back.”

She liked that idea. She wanted to leave marks on his skin like he was leaving marks on hers.

Then he slid into her fully and all thinking stopped. He was big, but it didn’t hurt. She felt full and stretched in the most delicious way. He paused and kissed her neck before whispering in her ear.

“Talk to me, sweetling.” There was no demand or darkness in his tone, only gentle concern.

“Keep going,” she begged with a moan.

He let out an explosive breath and pulled his hips back, sliding out of her. When he had almost completely withdrawn, he stopped and pushed back in. His movements felt good, but not fast enough.

“More,” she begged, trying to move her hips under him.

“I’ll give you more, sweetling,” he promised. He dropped his arm from around her waist and she thought he was going to start thrusting harder. Instead, he pressed his fingers to where he was splitting her open. He found her clit and

started rubbing at the same time he moved his hard cock in and out of her. His actions drove the air out of her lungs in one harsh breath.

“Oh!” her arms started to shake as tension built in her body. She gave up on holding her shoulders up and let her chest drop to the bed. This changed the angle of his penetration and pressed his fingers harder against her.

She cried out, her voice muffled against the bedding as another orgasm ripped through her.

“Yes,” Revin roared, his thrusting becoming more violent as her body seized with pleasure. “Grip me tight, mate.”

Suddenly, Revin was pressing hard inside of her, shouting a wordless exclamation of pleasure. Warmth flooded her, making her feel more connected to Revin than any other person she’d ever known.

“You’re mine,” she whispered so softly she wasn’t sure she was even making a sound. “And I’m going to keep you for always.”

## CHAPTER 15

### Kamaril

“To me!” Kamaril called out in Anavac when two of the minari diverted down the wrong corridor. She knew it was because the galley was that way. Wink and Hallow were always trying to sneak off to beg for treats from the Hissa working there. They’d gotten away with it once, so now they tried every time.

Revin chuckled as the two minari trotted back and rejoined the group, their neck tentacles pulled tightly against their bodies. “They look disappointed.”

“They are,” Kamaril said with a grin. Revin had gotten good at judging minari body language. It proved how dedicated he was to the pack and her. It was amazing to think how much her life had changed in a short time and continued to change for the better.

Five days had passed since she’d been released from medical and presented with the minari. The Hissa crew avoided the animals at first, but within a day, they were finding excuses to visit the bay. Revin claimed it was because they wanted to be with Kamaril, but she was sure he was wrong. The minari were far more interesting than her.

Three days ago, Section Commander Demor gave her permission to run the minari around the ship on a designated path at a set time. This allowed them to shut down cross corridors and warn the crew to stay out of her way. After witnessing her well-behaved pack during the first run, the commander agreed she could do it every day. Between the runs and chasing the prey ball, the pack was getting enough exercise to be happy.

The minari weren’t the only ones who were content. Kamaril was the happiest she’d ever been. Revin assured her none of the minari would ever be sold or given away unless she agreed to it. Her pack was safe, and she got to spend her days with them and her nights with Revin.

She felt so lucky that sometimes she would wake in the middle of the night in a panic that she'd dreamed everything. Whenever that happened, Revin was there, warm and comforting to soothe her back to sleep.

An unfamiliar Hissa poked his head out a nearby door, interrupting her thoughts. "Are the pups with you?"

Kamaril wasn't expecting that so when she startled, the minari all turned to the Hissa as one and growled out a warning. The male's eyes went wide, and he ducked back in, slamming the door behind him. Revin's laugh kept Kamaril from panicking.

"Yorin won't make the mistake of popping out unexpectedly again," Revin declared, striding to the door and opening it.

Kamaril could see Yorin was standing away from the door and looked ready to bolt. Even as Revin promised her pack was safe, she was quick to assure Yorin that he wasn't in any danger.

"They only growled at you because I was surprised," she said. "The pups aren't old enough to run with the pack, but Surprise is still very young. Would you like to meet him?"

She called Surprise over and ordered him to "make friends" with Yorin. Making friends was a command that told the minari to obey the commands of the new person. Surprise trotted up and sat in front of Yorin, waiting for a command.

"He's on the small side, isn't he?" Yorin said, relaxing a little.

"He's only a few months old," she explained. "He'll fill out over the next year."

Yorin started to reach out a hand, then froze and glanced over at her. "I know the pups like to be touched and petted, but do the adults like it too?"

Kamaril nodded eagerly and moved to stand behind Surprise. "Most of them love to be scratched here." She worked her fingers between the tallest spikes at the center of

Surprise's back and started scratching. All six of Surprise's eyes closed, and he leaned into her fingers.

"He likes that!" Yorin said and reached out to scratch as well. With two sets of hands petting him, Surprise was in heaven and she could feel him waver on his feet a little. He'd topple over with ecstasy if they kept going.

Behind her, the rest of the pack was getting restless. Nibbler was teasing Cloud by nipping at her hind legs and Wink was trying to jump on Tizzy's back. They were barely into their run so all the minari still had a lot of energy to burn off.

"Can we join you?" a voice asked, making Kamaril turn to find four Hissa standing at the tail end of the pack.

"Um, we need to get back to running," she explained. "But you're welcome to come by the bay and visit with the minari there."

The four males smiled and the one in the front shook his head. "I meant, can we run with you?"

Revin was quick to step up and stand slightly ahead of her, as if blocking her from these new Hissa. "I don't know, Bomen. The minari keep a pretty quick pace and judging by the last triads we did together, you're not much of a runner."

That had to be some kind of inside joke because the other Hissa laughed and Bomen looked mildly embarrassed.

"I wasn't feeling well that day, but I'm more than capable of keeping up for at least one circuit of the ship." He focused his gaze on her. "Don't listen to Revin. He's jealous because his idea of marksmanship is simply being able to fire a weapon even if it doesn't hit anything."

"This is Bomen, one of the ship's gunners and auto-firing controllers," Revin explained, then pointed to the next male. "This is Hawin. He digs in the dirt."

Hawin gave Revin an annoyed look. "There's no dirt on Steadfast, you idiot," he said before looking at Kamaril. "I work with the grow-pods. All the fresh food you enjoy is

because of my team, but that's my extra job. My main task is to keep the ship breathable."

"Thank you," Kamaril said. She hadn't thought of it until then, but there must be all kinds of intricate systems on the ship that kept them alive. "I like to eat and breathe."

While others chuckled, Hawin beamed at her. "You're very welcome. What's your favorite fruit? If I've got the seed stocked in my programs, then I could produce it for you."

"That's very kind of you, but I'm not worth the trouble," she assured him, then remembered back when Revin had given her the shirt she was wearing now. She'd been provided with many clothes, but she always gravitated back to this shirt. Hawin's offer seemed kind, but she didn't want to feel obligated to let him touch her like Revin touched her.

"You're worth everything," Hawin argued. "I have some lami or maybe you like weca? Both grow very quickly and are sweet and flavorful."

Revin spoke before she had to figure out how to turn Hawin down again.

"Enough Hawin," Revin said with a frown and pointed at where Cloud was standing on a prone Nibbler and baring her teeth because he'd managed to annoy her beyond endurance. Nibbler looked perfectly happy with this turn of events, but to an outsider, they probably looked like they were ready to tear into each other. "We need to continue this run before the minari become any more impatient."

The other two Hissa introduced themselves quickly and urged Revin and Kamaril to start the run again. The pack was forced to give up the area around her so these men could take their positions. It felt strange to run with so many two-legged companions, and even more odd to try to make conversation while running.

Thankfully, by the second circuit, the men were too busy breathing to talk. It was with a sense of wry humor that Kamaril realized she could've gotten them to stop talking sooner if only she'd increased the pace at the beginning. In

deference to the newcomers, she'd kept their speed to a moderate level. Next time she wouldn't!

By the middle of the third circuit, the men were struggling to keep up. She and the minari could've done one more lap, but she took pity on Revin. He was doing better than the other Hissa, but he was still starting to lag a little. She steered them all back into bay three.

"Release!" she called out once they were in the bay. Cloud went to check on her pups while half the minari rushed off to drink from the water trough Revin had set up for them. The other half crowded around her, making begging sounds.

"What's going on?" Bomen asked, sounding a little worried.

"They want to play," she explained and strode over to the box of prey balls. After bouncing one to turn it on, she tossed it. Because they were still under the release order, the remaining minari raced after it without further command from her.

With the rest of the minari occupied, the Hissa turned to her, and all started talking at once.

"You never did tell me what fruit you like," Hawin said.

Bomen spoke over him. "I was wondering if you'd like to see more of the ship than the hallways. I could show you a lot of interesting things."

Dinal and Tarin started talking also and Kamaril couldn't answer any of them. She felt hemmed in with one of the temporary walls behind her. Up until now, all the Hissa had kept their distance and only spoke to her briefly. Why had that changed now?

"Kamaril, I think one of the pups might be sick," Revin said loudly at the back of the group. "Whisper and Cloud are whining and nudging him a lot."

The men parted so she could hurry past them to the spot marked off for Cloud and the pups. "I'll check right now."



“Can I help?” Tarin asked, and the others echoed his question.

“None of you should come near the pups if one is ill,” she warned them honestly. “Cloud will be agitated and prone to aggression. Revin, you need to keep the other minari away too.”

They’d learned after the second night to create a small fenced-in area using the crates because the pups would wake up in the night and liked to wander off and get into trouble. Because there were no predators around, Cloud let them. Stepping over the waist-high barrier they’d put up, she dropped to her knees on the thick bed mats.

She found that Cloud was fast asleep with all the pups contentedly burrowed into their separate pouches on her belly, probably nursing greedily. Whisper was licking Cloud’s head and blinking lazily. There was nothing wrong and now she was away from the men and hidden from view. Smiling, she stretched out next to Cloud and Whisper, running her fingers over itchy spots on both beasts.

It was probably cowardly, but she decided to stay hidden for a while. If she stayed long enough, the men might leave on their own.

She could hear them talking with Revin but couldn’t make out what they were saying. Then she heard them moving to the bay doors and leaving. She let out a big sigh and stood up in time to see Revin sliding the bay doors shut. When he turned around, she rushed to apologize.

“I’m sorry I didn’t return to talk to them when I saw the pup was fine. I didn’t know what to say, and they all kept asking questions and…” her voice trailed off as Revin grinned and opened his arms. She jumped over the barrier and rushed to him. Accepting his invitation to hug, she wrapped her arms around him and snuggled close. It felt good to press her body against his and bury her face in the crook of his neck.

“I’m sorry if they swarmed you,” Revin murmured, hugging her back. “They mean well, but they don’t realize they’re overwhelming you.”

“But they hadn’t done anything like this before,” she pointed out, her voice muffled against his skin. “Everyone always kept their distance and barely talked to me before now.”

“You’ve grown more confident since the minari came,” Revin explained. “When Sarin first brought you aboard, you walked with your shoulders hunched and eyes staring at the floor. It looked like you were waiting to be hit. Now you walk with confidence and you look everyone in the eyes and smile.”

“But why do they want to talk to me at all?” she questioned. “Unless they want a minari. But I’m not comfortable giving any of the pack away unless they bond with someone.”

“No, sweetling, no one is going to ask you for a minari. They’re here to talk to you because they’re hoping you’ll pick them.”

“For sex?” she asked, finally understanding. She didn’t like the idea of breeding with any of the other males on board, but if she had to, then she’d find some way to deal with it. As long as she was allowed to come back to Revin, she could bear anything.

Revin’s body stiffened. “You’re free to have sex with as many men as you wish,” he growled.

She was confused. He sounded like he didn’t approve of what he was telling her to do. “Is there a set number I have to breed with?”

He was silent for a moment, then put his hands on her shoulders and pushed her back so their eyes could meet. “You don’t *have* to do anything. Everything is your choice, sweetling.”

“But they want to give me fruit and tours of the ship, and Dinal said he wanted to give me jewelry. If I don’t give them minari then sex is the only other thing I have to offer. I don’t want to get in trouble!”

Revin's face went through several complicated expressions before settling on upset. He pinched a bit of her shirt between two fingers and tugged it slightly away from her body. "You didn't sleep with me because I gave you this, did you?"

She blinked, then shook her head. "No, you said I didn't need to reciprocate for the shirt." Worry knotted her stomach. "Did I misunderstand?"

Relief chased away the expression of worry on his face. "No, sweetling, you did exactly right. But tell me, truly, why did you have sex with me?"

"Because I wanted to?" she said and realized it sounded more like a question. That wasn't right, this was Revin and if anyone deserved her confidence, it was him. "Because I wanted to. Because you're Revin, and you understand me. You're the best Hissa here, and I know I'll always be safe with you."

"That's it?" he pushed.

She racked her brain to explain all the ways Revin was important to her and finally hit on one word that might make him understand. "You're my pack. I'd never had one before, and I didn't think I was missing anything, but now I can't imagine life without you."

His expression softened, and he pulled her back against him. "I love you too, sweetling. I'm happy to be in our little pack of two."

She relaxed into his embrace. "I love you too," she whispered, unsure what the word love meant, but wanting to assure Revin that he was precious to her.

"You never ever have to have sex with any male, including me, if you don't want to," Revin continued with a soft but firm tone. "You're free, sweetling. That means the word *no* is a viable part of your vocabulary."

"Saying no will be hard, but I'm glad I don't have to breed with anyone. I only want you, Revin," she murmured.

“Part of being free is having me,” he agreed, his words sounding like a vow. “Now and forever.”

## CHAPTER 16

### Revin

“Can we take a shower?” Kamaril asked after they’d been hugging for a while.

The bay had a large communal bathing facility. He’d shown it to her on their second day in the bay. She’d expressed astonishment at the warm water available all over the ship. That was when he found out she’d only ever had access to cold water for bathing. With hot water on demand, she turned into someone who loved taking long, luxurious showers. He couldn’t wait to introduce her to the many hot springs on Hissa where she could spend hours soaking in turquoise waters.

“Of course,” he agreed readily. “Let’s grab a change of clothes first so you don’t need to go streaking across the bay naked again.”

She blushed at the reminder. “I didn’t plan on getting so wet when we were bathing the pack that day.”

“I offered to get you a change of clothes,” Revin reminded her.

“I know,” she agreed, then bit her lip. Why did that little thing make him want to kiss her?

Actually, it shouldn’t be a surprise because almost everything she did made him want to kiss her. He watched her pull a clean shirt and pants out of the pathetically small pile on the table near their bed.

“What’s wrong? Do you not like these?” she asked, holding up the garments. He must have been frowning at the clothes.

Letting a smile curve his lips, he shook his head. “Nothing is wrong except they aren’t good enough for you.”

Her nose wrinkled as she looked down at the clothes. “They’re the nicest clothes I’ve ever had.”

“That speaks more to how poorly you were treated than the quality of these clothes,” Revin countered.

“Mender Honil was upset I was wearing these items too, and Sarin said something about having all the wrong sizes and having to have things specially made for me. How should I be dressed?”

Revin took her hand and led her across the bay to the bathing facility as he explained.

“Our females were always dressed in the most colorful and softest clothes we could find.”

“But the males didn’t wear bright colors?” she asked and tugged at the high-necked shirt she was wearing. It was the one he’d given her on that first day. “This one is pretty, though. Look, it shimmers.”

“It is a nice shirt,” he agreed. “But much too dark. You should be wearing bright, eye-catching colors, not black, brown, or dark blue.”

“Wearing brighter colors would make you happy?” Kamaril asked, her smile dimming slightly.

“Yes, very much so,” Revin said, then thought about the more nuanced aspect of Kamaril’s question. “But not at the expense of your comfort. If you try on the clothes I give you and you don’t like them, you can go back to the ones you’re wearing now.”

A relieved look flashed over her expression before she went back to her previous smile. “I really like this shirt,” she repeated.

“I can look for shirts in the same material but better colors,” he offered, eyeing the high neckline of the shirt he’d gifted to her. It was much too high for everyday wear. Hissa necklines for both men and women tended to be lower, usually down to the clavicle. Getting Kamaril to wear that type of shirt might take some time, but everyone wore them so it might not be too hard to convince her.

He needed to put the word out for other Hissa to look for iridescent fabrics and clothing for him. After his species

found dimmerion on their moons, they went from being a civilization of little wealth to rich beyond measure. It made them a target for attack in the early years, but it also meant that they had plenty of resources to spend on whatever they deemed necessary. Each Hissa was wealthy by most standards in the universe, and yet every male wanted nothing more than to spend that money on a mate of their own.

He was no exception. He'd tried to cover the price of buying and transporting the minari, but Sarin had overruled him and used the funds set aside by the Council to provide for the Decanted women.

That made him determined to use his own funds to build her the perfect home with kennels and anything else the pack might need. He'd already contacted a friend on Hissa to start the land claim and clearing process. With so many of their species devastated by the Great Death, there was plenty of land to use.

As they walked to the bathing room, they chatted about the run and the Hissa who thought they'd be able to keep up with her. All the room's automations sprang to life. Light flooded the area, the floor warmed up, and the air became pleasantly balmy. There were benches and a wall full of cabinets. Further in were individual stalls to bathe in with a bench and cleaning products in each. If this was regularly used, the stalls would have descending screens to give the bather privacy but almost no one ever used the bay facilities. With only the two of them inside, there was no reason to bother activating the privacy screens either.

Kamaril was quick to strip, jump into the nearest stall, and activate the water. She chilled easily, and they'd set that specific stall to the water temperature she liked best. He found it almost too hot, but she said it was perfect.

"Feels so good!" she sang out, her words echoing in the room. "Hurry up and join me!"

"I am!" Revin called, then cursed at a stubborn shoe release strap. Kamaril still refused to wear shoes, but the menders saw nothing wrong with it as long as she wasn't

uncomfortable. Revin was sure at some point one of the warriors would try running without footwear and probably regret it later.

Once he got the reluctant shoe off, he was quick to shed the rest of his clothes and turn to face Kamaril. She was standing with her back to him, her hands buried in her long white tresses, already working cleanser into her hair.

His eyes focused on the parts of her neck and shoulders he could see, then he blinked a few times because he couldn't possibly be seeing correctly. His chest felt so tight it was hard to breathe as he stumbled to the stall and grabbed Kamaril by the hips to swing her around.

"Uhfff!" she exclaimed, losing her balance and grabbing onto his shoulders to steady herself. "Revin? Is there something wrong?"

"I never...I can't believe..." he swallowed hard, trying to make his scrambled brain work. "They're so beautiful."

Kamaril looked both amused and confused. "You're pretty too!"

Her response made him finally realize she didn't know what he was seeing. Reaching out, he smacked a nearby section of multi-use wall to bring it to life.

"Mirror," he called out.

The wall shimmered for a moment then became a reflective surface. Kamaril had turned to see what he was doing and gasped when she saw herself. Touching her fingertips to her neck, Kamaril traced one of the red lines that appeared there.

"What's going on? Is there something wrong with me?" she asked, fear making her voice high.

"Nothing's wrong," Revin assured her, wrapping his arms around her and pressing his front to her back. Leaning down, he put his lips to one of the red lines on her shoulder and kissed it reverently. "Everything is right."



She looked over her shoulder at him. “You know what caused this?”

“It was me,” he said simply, kissing further down the line on her shoulder. He was determined to kiss every line on her neck and shoulders before they left the room. “I’ve seen them on other Decanted women but never thought I’d be the cause.”

“What did you do to me?” she whispered.

Revin met her gaze in the mirror. “These are mating marks, sweetling. They show that we are biologically compatible and can have children. They are a display to all others that you have made your choice.”

Relief made her slump a little in his arms before a wide smile unfurled across her face. “That’s good then,” she murmured, nuzzling the side of his face.

The smell of hair cleanser masked her unique feminine scent. He needed to be able to smell her as he touched her. It was imperative that she smelled like her again, not a field of wildflowers!

“I’m going to finish bathing you,” he declared and turned her back toward the water. Instead of pushing her under the flow, he sat her on the small built-in bench. “And then I’m going to pleasure you.”

She made a humming sound. “That’s also good.”



## **Kamaril**

Revin was entranced with the strange red geometric patterns decorating her throat and tops of her shoulders. Now that she knew it wasn’t a sign of any disease or pending death, it was enjoyable to watch him fawn over the marks while mumbling how beautiful and perfect she was.

He made her feel treasured and special; it was something she could become addicted to.

“Lean forward a little,” he instructed. She did so and her long hair draped down, dripping water and suds onto her

feet and the floor.

Gently, Revin dug his fingers into her hair, running his claws over her scalp and working the cleanser all the way through her hair. His touch sent delightful shivers down her spine and made her want to moan.

When he'd mentioned pleasure earlier, she expected him to rush through the bathing process and then take her on the wet floor or against one of the walls. Instead, he took his time worshiping her body, starting with her scalp.

"I'm going to wash the cleanser out," he warned her before perfectly hot water started pouring over her head. He must have pulled the retractable hose out of the cubby in the wall to use on her. The room was too warm to say she'd been getting cold but having the hot water sluice over her skin felt heavenly.

Once her hair was free of cleanser, he rubbed a thick, creamy mixture into her hair. During their first shower, he'd explained that many of the Decanted women used it. The treatment smelled faintly herbal and made her long tresses easy to comb out and soft to the touch. She moaned again as he finished working it all the way down to her scalp and then to the very ends of her hair.

It was meant to leave in so after her hair was thoroughly coated, he turned his attention to washing her body. He started with her neck and shoulders, running the cleansing cloth over the mating marks with almost no pressure at all. The cloth was barely touching her skin.

"They won't rub off, will they?" she asked. She didn't want them to fade or disappear.

Revin huffed out a laugh. "They can't be rubbed off."

She opened her eyes only to see herself in the mirrored wall across from the bench in their stall. When she'd first seen the marks, she'd been far too concerned to look at them too closely. Examining them now, she noticed her old scars from poorly fitting collars interrupted the pattern in several places.

Revin didn't seem to be bothered by that and if she was honest, the scars added to the complexity of the pattern.

Like anything in life, she was the product of both good and bad experiences, and her mating marks with interwoven scars were a perfect symbol of that.

Revin moved the cloth lower, and she forgot about philosophical thoughts. Sitting up tall, she arched her back as he ran the cloth over her breasts. She liked the feel of the soft cloth against her sensitive nipples.

"You make the prettiest sounds," he murmured, running the cloth over her chest again. He still had the hose in his hand and brought it up and set the nozzle over her breast. Hot water poured over her nipple, making it feel like she was being caressed with heat. She gasped and whimpered. The heat felt good, but the water didn't have enough force. It felt like she was being teased with ghost touches. Then both the cloth and water disappeared, replaced by Revin's mouth.

As he sucked and tugged at her breast, his hand moved the hose down until it was between her legs. She thought he was trying to set it down, but then the water started hitting her between the legs.

"Revin!" she gasped and jerked, trying to move away.

He chuckled and used his bulk to keep her in place. When she muffled a cry of pleasure with her hand, he pulled his mouth away from her nipple and looked up at her. "I want to hear your scream, mate. Let the whole ship hear you!"

With the Steadfast's exceptional build quality, it was unlikely her cries would reach beyond the confines of the bathing area, but if Revin wanted to hear her cry out with pleasure, she would.

As Revin returned his mouth to her breast, he did something to the nozzle to increase the water pressure. She hadn't expected it and jerked violently against him, then moaned. She couldn't remain still as the pleasure built inside of her, but Revin made sure she couldn't get away from his mouth or the water.

“My male!” she wailed. “More! I want you inside me!”

“Mate,” he growled against her skin and nipped at the tender flesh of her breast. “Call me your mate!”

“Mate,” she cried out. “My mate, my Revin, my male!”

“All yours,” he agreed and pressed the nozzle closer. The hot water jetted against her clit, making the sensitive nub pulse with pleasure. His mouth returned to her breasts, alternating between them.

“I can’t...I...please.” Jumbles of words fell from her mouth as the pleasure built.

“What do you want, sweetling?” he asked, his breath hot against her skin.

“You,” she whimpered. She knew she’d come if he pressed his cock inside her.

“You’ll have me,” he promised, kissing his way up to her neck. “But this first.”

He moved the nozzle again, making her whine as the pressure changed slightly. She tried to shift position again, but he kept her still with the water pulsing against her clit, and his lips back to tracing kisses over her mating marks.

“You’re not only beautiful,” he whispered to her between kisses, “but also brilliant. You have so much to teach me, and I promise to be a good student and the best mate you could ever want.”

She wanted to tell him that he already was, but she couldn’t get words to form. Then his mouth was on hers, his tongue pressing against her lips. She opened to him, moaning into his mouth. He captured her sounds of pleasure as they kissed, never letting up with his hands or the water.

The delicious torture built inside her until she thought she might burst. Finally, her orgasm exploded inside her, making her entire body go stiff before quivering and shaking from the intensity.

Revin kept the water on her until she sagged back on the bench and whimpered. Withdrawing the nozzle, he chuckled.

“That was just the beginning,” he warned her in a whisper, an wicked, slanting grin on his face.

## CHAPTER 17

### Kamaril

It wasn't until they'd been running with the minari for over half the ship that Kamaril noticed the crew she passed were openly gaping at her. At first, she ignored it, but when it kept happening, she started feeling self-conscious.

It wasn't the minari, they were all staring at her with openmouthed astonishment. Some even looked with longing or envy. Then it hit her what they were staring at.

She came to a dead stop and pulled the collar of her shirt up to cover her neck. Thankfully, the scoop-neck garment was large because she had to bunch a lot of fabric together and pull it up high enough to cover the mating marks.

Revin took a full stride after Kamaril stopped but was quick to halt and rush to her side. "What's wrong? Does something hurt? Is it your throat?"

"They're all staring at the mating marks," she hissed, ducking her head down. "I only have the one shirt that covers them. We need to go back so I can put it on."

A look of supreme satisfaction came over Revin's face. "Let them look, sweetling. They aren't judging you. They're excited and probably a little jealous of me."

She shook her head with a soft grin. "You're so proud that you caused these marks, aren't you?"

His grin got a little wider. "Absolutely. If you hadn't picked me, I would still have protected you with my life. But you did pick me, and now I get to protect you for the rest of our lives. The marks clearly show everyone that you have a mate now."

"It seems I've traded one collar for another. At least this one is prettier," she murmured, mostly to herself. Revin must've heard because his scales paled dramatically. "Revin?"

He took a step away from her and shook his head; his expression was one of devastation. "Have I trapped you? Have

I forced you? Did you feel as if you had no choice but to say yes to me? Tell me the truth, Kamaril. If you don't want to have sex again, the marks will fade in time, and you can find someone more worthy of you."

With a distressed cry, Kamaril threw herself at Revin. Worried that he might try to leave her, she wrapped her arms around his neck and held on tightly. "I picked you. I'll always pick you. If you leave me, I'll be alone because I'll never want anyone else."

"Why did you call the mating marks a collar?" Revin asked, finally bringing his arms up to hug her back. Unsure of why Kamaril was so upset, the minari around them were whining and closing in tight to offer both comfort and the promise of protection.

"I didn't think of it like that," Kamaril said, trying to explain. "You saw the collar as a sign of my slavery, which it was. It was also a mark of belonging. I always knew who I was and where I belonged. There is a kind of contentment in that. Sarin and the others collected me and took off my collar but didn't give me any role. I felt adrift and useless. Now you've given me a new collar and a new place."

"How do you see your place?" he asked, the stiffness in his body fading away.

"Caring for my pack, and our children with you at my side," she answered without hesitation. She didn't have to think about it; she'd already imagined this life so many times that she could even picture Whisper curled around her newborn baby. "I never want these marks to fade."

"If you agree to enter into a marriage pact with me, then I can find a tatter to put matching marks on my skin," he explained. "Please tell me you'll let me wear a matching collar."

With a relieved grin, she pulled away so she could look him in the face. "I would very much love to see a matching collar around your neck."

“Does that mean you’ll enter into a family pact with me?” he pressed.

She didn’t know what that was, but it sounded similar to a marriage contract. “I want it as much as I want us to have matching collars.”

Revin whooped loudly, picked her up, and swung her around in a circle. The minari around them yipped, jumped, and nipped at her flying feet. Loud applause sounded from somewhere. There were cheers and several rounds of congratulations.

They had an audience.

“I’ll go find Gilor,” someone called out. “He’s a master tatter.”

Revin set her down and grinned at the men. “Send him to bay three when he has time. We should probably finish this run before we confuse the minari anymore.”

Kamaril hugged him one more time before separating and wiping away the stray tear from her eye. Could a person be so happy they could simply take flight? Because she felt like she could fly!



## **Revin**

When they started running again, Revin swore he had wings on his feet. Kamaril must feel similarly because they were both moving faster than normal. The minari were in on the game too, howling as if on the chase. He felt so good, he thought they should add another circuit of the ship to their run when the klaxon started blaring.

“What—” Kamaril didn’t get a chance to finish her question. The entire ship shook, and the corridor filled with the distinct sounds of the rail guns moving and firing followed.

“We’re under attack,” he explained, grabbing her hand and thinking quickly. Going back to the bay wasn’t an option, that was one of the more vulnerable places on the ship and far from where they were. The safe room wouldn’t fit all the



minari, and he knew better than trying to talk Kamaril into abandoning the pack.

The only room he could think of that would be large enough for all of them, and in a relatively safe location, was the exercise room. It was an added benefit that the path there would take them past one of the armament storage lockers.

The ship shuddered around them, indicating they were taking heavy fire. Then a series of fast hitting vibrations rocked through the ship, telling him remote fighter droids were being launched. He wished he could help, but his first duty was to Kamaril.

“This way,” he said, tugging her along. She shouted a command to the minari who were quick to fall in behind them. The animals had all gone quiet, either because of the commotion going on around them or the tension in Kamaril’s voice.

It didn’t take long to reach a munitions locker. He wasn’t surprised to find it half empty. He pulled on upper body armor before grabbing a second one.

“Arms up,” he ordered, and then slid the armor over Kamaril’s head. Because she was almost as tall as the average Hissa male, the armor fit the length of her torso, but her shoulders weren’t as broad, so it dwarfed her there. Ratcheting down the side straps, he snugged the armor around her body and turned on the reactive shielding. This would protect her from pulse weapons and most shrapnel.

Once he was finished with her, he secured a weapons belt around his waist and loaded himself with all the weapons and all the extra plasma cartridges he could fit.

“Hurry,” he said as he grabbed her hand again and rushed down the corridor at a run. The minari kept pace and soon they all flooded into the exercise room. Because the ship was under attack, the main lights in the large room were off and only the dim floor lights were lit.

“Make sure the entire pack is inside,” he said to Kamaril as the minari gathered around her and eyed the new

room.

Kamaril surveyed the animals, then looked up at him in panic. “Whisper and the pups are still in the bay!”

For two solid seconds, Revin debated telling Kamaril that they couldn’t be saved, but no, he couldn’t do that.

“Stay here,” he ordered and pulled a single-use blunderbuss off his belt. It was the kind of weapon you used when there were many enemies coming at you within the tight confines of a ship’s corridor. “This will kill or incapacitate a group of Kaklans, even if they’re wearing full armor. Make sure anyone you care about is behind you when you fire, or they might get caught in the spray. See this button? That’s how you arm it. This lower button fires. Hold it tightly and brace yourself because it will push back hard against you when it fires. Understand?”

Kamaril nodded her head rapidly, accepting the weapon. “I understand.”

He could see she was scared but prepared to do what was necessary to protect herself and the pack. “I’m sorry,” she whispered, confusing the hell out of him.

“You’re sorry for leaving Whisper and the pups behind?” he asked.

“I caused this,” she explained, wide eyes moving around rapidly at the shaking ship and blaring klaxon. “I was too happy, and the universe decided to take away my happiness.”

His heart broke for his sweet human. “No Kamaril, this isn’t the universe taking anything away from you. This is a bunch of Kaklans thinking they can take and abuse where the Hissa would rescue and reverse.”

It was her turn to look confused. “What?”

He gave her a quick kiss on the forehead. “I’ll explain it all when I get back. After I leave, close the doors and pile items in front of them that would cause an invader to stumble and fall. Don’t fire until they’re at least a body length into the room. That should cause the remaining ones to retreat because

they won't know how many opponents are in the room or how well armed they are."

It was unlikely they'd be boarded, but he still needed her to have as many tools as he could provide.

"I'll do all those things," she promised. "Be safe and return to me."

"May Brimming hear our pleas," he whispered to her and because she didn't know the traditional response, he provided it. "And Diminish protect us."

"May Brimming hear our pleas and Diminish protect us," she repeated, her eyes bright with unshed tears. Gripping the blunderbuss in both hands, she stepped away, standing tall and proud. Determined to be quick, he rushed off without further words.

Most of the corridors were empty by the time he left Kamaril in the exercise room. The Hissa species might be wealthy, but they weren't numerous, which meant their ships were chronically understaffed. Every member of the crew would be at his station, and some would be doing several jobs at once.

For a moment, he felt guilty that he was rushing off to retrieve a few minari when his fellow warriors were actively fighting, but his primary responsibility was Kamaril, and she wouldn't remain in safety if he didn't retrieve the minari left behind.

"By the moons!" a familiar voice exclaimed from his right. "Where is Kamaril?"

He halted and faced Sarin. "Exercise room," he explained. "Need to get the minari left in bay three."

Sarin nodded, understanding the issue without further explanation. "The port side corridors on levels five through eight aren't passable," he warned. "There's structural damage there, and they've been sealed off as a precaution."

That was good to know but meant his journey would be more circuitous. "I'll go up to level four."

Sarin nodded before his data bracelet pinged. He glanced down and scowled. "I'll send whoever I can spare to help you guard Kamaril."

"Tell them to wait outside the room until I get there," Revin said. "I gave Kamaril a blunderbuss."

Sarin gave him a grin. "Too bad she isn't a warrior like Halin's mate, Mian. You could give that woman a plasma rifle and be assured no one would get to her!"

"So I've heard," Revin answered, already in motion. Sarin shouted something after him, but Revin was scrambling up a service ladder to access level four.

It was a near thing, but he got to bay three before level four was also sealed. He'd have to return using the starboard side of the ship.

Whisper ran to him the moment he entered the bay. Whining, the minari grabbed Revin's hand with several neck tentacles and pulled him to a dark corner of the bay. Once there, Whisper got behind him and tried to shove him in an empty storage locker. The pups were all in there, curled up and asleep. Whisper must have been worried about all the strange sounds and vibrations and decided to hide the pups, and now he was trying to do the same thing to Revin.

"You're a good nanny," he told Whisper as he pulled the pups out of the locker. He'd never handled the puppies without Kamaril and really hoped Whisper didn't get the wrong idea and attack.

Cradling the pups in his arms, he stood up and made his way over to the sleeping area. It only took a few minutes for him to find a bag, place the sleeping puppies inside, and strap it onto his back.

Whisper observed with a concerned expression but no aggression. When Revin headed for the bay doors, Whisper trotted right behind him.

"I guess I don't have to worry about getting you to follow me," he said to the animal. "I'm going to take you guys

to Kamaril and the rest of the pack. I hope you know how to climb ladders because we've got a lot of floors to cover."

## CHAPTER 18

### Kamaril

The pack alerted Kamaril to someone outside the exercise room doors. She ordered the pack behind her then armed and aimed her weapon at the doors. Fear made her heart pound, and her hands shake. Could she take a life? If Kaklan warriors burst through the door, would she be able to fire on them?

She'd never killed anything before. No, that wasn't true. She and the minari killed game all the time, but this felt different. They weren't six-legged, spiny, ground yurm on the other side of the door, they were sapient beings with families and friends waiting for them back home.

*No, they were the enemy.* She couldn't feel bad for them. They decided to attack Steadfast and would get what they deserved!

No one tried to open the doors or even bang on them. The minari continued to indicate someone was out there, but not trying to get inside. Curious, she made her way closer to the door and tapped the display on the wall. It gave her several options to pick from, all written in both Space Standard and Hissa. One option allowed her to see the hall.

After picking that one, an image of several heavily armed Hissa standing with their backs to her door was revealed.

Feeling even more shaky than before, she quickly deactivated the gun and set it on the floor. She'd almost shot her own people!

Commanding the door open, she moved the items she'd put down to impede an invader's advance.

"You need to stay in there," one of the Hissa said.

"Sarin told us Revin should be here soon with the minari," the other said. "Try to stay calm. We won't let anything happen to you."

“But I don’t want anything to happen to either of you or Revin either,” she cried, feeling tears pressing against her eyes. She felt helpless and, even worse, like she was a burden.

“Don’t be upset,” one pleaded while the other one tapped on his data bracelet.

“I can’t find him in the ship’s location schematic, but a lot of the local sensor units are down,” the other one said.

“Revin will probably—”

His words were cut off by the appearance of Revin jogging around a corner with Whisper at his side. Ignoring the other Hissa, Kamaril sprinted to him. She didn’t give him a chance to say anything and grabbed him in a fierce hug and held on.

“Tell me what you do to honor Diminish and Brimming and I’ll do it,” she whispered. “They brought you back to me, and I want them to know I’m thankful.”

Revin wrapped his arms around her and rubbed her back. “Shhhh, everything is going to be fine.”

As if obeying his words, the sounds of the rail guns abruptly stopped. Within seconds, the klaxon went quiet.

“I guess it’s over,” one of the warriors said with relief.

“We won?” Kamaril asked, pulling back enough so she could see Revin’s grim expression.

“We have, but did we win the battle or only the first wave?” he said. “You guys can go help wherever you’re needed; I’ll stay here with Kamaril and the pack.”

They tapped their fingers between their eyes to Revin, then over their hearts for Kamaril before jogging off.

Revin urged her back into the exercise room, Whisper following. The moment they walked into the open door, the pack rushed to greet Whisper and sniff around Revin. When he took off the backpack he was wearing and set it on the floor, Cloud was there, ripping the top of the bag and nuzzling her pups. After she’d urged each one into a pouch, she found a place to lie down and promptly went to sleep.

Kamaril envied the minari's simple understanding of their situation. They'd been alert and anxious, but now everything was fine so it was nap time.

The moment Revin stood back up, Kamaril grabbed him in a hug again. "I was so scared," she whispered. "I felt weak and powerless. I don't know if I can kill anyone, Revin."

He made soothing sounds and rubbed one hand up and down her back. "You did good, Kamaril."

"I want training," she demanded. "Real training. I want to be better. I want to be a proper packmate for you."

"Maybe when we get back home, you can train at the citadel with the other warriors," he answered, then gave her a half grin. "Right now, I could use some water and a little rest. It was a long way from here to bay three. And I found out something new today."

Some of her tension released a little with Revin's teasing tone. "What did you find out?"

"Minari can climb ladders!" he announced with exaggerated astonishment, then quickly amended his statement in a more reasonable tone. "Or at least Whisper can climb."

"They can climb just about anything, so I'm not shocked that Whisper wasn't held back by a ladder," she answered with a smile and pulled away from him. Taking one arm in her hand, she guided him to a pile of mats she'd stacked near the door display. "There are canisters of water in the back corner. I'll get them, and you can sit here."

He didn't get a chance to sit before Sarin and Section Commander Demor strode into the room wearing identical expressions of grim determination.

"We need to talk," Section Commander Demor said.

"That's never a good way to start a conversation," Revin muttered as he faced the men. Kamaril clung to his side, unsure of her role in this discussion. The minari gave some low warning sounds, but they were easy to hush with a single command.



“We’re still doing damage assessment,” Sarin said. “But even the initial reports say we’re stranded until help arrives.”

“That means we need to figure out how to keep you safe,” Demor said, looking at Kamaril with a scowl. She started to duck behind Revin, but the commander caught himself and his expression turned neutral. “I’ve been told you won’t leave your pack behind, so the safe room is out. I have an alternate idea, but it won’t be the most comfortable.”

“Anything,” she agreed. “But Revin can’t leave me either.”

“Trust me,” Sarin said with a huffing laugh, his eyes dropping to the mating marks on her neck. “We wouldn’t even try.”



Kamaril didn’t see the compromise as much of a burden on her part. The commander had a large gunship moved into bay three. It only took up about a quarter of the bay, but he’d been under the impression she needed the whole bay to keep the minari happy. Although now that they couldn’t run the ship anymore, it would be more important to keep them entertained with prey balls and training exercises.

“If we’re attacked again, Tilin and Bayin will report here to pilot the gunship with you, Revin, and your pack to safety. We’ll launch other droid ships and have our gunner clear a path so it would be nearly impossible for the Kaklans to follow. Even if they do, Tilin and Bayin are our most skilled gunship crew. They’ll keep you safe and get you back to Hissa.”

“Don’t you need the gunship to defend Steadfast?” Kamaril protested. “I don’t want my life if it will cost everyone else theirs.”

Section Commander Demor’s normally harsh expression turned gentle. “There is nothing more important than you surviving. You have Revin’s mating marks around your neck, you might be carrying his child even now. You

represent the survival of our species. There is nothing more precious than that.”

Kamaril suddenly felt overwhelmed and guilty. She clung to Revin even harder while he made soothing sounds.

“This isn’t right,” she mumbled. “I’m nothing but a slave.”

Sarin hissed out an angry breath and the commander’s expression turned harsh again. She shrank back against Revin, fearful of reprisal because she’d used the forbidden word.

“Walk away,” Revin commanded. Both men looked surprised for a moment before hastily tapping their fingers between their eyes to Revin and over their hearts to Kamaril. Almost in unison, they turned and strode out of the bay.

“I’m sorry I said the bad word,” she whispered, burying her face against Revin’s shoulder.

“They overreacted,” Revin assured her. “Everyone is tense and worried. We still have a full complement of attack droids and all the outside defenses are still working, but the Kaklans did a good job of targeting our engines before we were able to mount a defense. It means we aren’t going anywhere until the Ardent gets here to help us with parts and repairs. They’re burning hard so it won’t be long. Still, it’s hard to be this vulnerable, and it’s putting everyone on edge.”

Kamaril knew what it was like to feel cornered and scared. She was probably more familiar with the experience than anyone on the ship. “Is there anything I can do to help?”

“Try to smile at everyone and tap your throat any time you make eye contact,” Revin instructed.

She’d hoped for something a little more tangible to do. “How could that possibly help?”

“If the men see you aren’t scared, they’ll feel strong and proud,” Revin explained. “They want to believe you have confidence in their skills.”

“I do,” she insisted. “Everyone on Steadfast is wonderful!”

Revin gave her an encouraging smile. “And you can show it with your smiles and interaction. It will have the exact opposite effect as when you said the word slave earlier.”

Kamaril took a deep breath. “I’ll try. But it’s hard to look everyone in the eye and smile when I can’t help with anything. I feel guilty!”

Nibbler chose that moment to push hard against the back of Kamaril’s legs. Looking down, she saw that Nibbler wasn’t alone. When they’d gotten back to the bay and she released the pack, they’d all explored the new addition to their environment, the gunship. The hatch was closed, but its sides were bristling with weapons to sniff and flanges to taste test. Thankfully, none of the minari wanted to eat the metal, only give it a test bite to see what it was made of. Now they were finished exploring the gunship and were reminding Kamaril that their earlier exercise had been interrupted.

“You get them a prey ball,” Revin said with a chuckle. “I want to check on Cloud, Whisper, and the pups.”

“Then we can start teaching me how to use weapons?” she asked.

“Sure,” he agreed easily. “I think there’s a kit of training weapons on the gunship. I’ll pull it out and we’ll practice.”

Kamaril beamed at him. “You’re the best mate.”

Revin’s grin was both pleased and mischievous. “Make sure you tell that to Section Commander Demor and Sarin. If either of them catches us, I’m not sure they would approve.”

## CHAPTER 19

### Revin

Revin and Kamaril walked through the Steadfast with the pack behind them, heading to midship where the Ardent was now tethered to the Steadfast. Ardent and her crew made record time in getting to them and then set up the umbilical tunnel between the ships quickly.

The moment the crews were sure everything was secure for passage, Section Commander Demor ordered Revin and Kamaril over to the fully functional Ardent. Knowing nothing would get done until Kamaril was safely on Ardent, Revin had packed them a bag even before the umbilical was secured.

Strangely enough, Kamaril didn't seem in a hurry. She was walking slowly and failing to keep her anxiety off her face. Even knowing the need for urgency, Revin stopped their progress and turned to face her.

“What’s wrong, sweetling?”

“Sarin said a woman named Safena is going to meet us,” she said, not meeting his eyes.

“Yes,” Revin agreed, puzzled by Kamaril’s anxiety over meeting Safena. “She’s very nice. I promise she won’t look down on you.”

Kamaril was silent for a moment, then finally looked up with a worried expression. “Isn’t she Kaklan? Aren’t they the ones who attacked us?”

Ah, now he understood her concern. “Safena’s mother ran away from her people when Safena and her sisters were young. She grew up on a farming planet called Inola, far away from Kaklan controlled space. Her mother adopted a young Decanted child named Mouse, so Safena is familiar with Decanted humans.”

“Why did her mother run away?” Kamaril asked, starting to look more relaxed.

“Kaklan society isn’t kind to their females,” Revin explained. “They look at their daughters and wives as possessions instead of people. She didn’t want her daughters to suffer like she had.”

“She must’ve been a brave woman,” Kamaril murmured.

“From what I’ve heard, she was brave, clever, and strong. All important and noble traits,” Revin added. “If you’re still worried about meeting her, I can message Ardent and ask that she return to her room.”

Kamaril worried her lip for a little while before shaking her head. “No, I should meet her. She’s like me.”

Revin blinked, thinking of the small Kaklan woman who, up until recently, had been weak and in constant pain. “How is she like you?”

Kamaril gave him a tentative smile. “She’s Hissa now, not Kaklan. I’m Hissa too, not human.”

Revin beamed at her. “Yes, exactly! Let’s go meet Safena.”

With her reluctance gone, Kamaril moved more rapidly through the ship. As she’d been doing since the attack, whenever she saw a male, she deliberately made eye contact, smiled, and tapped over her throat. He did notice she tended to wear the shirt he’d given her, so all the mating marks were covered and only a few scars showed. Part of it was that it was her favorite shirt, but the other was that she still didn’t like it when men stared at her neck. He hoped she’d learn to accept it because he loved when everyone could see the marks.

As she smiled and tapped at her throat, every male was quick to respond in kind with wide, happy smiles. Revin knew seeing Kamaril adjusting to life among them made each male hopeful that the next Decanted woman they rescued might choose them.

There probably weren’t enough Decanted women out there for every Hissa, but they all tacitly agreed to ignore that detail. Sometimes hope was far more important than facts.



## **Kamaril**

It was a tight fit, but she and all the minari fit into the airlock. She was at the front of the pack and Revin was at the rear and about to close the door when someone shouted from the hall. Judging by the sound of their voice, they were a good distance away.

“Revin, I need your help to open the outer door manually. The motor was damaged in the attack. We need to get Kamaril and the minari over quickly, so I don’t want to wait for someone else to come help.”

“I’ll be right back, you stay here,” Revin said and closed the door behind him. Kamaril reached her hand into the bag resting on her hip. Inside was Bilo, Long, and Fast. The distance was too far for the pups to walk and Cloud refused to carry them. She’d probably thought they were going on a hunt and no minari took pups on a hunt.

It was an easy problem to fix by simply putting the pups in a bag and carrying them. Being able to run her fingers over their warm little bodies was a bonus.

The airlock doors swished open and bright lights flooded both the tunnel in front of her and the airlock she was in. The change in lighting was startling and then a crewmember popped his head in and smiled at her.

“You’re still here? You need to get moving. Safena and Woken are waiting for you at the other end.”

He was gone before she could ask any questions or even tap her throat and smile. Revin had told her to stay put, but everyone was in a hurry to start repairs and waiting for her to cross over. She’d already wasted time by being slow on the way to the airlock. Guilt made her look at the tunnel with determination.

She needed to be stronger and face these strangers with confidence. Or at least fake it until she felt it.

“Forward, tight pack.” she called to the minari in Anavac. They obediently gathered around her and walked

down the connecting tunnel with her. It wasn't long until she saw another open hatch and the Ardent's matching airlock. There was a woman with red skin standing at the center of the airlock. Next to her was the largest Hissa male she'd seen so far. He was massive and towered over the little Kaklan!

She slowed down when she realized the large Hissa was tense and scowling. Then he swept the woman behind him and shouted over his shoulder.

“Zarik, Muran, Suley! Get armor and weapons!”

Kamaril froze, unsure what to do. The minari didn't like the way the Hissa yelled, and they all showed their teeth with the ones closest to him lowering their heads to further the threat display. She pulled Bilo's back to her chest and thought about turning and running for Steadfast with the pack. Had no one warned Ardent that she was coming over with the minari? What if they killed her pack without letting her explain?

Fear made it hard for her to think, let alone move.

“Stay calm, I'll help you,” the man shouted, his voice loud and echoing in the tube around her. Then he looked at the minari closest to him, showed his teeth and growled! Why would he do that?

Someone tossed him a weapon, making Kamaril's fear for her pack elevate. The minari noticed her state and growled louder, opening all three sets of eyes to indicate they were ready to attack.

One word from her would calm them all down, but she couldn't get her mouth to work. She felt helpless at the sight of the giant Hissa with his weapon.

Then the Kaklan woman ran toward her! There were no obvious weapons on the woman, and she held up her hands to show they were empty. Her expression was friendly and eager.

The woman's approach made Kamaril realize the minari were still growling. She called out in Anavac to the pack, “Belly!”

The pack dropped to the floor, still growling softly with all eyes focused on the armed Hissa.

“I’m Safena,” the Kaklan said in perfect Space Standard. “I’m not sure if they told you about me. I might be Kaklan instead of human, but one of my sisters is a Decanted human my mother adopted when we were all very young. I love her, and I know she’d want us to become friends.”

Kamaril saw the large warrior point his weapon at Cloud. She focused back on Safena and spoke quickly.

“Don’t let him hurt my minari,” she begged.

Safena looked over her shoulder and spoke quickly. “Woken, I’m safe. Did you see them obey her command to lie down? Have you noticed I’m not being torn to shreds? I don’t think they’re space minari that got aboard Steadfast and rampaged around, letting only this single human survive, do you?”

Relief flooded Kamaril. Safena was on her side! “Revin is coming. He can tell you they’re all good minari. They’re all my minari.” She pointed to the one closest to Safena. “That’s Cloud. She’s a new mother. Her babies are right here.”

Kamaril opened the bag. The pups were awake now and all three popped their heads out to see what was going on. As she hoped, Safena was entranced by the adorable babies. They weren’t ready to be disturbed, so after a few yawns, they chirped sleepily. Cloud looked over at her to make sure Kamaril still had the puppies under control then turned her attention back to the Hissa warrior with the weapon.

“Can I pet them?”

The request made Kamaril chuckle with relief. She’d been right. Who could resist a baby minari?

Safena showed no fear as she got close enough to pet the siblings. Kamaril introduced her to the babies, even handing over Bilo for Safena to hold. She blushed when Safena complimented the obedience of her pack while snuggling Bilo in her arms.



“Kamaril!” Revin shouted as he sprinted down the tube. “I told you to wait for me!”

Feeling guilty for having listened to a Hissa other than her trusted Revin, Kamaril reverted to her old habits and rounded her shoulders and dropped her gaze to the floor. She’d scared him, herself, and the giant warrior guarding Safena. All of it could’ve been avoided if only she’d obeyed Revin!

“I’m sorry, Mast—uh, Revin. The doors opened. I thought I was supposed to walk through. I was told we needed to hurry so the ship could be fixed. I didn’t want to cause delays.”

And now she’d messed up and almost called him master! All the progress she’d made since being with Revin felt like a distant memory. What was wrong with her?

Safena glared at Revin. “Don’t talk to her like that.”

This woman might be smaller than all the Hissa, but she was fierce and unafraid as she scowled at Revin. Kamaril pivoted in place so she could see Revin come to a stumbling halt, his expression a combination of surprise and confusion.

“No, I wasn’t, that is, uh, I didn’t mean...it’s not what you think.”

Kamaril couldn’t help the worried sound that came out of her. She’d messed up and now Revin was in trouble with the fearless little Kaklan. She wanted to run away and hide so badly but worried it would only make matters worse.

Safena gave her a reassuring smile. “It’s okay. I won’t let him hurt you.”

She needed to make Safena understand. “He wouldn’t hit me.” After taking Bilo back and tucking him into the sack with the others, she pointed to the few scars visible over her high collar. “They’ve all been good to me. They took my collar off.”

There, that should make her understand that no one was hurting her. Everyone hated the collar or mention of the collar so Safena should be appeased to know they’d taken it

off when they bought her. She didn't expect Safena's next words at all.

"Words can hurt too. No one's allowed to talk down to you or order you around like you're still a slave."

This reminded her of the misunderstanding with Damen during that first run around the ship with Revin. She needed to get better at using her words because the ones she used were never correct! Kamaril opened her mouth, hoping all the right words would flow out, but nothing came to her. Safena took her hand in a gentle grip.

"You're not alone anymore," she assured Kamaril. "I won't be going to the Hissa homeworld with you, but I can tell you all about my sisters. They'll welcome you and make sure no one takes advantage of you. And I can talk to Section Commander Zamer. He can assign other guards instead of Revin."

As much as she loved the thought of having Safena and her sisters as new friends, this woman was threatening to take Revin away from her! The familiar helpless feeling nearly drowned her, making tears gather in her eyes. This time, words flew out of her mouth, and they were all begging and pleading ones.

"Oh no, please don't take Revin away. I don't know what I did wrong, but please don't punish me like that."

Safena blinked in surprise, then her expression turned contemplative. "Does Revin make you feel safe or scared?"

This time, it was easy to find the right words. "He and the minari are my family now," she whispered to Safena. "They are the shelter that keeps my heart protected."

To her relief, Safena patted her hand reassuringly and looked over her shoulder at the big angry Hissa pointing a weapon at Cloud. There were other warriors standing next to him, but they were all relaxed with their weapons cradled in their arms or resting on their shoulders.

"Maybe we should all go to the exercise room?" Safena said in a loud voice. "I think the reason we were told to

clear it out earlier was to accommodate the minari.”

Kamaril started to realize no one had told the people aboard Ardent about her pack. No wonder they'd reacted badly; her pack could be intimidating if you weren't ready for them. Except no one had even asked her about them; they simply reacted with threats of violence.

Thankfully, Safena understood and acted before anything bad could happen. It was then that Kamaril realized something profound. There was one word that fit Safena. A word Kamaril was still trying to figure out.

Safena acted free.

Kamaril was determined to be more like Safena.

## CHAPTER 20

### Kamaril

Eager nudged Safena again, making the woman laugh and return to petting him. “You’re pushy,” she announced without any heat as she scraped her nails between the tallest spikes on Eager’s back.

The two of them were sitting in the center of the exercise room with Woken and Revin standing near the door talking quietly to each other. Eager had put himself at Safena’s side as they’d walked here and refused to leave.

“He likes you,” Kamaril noted with a wide smile.

“I’m sure he likes anyone who pets him,” Safena countered with a wry smile.

Kamaril shook her head. “No, Eager doesn’t like very many people, or even minari.”

Safena looked confused. “Eager doesn’t like other minari?”

“Sometimes, minari need to be in very small packs of two or three, or even one,” Kamaril explained. “Eager wants to be good, but he also wants to be the center of someone’s attention. He never liked sharing my attention with the other minari. He’s even gotten into a couple of fights about it.”

Safena’s eyes went wide. “Truly?”

Kamaril pointed to the side of Eager’s face. “See that missing piece of his muzzle? He got into a fight with Jumper because he wanted to be closer to me. It’s rare for something like that to happen.”

“Which one is Jumper?” Safena asked, looking at all the minari around them. A few were playing but most were napping.

“That one,” Kamaril said, nodding over at the sleeping Jumper. “Eager didn’t hurt Jumper, even though he’s bigger and older. Eager simply shook him off, shoved him out of the

way, and took his place at my side with an open and bleeding wound.” Kamaril sighed at the memory. Eager was from a good bloodline, but after Jumper took a chunk out of his muzzle, no one wanted to buy him. It would be nice to find him a home where he could shine and be truly content.

“He likes you,” Kamaril repeated with a widening smile. “Have you ever thought of owning a minari?”

Safena’s eyes got wide. “What?”

“Eager likes you and he needs to be with someone who doesn’t own any other minari. You’re observant and kind. I know you’ll be a good keeper for him,” Kamaril explained. “If you want him, that is.”

Safena looked stunned, then smiled at Eager. “Would you like to come with me?”

All of Eager’s six eyes were closed, his breath was huffing rhythmically from between his lips, and his tentacles were waving slowly in the air. All signs of a very content minari. Cloud was lying next to Kamaril with her pups nestled between the two of them, fast asleep.

Cloud didn’t like having Eager so close to her pups. None of the new mothers were fond of him, but Eager ignored her baleful looks and occasional warning growl. His entire focus was on Safena.

“I can teach you the commands,” Kamaril offered. “Do you speak Anavac?”

“I don’t, but I’m a fast learner,” Safena said.

“All the commands are one or two words long,” Kamaril explained, then started going over each command.

Safena wasn’t exaggerating when she claimed to be a fast learner. It didn’t take her long to memorize all the Anavac words, then learn what they meant both literally and as minari commands. Then she was ready to try it on Eager.

When she first gave Eager an order, he hesitated and looked over at Kamaril.

“Obey,” Kamaril ordered, giving Eager the freedom to do Safena’s bidding. He performed all the commands Safena gave with more speed and enthusiasm than he’d ever shown Kamaril. It was a clear indication that Eager had made his choice.

“Are you sure you want to give him up?” Safena asked, petting the panting Eager. All six of his eyes were open and on Safena, ready for her next command.

“Only because I know he’ll be happier with you,” Kamaril answered honestly.

“Thank you, Kamaril,” Safena said, giving Eager a hug around his thick neck. The minari wrapped his neck tentacles around Safena, his way of hugging her back. “I’ll take good care of him.”

“I have no doubt,” Kamaril answered. It seemed Eager had found his place in the universe and had no reservations about his choice. It had to be nice to be a minari.



## **Revin**

“We’re going to sleep here for the night,” Revin told her after Safena and Woken left with Eager. Woken hadn’t looked happy about the minari but like all Hissa, he couldn’t refuse Safena anything she wanted.

“It’s no less comfortable here than in bay three,” Kamaril agreed, still sitting on the floor next to Cloud and the pups.

“Did Safena ask for Eager?” Revin inquired as he settled down on the floor behind her.

“No, but Eager asked to be with Safena,” Kamaril explained. She made a happy little sound as she settled back against him. With Eager gone, Cloud had relaxed and fallen asleep curled up around her pups. “Sometimes minari pick their people and if he hadn’t gone with Safena, he might’ve gotten depressed.”

Revin put his chin down on Kamaril's shoulder and nuzzled the high neck of the garment down so he could kiss one of her mating marks. As much as he loved that she wore the shirt he gave her, he hated that it hid the red marks. "Do minari get depressed often?"

"Not often, but when they do, it's very serious. Sometimes they stop eating and die," Kamaril explained.

"Then I'm glad she took him," Revin agreed.

"Does Woken hate me?" Kamaril asked in a whisper. "It was my fault that everyone got upset in the tunnels."

"No, Woken doesn't hate you," Revin assured her, then chuckled. "He didn't come up and talk to you because he was afraid of intimidating you. What happened in the tunnels was because of poor communication between Ardent and Steadfast. Then Woken overreacted, making everything worse. Safena will make sure he understands what he did wrong; she was angry enough at him for both of you."

"She's amazing," Kamaril said.

The wistful tone of her voice made Revin curious. "You sound jealous."

"Maybe a little," Kamaril admitted. "She doesn't seem to be afraid of anything."

"We're all afraid of something," Revin argued. His data bracelet pinged, and he looked down to read the brief message from Section Commander Zamer. He jolted a little at what he read. "Looks like Eager is going on an adventure."

"What?"

"Safena and Woken are leaving on a gunship to Gafican Station to meet a human who says she has information about Decanted humans being illegally grown."

"Isn't that dangerous?" Kamaril asked, thinking of the Kaklan ship still out there. They'd found out one ship had limped away only to implode later, but that still left one lurking out there and potentially waiting to pounce.

“They’re going to give their gunship a boost,” Revin explained. “Our gunships are fast but with the boost, they’ll be gone before any Kaklan ship registers their departure from Ardent.”

“If anyone can find the children, it’ll be Safena,” Kamaril decided. “She’s bold and smart.”

“She has to put up with Woken,” Revin agreed with a smirk.

“Woken is very large,” Kamaril said, then yawned widely. “I’ve lost track of days and nights.”

“That’s easy to do on a ship even if everything is running smoothly,” Revin assured her. “After the attack, everything went a little awry. Right now, it’s late evening for us so it fits that you should be tired. A bed for us and mats for the minari should be getting here soon.”

“We should’ve brought stuff over with us,” Kamaril said with a sleepy frown.

“It’s fine,” Revin assured her. “I’ll go over and load up a couple of carts with everything we need and bring it over here after we rest.”

Kamaril opened her mouth, probably about to offer to help when she closed it again and shook her head. “I’ll stay here. That way, I’m less likely to cause any trouble.”

He kissed behind her ear. “It’s not because you’re trouble, sweetling. It’s because we worry about you.”

She yawned again. “Then I’ll stay here so no one has to worry.”

“Relax, my heart,” Revin murmured as she went lax against him. “You can rest against me until the beds get here.”

Kamaril murmured something he couldn’t understand. Within minutes, she was asleep. She didn’t make a sound when he arranged her against him.

The door to the room eased open and a familiar face looked inside. Revin motioned for Bomen to wait, then carefully extracted himself from Kamaril, using the nearest



minari as her new pillow. Without waking up, she curled up against Tizzy and hugged the large, affectionate minari.

Stepping carefully so as not to disturb any of the sleeping minari, Revin made it to the door and slid soundlessly into the hall beyond. Bowen had bedding and frames loaded up on a few hover carts for them.

“Did you hear?” Bowen asked.

“About Woken and Safena?” Revin clarified.

“Yes, that, but more importantly, we might have access to the Decanting technology!” Bowen pointed out excitedly.

“What?” Revin asked, feeling his own heartbeat kick up.

“Think about it. If it’s true, and the human they’re meeting leads us to the labs where they’re doing the Decanting, we’ll have access to the technology. We could start growing our next generation!”

Revin hadn’t thought of the broader implication of Safena and Woken’s mission. His first thought was about getting to the children before they were sold, but Bowen’s comments made him understand how significant this could be.

Several years ago, Halin was rescued by a human bounty hunter named Mian. She was the key to finding out Hissa were breeding compatible with Decanted human women. The technology was first developed in the human’s home system, but the Earth Government shut down the company and raided their facility on Mars, inadvertently destroying both the labs and all the research on Decanting.

So far, Hissa scientists weren’t able to reproduce it and they were reduced to hunting the galaxy for all the Decanted women sold into slavery before the lab was shut down. Access to the tech would change everything.

One thing troubled Revin. “You don’t think the Council would stop our search for Decanted women, do you? There are more of them out there, enslaved and needing to be rescued.”

“I’m sure they wouldn’t,” Bowen said, although he didn’t look entirely certain. Then his expression hardened. “If they do, there will be those of us who refuse to obey and continue looking on our own.”

Hearing Bowen boldly declare that he’d go against the Council eased Revin’s fears. They were Hissa. They didn’t turn their backs on their own.

## CHAPTER 21

### Kamaril

Nibbler grabbed the hem of her shirt in his mouth again and tugged, sounding the same type of fake growl adult minari used on the young.

“Nibbler, let go,” Kamaril admonished him, tugging the shirt out from between his jaws. He huffed and gave up, sitting heavily on his back haunches and staring up at her. She crouched down next to him and gave him some scratches. “You’re bored, aren’t you?”

He huffed and leaned into the pets, but she could feel tension coiled in his body. Nibbler wasn’t the only one. All the pack, except for Whisper and the puppies, had their full attention on her as if waiting for something. They were restless and tired of only chasing the prey ball for exercise. Revin had gone to check in with several Hissa on the Steadfast’s progress and to fetch the minari’s meal for tomorrow.

With him gone, there was no reason Kamaril couldn’t get creative with the minari training!

First, she pulled out all the equipment shoved into one corner of the exercise room and created a kind of obstacle course for her and the minari. Then, she put on the armor Revin had picked out for her. It was fully functional but painted a bright yellow to denote it belonged with the practice weapons and not to any one individual.

Finally, she pulled out the practice gun, also painted bright yellow that only fired harmless colored pellets. This allowed her to see what she hit but do no damage.

The first challenge was keeping the weapon steady as she moved. She was used to swinging her arms when walking or running, but with the weapon, her upper body needed to remain still. It took several circuits of the obstacle course before she got a handle on it and was hitting the pop-up practice targets about fifty percent of the time. That was far better than her single hit on the first attempt.

The second hardest thing was not accidentally hitting a minari. They didn't care when the colorful beads left little dots of yellow on their tough hides, but Kamaril hated it. Each dot was evidence that she was more dangerous to her minari than the enemy would be.

Unwilling to be discouraged, she practiced harder.

By the time she and the minari had done the course ten times, they were working in concert with almost no mess-ups. Not a single minari broke ranks and got in the way of her shots, and she only missed on the targets. Although she might be cheating by firing many rounds at once. Still, she decided it counted as an improvement for all of them.

Putting down the weapon, she released the pack for a break. All the minari were enjoying this new game so they didn't wander off. They remained close and stared at her intently while she sipped water and considered how to rearrange the course.

She was almost finished with the canister when the all too familiar klaxon sounded. The display on a far wall lit up and filled with text in Hissa. It didn't matter that she couldn't read what was written there. All that mattered was Revin wasn't with her.

Fear hit her hard and fast, making her scream out.  
"No!"

The minari weren't fond of the klaxon, but her cry echoing in the large room made them all gather around her and look for an enemy.

"I'm not hurt," she assured them, petting the two closest minari. "I'm sorry."

Predictably, the overhead and wall lights went out and the floor lights came on. The minari growled a little at the change and all of them opened their third set of hunting eyes.

She stared at the door to the exercise room. Section Commanders Zamer and Demor had dropped by the exercise room several days earlier to explain that they were forced to

put everyone to work, so only Revin was left to guard her. They'd both been confident that another attack was unlikely.

They'd been wrong, and her Revin was at risk!

He was out there with no weapon. He should've been here with her and the pack. What if he ended up in a corridor that was breached, or something fell on him, and he was stuck and slowly dying? All the other Hissa would be busy fighting and there would be no one to help him.

"He'd want us to stay here," she whispered to the minari around her. "He'd want us to stay sheltered and safe here inside the exercise room."

She heard the rail guns moving and then start firing, making the entire ship vibrate slightly. Staring at the door to the exercise room, she worried her lip while trying to decide what to do.

When both Stumpy and Wink whined at her and tried to go for the exercise room door, she realized they were worried about Revin too. The minari didn't like it when pack members weren't visible. Her state of distress was making them agitated and wanting to find their missing pack member, Revin.

"I want Revin. My pack wants Revin," she said to herself. "Safena would go find him too. She wouldn't let orders stop her. She knows what it is to be free."

Yes, free! She finally understood because this moment was what freedom meant. She should do what was important, not what she was told to do.

A sense of rightness flowed through her as she looked down at her practice weapon. She was still wearing the chest armor that would protect her, but the gun would be useless against a real opponent.

Looking around the room for a potential weapon, she thought about her days on Anavac. She'd always carried a short spear with her in case one of the pack got attacked by a wollop during a run or a hunt. She'd defended her pack on many occasions when faced by the tall, lanky, and deadly

predator that liked to capture and eat minari. It wouldn't be the perfect weapon, or even a good one considering what the Kaklans would probably be carrying around, but it was better than going out empty-handed.

It didn't take long for her to put together an improvised spear from parts of the exercise equipment. A sturdy pole, and a thick, sharp piece of metal salvaged from a pile of items to be thrown away went together with some insta-gel to create a fine weapon. She tested the weight and found it only a little heavier than the one back on Anavac.

Before leaving, she put Whisper in a corner with the pups.

"We'll be back," she promised them. "And we'll have Revin with us."

Whisper gave a little huff as if in agreement, then settled down around the pups.

Because she only had an improvised spear, she didn't use the "behind" command they'd been practicing earlier. Instead, she used the "surround" command that put her in the middle of the pack with the most observant minari in the rear and the most aggressive minari in the front. This was how they hunted back on Anavac, making it a familiar and easy formation.

Revin was vague about who he needed to talk to when he left, which meant he could be anywhere on either the Ardent or the Steadfast. That was a lot of ground to cover, and she didn't have the best mental map of the Ardent. Deciding to explore the Steadfast first and hope he was there; she made her way to the connecting tube.

Occasionally, she heard shouted Hissa words echoing down halls but none of the voices were Revin, or even someone familiar. She didn't call out to any of them. If they found her out of the exercise room without Revin, they'd make her go back and pull men needed elsewhere to guard her.

That wasn't going to work for her. Returning to the exercise room without Revin wasn't an option.

Even though she didn't have a firing weapon, she was thankful for the training Revin had given her. He'd taught her that most weapons used inside ships were energy weapons because no one wanted to puncture the hull of a ship. The chest armor she was wearing would protect her for a first or second hit of an energy weapon before failing.

He'd also explained that Kaklans outnumbered the Hissa, so they often tried to overwhelm them with numbers instead of weapons. Unlike his people, the Kaklans didn't care about casualties as long as they achieved their goal. When she'd asked about the goal, he'd gone quiet, then changed the subject.

"Ahh!" she exclaimed as the entire ship shook violently around her. She stumbled and almost fell to her knees. The minari closest to her pressed in close to help steady her.

What caused the ship to shake like that? It hadn't happened during the first attack.

Then she felt a slight pressure change. She didn't know what it meant, but it had to be significant. Worry for Revin made her want to run heedlessly through the corridors and halls. Forcing herself to be cautious, she kept a more sedate pace toward the connection tube.

Voices that didn't sound right hit her ears, making her pause to listen.

"This way!"

"Are you sure? Last time you were wrong, and the room was empty."

"The sniffers are registering a stronger signal now. We're close!"

They were talking in Space Standard, which didn't make sense if they were Hissa talking among themselves. When she wasn't around, they often dropped back into their native language. This had to be the Kaklan, or the mercenaries Revin told her they liked to hire.

She had to run or fight; hiding wasn't an option in this sparse section of the ship. Running was what Revin would want her to do, but these men were a threat to her mate and that couldn't be allowed. Besides, she had the advantage of ambush.

"To here," she commanded, maneuvering the pack to a T intersection. Calling out names, she divided the pack so they were hidden on either side of the intersection, and they could flank these intruders.

She and the minari would be visible the moment the men entered the intersection. If there weren't many men, the surprise would allow her and the minari to take them down before they had a chance to fire.

That was the plan anyway.

She stood next to the end of the intersection; her spear gripped tightly in her white-knuckled hands. They weren't talking now, but she could hear them moving. They weren't trying to mask their footfalls. For a moment she had doubts. What if it was a group of Hissa?

Cloud growled and all the spikes along her spine raised. She didn't like what she was smelling. There was only species that would make Cloud react like that—Regarians!

A group of them had visited with interest in buying a few minari to start a pack of their own. One of them had been rough with Cloud, and she'd bit him in retaliation. Thankfully, Ti had been angry at the Regarians' rudeness and sent them away without punishing her or Cloud.

Cloud's response meant there had to be Regarians coming at them. Kamaril didn't have to worry about unleashing the minari on innocent Hissa.

"Trophy kill," she whispered to the pack. It was the command to tell them to kill quickly but not eat the prey. She watched all of them crouch, ready to pounce.

*I know I'm not a true Hissa, she prayed silently to the Hissa's moon deities as the footsteps got closer. But please help me protect your favored people by protecting my minari.*



The footsteps paused, and there was a quick conversation about interference and needing to hurry. They were so close, Kamaril could smell the wretched musk of the Regarians. They'd start walking again any moment now and it would be time.

Kamaril thought she would be scared, but she felt strangely calm and hyper-aware of her surroundings. She noticed how still the air was around her. The enviro systems must have shut down or been damaged. There was still the sound of rail guns firing, but they were far off. She could feel the tension and excitement radiating off the minari around her.

*Yes, she thought. We're all ready for this hunt.*

The first body appeared in the intersection, a Kaklan holding a large data pad with a small sniffer droid crawling along the ground only a few feet in front of him. He was frowning down at the data pad as he walked and didn't even notice them at first.

"Trophy kill!" Kamaril shouted, thrusting her spear at the Kaklan as the minari flowed out and went after the rest of the group.

He gave a startled gasp and dropped the data pad. He was wearing armor similar to hers, so she aimed for his neck. He tried to grab her spear, but the tip was piercing his throat even as his fingers wrapped around it.

She pushed with all her body, and he went down backwards, trying to scream but only gurgling out blood. He batted at the spear, but his movement was ineffectual, and Kamaril had no problem keeping the spear embedded in his neck.

"Martolive!" someone screamed and Kamaril looked up in time to take an energy blast straight to the chest. It sent her tumbling back and knocked the wind out of her. When Revin told her the armor would absorb several blasts, she didn't think she'd end up on the floor. Now she understood the armor might take away the dangerous plasma out of the blast but not the kinetic energy.

Before she could get to her feet, Cloud and Wink were at her side, growling and falsely charging to keep the shooter away from her. She sat up in time to see Stumpy and Hallow jump on the man from behind. Hallow latched onto the small section of leg exposed between the upper and lower armor plates, and Stumpy went straight for the head.

She knew minari had a strong bite, but this was the first time she watched one crush a helmet between its powerful jaws. A spray of blood decorated the floor as Stumpy rode the man to the ground, then reared back and took the head with him.

“I truly have the best minari,” she whispered as Stumpy dropped the head and looked around, eager for the next target.

But there was no next target. Her pack had efficiently taken down the ten Kaklans and twelve Regarians so fast that most of them never got a chance to fire their weapons. The scorch marks on the walls, ceiling, and floors of the intersection told her that most shots missed their targets. A quick survey revealed no dead minari and only Jumper looked like she’d gotten hit.

“Jumper, to me,” Kamaril called, and the minari hurried over.

There was a black mark on the side of her head and some singed scales, but no real damage. It seemed minari were energy weapon resistant. As she examined Jumper, the rest of the minari meandered between corpses, looking disappointed that their fun hadn’t lasted longer.

Getting back on her feet, she looked down at her first sapient kill. Her spear was still embedded in his neck and sticking straight up. She could see his terrified expression through the clear front of the helmet and vacant eyes staring blindly up at the ceiling.

“I should probably feel guilty,” she said to the corpse.

Suddenly, her earlier calm was shattered. Rage filled her as she grasped the spear and ripped it out of the Kaklan’s

neck. Blood flicked off the spear, creating an arc of red on the wall next to her.

“You brought this on yourself. I hope you spend eternity suffering in the cold on the Unseen moon while your soul rots for all the evil you’ve done!”

Several of the minari whined and nudged her with bloody muzzles. They didn’t like her loud voice while still in hunt mode and several recognized she was upset. She took a few deep breaths because hunting with heavy emotions was never a good tactic.

Reaching down, she picked up the Kaklan’s weapon. It was similar to the one Revin trained her on, but when she tried to fire it, nothing happened. The same thing was true with the next three weapons she tried. They couldn’t all be out of charge or broken. There had to be some safety mechanism in place so no one but the person wielding it could use the guns.

“That’s fine,” she told the bodies, dropping the last weapon with a thud onto a body and picking her spear back up. “I don’t need your fancy guns or sniffer droids. You think to hunt me, but now all of you are the prey!”

She looked down at her minari and changed her plan. There was no better way to protect Revin than to eliminate all the threats.

“Recognize,” she ordered, pointing at the Kaklan. Each minari obediently took a sniff then looked back at her for further instruction. She did the same thing with one of the Regarian bodies. Recognize was the command given to minari so they’d know to track the scent. She’d just made both Kaklan and Regarian a prey animal to her pack.

“Track and trophy kill!” she ordered, giving the pack permission to run ahead of her and look for more Kaklans and Regarians. No sooner had she given the command than her best tracker, Under, was off at a run with her and the pack right behind.

“I hope your gods are ready,” she muttered as she ran. “Because we will be sending your souls to them very soon.”

## CHAPTER 22

### Revin

Gilor was just finishing the last line of Revin's mating mark tattoos when the klaxon started blaring. Both men jolted and looked at the nearest display. It was lit up with data on the attack, which wasn't much yet. They'd set up perimeter droids as an early warning system. The enemy ships weren't in firing range yet, but they would be very soon.

Revin looked at Gilor; the warrior's grim expression matched his own.

"I'm a fool," Revin muttered as he jumped off the reclining chair he'd been lying on and rushed to the nearest weapons locker. "I left Kamaril alone and unprotected because I wanted to get my matching mating marks."

"You're the type of fool we all hope to be," Gilor responded, his familiar humor popping up as the warrior followed close. "Besides, it's not as if your female is helpless. She has an entire pack of bloodthirsty animals to stand between her and a threat."

Revin found a locker and flung the door open with enough force to dent the panel behind it. "The only problem with that is she doesn't see them as animals, she sees them as family. She'll stand in front of them to take a blast instead of using them as a shield."

Gilor cursed as he reached past Revin to grab equipment. "This is bad. Why must you warriors keep finding females who insist on putting themselves in danger?"

Revin almost laughed. "You know the answer to that."

"I do," Gilor responded with his trademark half grin. "You love that part of her the most, don't you?"

"She's fierce and loyal," Revin agreed. "Like a Hissa."

"Then let's go find your mate," Gilor responded, checking the charge on his weapon, "before there is no enemy left for us to fight!"

Revin appreciated Gilor's humor, but it did nothing to quell his fear. "We should go to the exercise room on Ardent first. Hopefully, she's there waiting."

Although he'd never worked with Gilor before, they'd had the same training, first at the citadel back home, then later on the Steadfast. He had faith Gilor wouldn't accidentally shoot him or Kamaril.

Fully armed, they made their way to the connecting tube. Halfway there, the rail guns started firing.

"It's started," Gilor announced without breaking stride.

All available Hissa were at their stations, so they didn't see anyone as they rushed to the connection. They were almost there when the ship shook violently around them. There was only one thing that would cause that kind of movement: the impact of another ship.

"Do you think they rammed us?" Revin asked, confused why the Kaklans would sacrifice an entire ship in an attack. Both Steadfast and Ardent were ten times the size of one of the Kaklans' destroyers. Ramming them would demolish the destroyer but only wound the Hissa ship.

"Not ramming, boarding!" Gilor growled, grabbing Revin by the arm and urging him to run faster. "They must have launched a split-end."

Another impact sent Revin crashing into a wall and almost put Gilor on his knees.

"Or two," Revin growled.

Split-end ships were specifically designed for boarding. One end of the ship was shaped like a cone and heavily reinforced. It pierced the hull of a ship, then opened like a flower, sealing the edges of the hull so there was no loss of atmosphere for as long as the ship was attached. Of course, when it took off, it would leave a gaping hole behind.

The moment they got their feet under them, they started running again. There was no need for words; they both knew they needed to get back to Kamaril before the invaders found her.

Several more impacts happened. That told Revin the Kaklans didn't know where Kamaril was, but that they were willing to fill the ship with their own men to find her.

Gilor came to a dead stop at a corner. Focused on getting to Kamaril, Revin started running past him only to have Gilor grab the weapons harness on his back and pull him back.

"Gilor, what—" Revin started to protest and shut up when he saw Gilor's face. Following the warrior's line of sight, he saw a shadow appearing and disappearing with a warning strobe light going off further down the hall. The shadow didn't look right and soon it was joined by other shadows and he could clearly hear a voice speaking Regarian.

"Mercenaries," Revin hissed.

"Nope," Gilor whispered with his half grin back in place. "Target practice!"

They watched the shadows for a moment, but it was apparent they weren't going to make it easy by walking past him and Gilor.

"They're waiting to pick off anyone trying to get to the Ardent," Gilor said, voicing the conclusion Revin had come to as well.

Looking around them, Gilor spotted a scutter trying to clean the hall at their feet. Normally, all secondary units and functions were halted during battle, but the Steadfast systems were a mess, so it seemed the cleaning scutters were still active. Gilor grabbed the small machine and ripped open the operations panel to fiddle with the insides. Revin couldn't tell what the male was doing but kept his questions to himself.

Then Gilor shoved a pulse-grenade into the scutter, armed it, then started counting under his breath while quickly shoving the operations panel back on. Revin could see that the panel was barely staying on as Gilor set the scutter back down on the floor. They both held their breath as the machine made a whirring noise, then slowly made its way around the corner and toward the shadows.

Revin gave Gilor a look of admiration. Everything he'd heard about this warrior being clever was true.

Unlike a weapon droid, the scutter shouldn't attract attention or enemy fire. This would allow it to get close enough to be effective. Not that the Hissa used weapon droids. Most civilizations didn't. They were too easily manipulated by opposing sides.

Gilor's count was only one off because a beat after he reached one, the pulse-grenade went off.

The moment the pulse dissipated, he and Gilor jumped into action. They rounded the corner, weapons up and ready. Only one Regarian was still standing, and he opened fire. Gilor took a hit to the chest that knocked him to his knees, but Revin was quick to return fire. He got several hits dead center in the Regarian's body mass, disabling his armor. The next hit knocked Revin back, but by now Gilor had recovered and fired. The Regarian fell to the ground, moaning.

"That hurt," Gilor grumbled. "Next time, let's be smarter about this and fire from a position of cover instead of jumping out into the open like a couple of idiots."

Revin grunted in agreement as he worked on pulling a full breath in. While he recovered from the hit, Gilor restrained the group. They were all knocked out except for the Regarian who'd been in the back of the group. Gilor's last hit had dazed him and by the time he was being secured, he was cursing and growling at the two of them.

Stripping them of their weapons, they found a sniffer droid and data pad under one of the Kaklans. A quick swipe through the data pad showed what program the sniffer droid was running.

"They're programmed to find human DNA," Revin smirked. "There've been so many Decanted women on the Steadfast over the last year that it had probably taken this group up and down every corridor. Plus, Kamaril would've left a trail every time she ran with the pack, the entire ship is covered in her DNA."

Revin looked over at Gilor, expecting to see a matching smirk. There was worry there instead. “What?”

“They’ll all have sniffers,” Gilor announced, grabbing weapons off the men they’d restrained. “And the Ardent hasn’t had nearly as many humans on it as the Steadfast, and she hasn’t been allowed to run around over there. The sniffer droid on the Ardent will lead them right to her.”

“By the moon!” Revin exclaimed, as he dropped the data pad, and scooped up his weapon. Gilor sent a message to command about the men, and they both bolted through the connecting tube, forcing the doors open to make it across. Gilor barely kept from getting a foot caught as the doors tried to spring closed on him.

The sound of blaster fire made them deviate from a direct path to the exercise room. As they got closer, Gilor grabbed him and forced him to move slower. He wanted to growl and throw off the man’s hand but realized the wisdom in being cautious.

Until he heard the triumphant howl of a minari.

Gilor must have heard it too because both of them burst out of cover, ready to fight to the death, only to find no one to fight.

Revin stopped dead in his tracks, gaping at what he saw. Gilor bumped into his side, also startled by the sight before them.

As with the group he and Gilor had taken down earlier, this one was comprised of still and prone Kaklan and Regarians. The lack of movement wasn’t because they were subdued—it was because they were all dead, or close to it.

Kamaril stood in the center of the wide corridor turned battlefield. As they watched, she put a bare foot on the Kaklan soldier and pulled an improvised spear out of his torso. She’d managed to penetrate the weak spot where the chest armor met the pelvis armor and the weapon got firmly wedged when the man had gone down.



As she got the spear free, blood splashed on her and one of the minari standing close by. Another two minari were playing tug-of-war with a Regarian body and even more were nudging a Kaklan missing a head as if trying to get him to move so they could keep playing.

Kamaril said something sharply in Anavac and the two minari dropped the Regarian body to give her a sullen look. Nibbler saw him and came trotting over with a happy yip.

“Nibbler, what—” she started to say, then saw him and Gilor standing there. “Revin!” she cried out and rushed to him. The pack followed, flowing around her and then surrounding the three of them as Kamaril threw herself at him.

Holding his weapon in one hand, he wrapped his arms around her and held tight. Their chest armor clanked together and there were some angry beeps as a few sparks flew before their armor automatically shut down the ion fields.

“I was so worried about you!” she said, her voice thick with unshed tears. “I had the minari, but you didn’t have anyone!”

“What am I, a scutter droid?” Gilor quipped.

Kamaril pulled away to run her eyes down first him and then Gilor. “You’re both unhurt?”

“He’s in one piece, despite his best efforts to get himself killed,” Gilor announced cheerfully.

Both he and Kamaril ignored the warrior. “I’m not injured, but what about you, sweetling? You’re covered in blood.”

Kamaril gave him a predatory smile that would do any minari proud. “None of it is mine,” she assured him and nodded her head at the bodies behind her. “It turns out hunting on a ship is almost as easy as hunting taltal back on Anavac.”

“Were these taltal armed by any chance?” Gilor asked, eyeing the weapons scattered around the bodies. “From where I stand, unless the taltal had guns, this isn’t a similar situation at all.”

Kamaril shrugged and pressed against Revin. “These Kaklan and Regarian don’t have large, spiked tails and are slow to act and easy to take by surprise. We could keep hunting if you think there are more on the ship.”

“No!” both he and Gilor said at the same time, making Kamaril jump a little.

“But we did good,” she said, pointing her spear at the bodies, then down a hall. “There’s more that way.”

“We took out another group near the connecting tube,” Gilor said, slinging his weapon across his back and checking his data bracelet. “It looks like another group was captured near bay three on Steadfast. There were four impacts so that should be all the groups that boarded.”

“Send command an update on what we did on Steadfast and what Kamaril did here on Ardent,” Revin said, grimacing at the state of Kamaril and her minari. Although none of them seemed to mind being covered in blood and gore, Revin found it disquieting.

It wasn’t until that moment that Revin realized the rail guns had stopped firing. He looked over at Gilor. “Is it over?”

Still looking at his data bracelet, he grimaced. “I think so, but it’s hard to be sure. There’s a lot of chatter.”

Revin’s data bracelet pinged loudly several times. Someone was specifically trying to get in touch with him. They wouldn’t do that unless they were sure it was safe and pinging him wouldn’t draw enemy fire.

“They want us to report to the command center here on Ardent,” he said after looking at the message displayed there.

“Wait till they see this,” Gilor said with a sweep of his hand over Kamaril and the minari. “They’re going to be so angry at us, but I’m going to be the one who gets in trouble.”

Expecting to see fear or trepidation on Kamaril’s face, Revin was surprised to see Kamaril meet Gilor’s gaze, spine straight and mouth in a hard line.

“I’m free,” she declared boldly. “Being free means I get to decide what I do with my body and my life. I decided to hunt, not you or Revin. If they try to punish you, I’ll stop them. I won’t let anyone hurt you or Revin.”

Gilor’s expression went from cheerfully fatalistic to outright adoration. “You are the most perfect female I’ve ever met.”

Kamaril blinked in confusion. “Thank you?”

Gilor dropped to his knees in supplication. “Take me as a second mate, please!” he begged.

It wasn’t unheard of for one female to have two or more mates, but that wasn’t happening here. Especially since he knew Gilor didn’t mean it.

Putting a boot against Gilor, he gently knocked the dramatic warrior over. “Get to your feet, you ice-brained idiot. We need to get to the command center.”

“Ah, my heart has been broken,” Gilor said with a grin as he stood up. “I’ll never be the same. My body might look fine, but there is a deep bleeding wound where my heart should be.”

Kamaril might not understand all of Gilor’s references, but her smile made it clear that she recognized Gilor’s theatrics for what they were.

“You’ll probably be all healed by the time we get there,” she teased and let Revin tangle his fingers with hers and lead her down a corridor. One quick command and the minari surrounded them in a well-organized formation.

“That’s impressive,” Gilor commented as they walked. “After word gets out about what happened here, I’m thinking we might start buying packs of minari to take with us everywhere.”

“They won’t be as good as my pack,” Kamaril warned him.

“Not unless you’re the one who trains them,” Gilor agreed. “I predict that within the year, you’ll have a giant

facility next to the citadel, and you're going to be a very busy woman.”

Kamaril made a scoffing sound, but Revin agreed with Gilor. What Kamaril had done was astounding and proved that a single person with a pack of minari was as effective as several Hissa warriors, perhaps even more.

He could clearly see his future now, surrounded by Kamaril's beautiful babies and many minari on his home planet. He was going to have a good life. All he had to do was survive this meeting with Section Commander Zamer first.

## CHAPTER 23

### Kamaril

Both Revin and Gilor looked nervous as they made their way to the command center, but Kamaril refused to be scared. She was done with being worried about anything that wasn't life or death. Now she understood how Safena was able to stand up against all the large and angry looking Hissa warriors, even the giant Woken.

It was nice not to be afraid anymore.

As they got closer to the command center, there were more crew working in the halls. Every warrior halted what he was doing to stare at her as they passed by. Several jumped back to give the minari more of the hall with concerned looks on their faces. She forgave them because the crew of the Ardent hadn't seen how good her minari were, unlike the Steadfast crew.

Whispered conversations and murmured questions also followed them down the corridor. It was all in Hissa, but their tone of voice clearly indicated their surprise at her appearance. She probably looked awful, covered in blood as she was. There would be no asking Revin or Gilor to wait so she could bathe. She wanted the section commanders to see her like this. She was covered in the blood she'd shed in defense of Revin and the other Hissa on Ardent and Steadfast.

Blood she'd spill again without hesitation if circumstances warranted it.

The moment the three of them and the pack walked into the command center, the buzz of activity came to a dead stop. All eyes were on their group, and many settled on staring at her specifically.

"By the moons!" Section Commander Zamer exclaimed as he stepped closer to her, his face startled and his scale pattern going pale. "Be calm, Kamaril. I'll send for the menders."

“She’s uninjured,” Revin assured Zamer. “It’s all Kaklan and Regarian blood on her.”

Zamer’s scales turned black as he set his gaze to Revin. His face was nothing but rage.

“I should send you to spend the rest of your life on Diminish!” he roared. “You left Kamaril alone and turned off the locator on your data bracelet. How dare you!”

“No! You will not take him away!” Kamaril shouted, jumping in front of Revin, her spear pointed at Zamer. “*To me, defense,*” she called to the minari in Anavac. They crowded around her, Revin, and Gilor, baring their teeth at everyone else in the room.

Zamer was the closest to them and had taken a half step back when she’d moved. Now he took several quick steps away to stay out of reach of Nibbler’s jaw.

“Kamaril, he’s only angry. He didn’t mean those threats,” Revin soothed, wrapping his arms around her shoulders from behind. Kamaril dropped her head to press a quick kiss to his forearm before putting all her attention back to Zamer.

“I don’t care,” Kamaril announced defiantly. “You are my mate. Mine! No one will take you away from me. I won’t let them.”

“By the moons, she’s beautiful!” one of the other Hissa in the room exclaimed. “She’s like one of our women before the great death. Fierce and brave.”

“Look at the weapon she made. It’s covered in the blood of our enemies,” another said. “She’s ready to die defending Revin. She’s magnificent!”

There were murmured agreements from the other men in the room. She was glad everyone else seemed to approve of her, but she wasn’t going to take her eyes off the real threat.

Zamer ignored them and spoke to Kamaril, the black in his scales slowly fading back to the familiar blue green.

“Revin’s correct. If he’s the one you want, then I’m not going to send him away. You can call off the minari and lower the spear. He’s safe from my wrath. He might still need to answer to the Council back home, but I doubt they’ll give more than a verbal reprimand.”

“I’ll be there, ready to act if they try anything,” Kamaril announced, straightening up and striking the butt of her spear on the floor for emphasis. “Revin is part of my pack, and no one will hurt him.”

“I still have questions Revin needs to answer,” Zamer said, turning his gaze on her mate.

“I acted foolishly,” Revin said. Kamaril opened her mouth to argue, but Revin hushed her gently. “It’s true, sweetling. I was so eager to see Gilor that I didn’t think of the consequences of my actions.”

That made Kamaril curious. Pulling out of Revin’s hold, she turned to look at him and Gilor. “Why did you want to see him? The minari food arrived by droid not long after you left. You didn’t need to go fetch anything on Steadfast.”

Revin looked embarrassed and dropped his gaze to the floor. “Do you remember that you agreed to enter into a family pact with me?”

“Yes, but what does that have to do with Gilor?” Kamaril answered, pointing to the Hissa in question with her spear.

“Don’t go poking me with that,” Gilor announced cheerfully and took an exaggerated step back. “Revin came to me. I didn’t go looking for him. Everything was this ice-brained idiot’s idea.”

“Don’t call him that,” Kamaril snapped, refusing to be charmed by Gilor’s antics.

Revin stepped in front of Gilor. “Easy, Kamaril.”

Kamaril pinned Revin with a suspicious glare. “What is he talking about? What were you doing? I don’t like these secrets.”

She expected him to get upset with her demands, but to her surprise, he looked sheepish and started tugging at the closures of his chest armor. Once it was free, he pulled it off. The scooped neck shirt he was wearing underneath perfectly framed the new marks on his neck.

“Revin?” Kamaril whispered, stepping closer and gently pressing a fingertip to one of the black marks. “What’s happened?”

“It’s tradition,” he explained. “Males don’t develop mating marks like the women, so we have to have them tattooed on. Gilor is a skilled tatter, and I wanted to have him make my marks. It was dumb to do it while we were doing repairs and still vulnerable, but I couldn’t wait any longer.”

The skin looked angry and irritated and there was some blood and ink soaked into the neck of the shirt. “It looks like it hurt.”

“I promise I made it hurt,” Gilor assured her. Before she could thrust her spear at the cheerful Hissa, Revin grabbed her free hand and brought it to his lips.

“It’s supposed to hurt,” he explained. “The pain is a minor way for me to prove my dedication to you and our future together.”

“You deliberately hurt yourself for me?” she murmured, touched by his actions. No one had ever shown her such dedication before. “You even had him put my scars into the pattern.”

Revin smiled at her; his expression full of devotion. “They’re part of your mating marks as much as every other line.”

“You should’ve told me,” she insisted, leaning in close, putting her lips close to his. “I would’ve held your hand and whispered words of love in your ear.”

“I wanted to surprise you,” he said before brushing his lips across hers. “But you’re the one who surprised me, Kamaril the Warrior.”



She couldn't wait any longer; she pressed her lips to his for a full kiss. He wrapped his arms around her and held tight. Warmth chased away the last of her worry and fear. Revin was hers and even had marks around his neck to prove it. They both wore collars, not ones made of medical and tech but ones forged with passion and love.

Those were chains she didn't mind being bound with.



## **Revin**

He was so relieved when Kamaril kissed him that he didn't even care that Kamaril's chest armor was digging into him. All that mattered was that Kamaril's mouth was on his. They kissed until one of the minari pressed a large, blocky head between them with a little whine. Kamaril broke the kiss and looked down at the insistent beast.

"Don't be a brat, Gap. I promise we'll feed you soon." She looked back up at Revin with a smile. "I wouldn't let them eat the Kaklans or Regarians, and we did a lot of hunting today. They're all very hungry."

Revin tried hard not to look disgusted at the thought of the minari eating the invaders. "Probably good you didn't let them eat them. Those Kaklans would've given them stomachaches."

"Oh, no, they can eat almost anything without issue, including clothing," Kamaril answered earnestly. "I didn't let them eat because they're better hunters on an empty stomach."

Laughter made both of them remember they weren't alone. Kamaril's face turned red with embarrassment, and she hid her face against his neck. "I forgot where we were."

"I can see that there is no reprimanding you, Revin," Zamer said, clearly exasperated. "Moons save me from ever falling in love if it makes me like this."

Before Revin could argue the importance of love, Zamer shook his head and pointed to the door.

“Both of you need to see the menders,” he paused, looking around at the minari. “Better yet, I’ll send a mender to the exercise room.”

Revin tapped between his eyes. “Yes, Section Commander Zamer.”

Zamer returned the tap, then moved his gaze to Kamaril. “You’ve made us all proud today.”

As many of the warriors did for Mian, Zamer tapped over his heart first and then between his eyes, acknowledging Kamaril as both a beloved female and a fellow warrior. Kamaril couldn’t know the significance, but she beamed at his compliment as she tapped her fingers at the base of her throat.

“Gilor, you stay here,” Zamer called as he, Kamaril, and the pack turned to leave. Gilor was halfway out the door when Zamer spoke. Grimacing, the Hissa turned to face Zamer, only to have Kamaril grab his arm and drag him after her.

“I need him to come with us,” she called over her shoulder. “He missed a spot on Revin’s neck, and I want it fixed.”

With a cheeky grin, Gilor fell into step behind Kamaril. “Anything Kamaril the Warrior wants!”

Revin expected the corridors to be cleared of personnel by the time they left the command center. Far from being empty, they were lined with warriors, all of them grinning and cheering. It took Revin a moment to realize that they were celebrating Kamaril’s success in battle.

For a moment, Kamaril looked stunned and dazed. Then he watched her straighten her spine, hold her spear up high and give a triumphant howl that made all the minari throw back their heads and join her.

After a brief pause, the Hissa joined their combined voices to the howls, filling the corridor with the sound of triumph. As Revin tipped his head back and added his voice, he thought they might be starting a new tradition among the Hissa warships. He couldn’t be more proud of his warrior!

## CHAPTER 24

*One year later*

### **Kamaril**

Lounging against Whisper in an open field, warmed by the Hissa's sun, Kamaril cooed at her baby.

"You're the most beautiful baby to have ever been born," she told the two-week-old infant resting on her chest. He'd been born with the Hissa green skin and scales on his head but had her freckles in a darker green scattered across his face.

She and Revin still hadn't decided on a name so for now they called him Precious.

"I have to agree with you," Revin said as he walked swiftly across the field toward her. Nibbler was at his side using several tentacles wrapped around a forearm to tug at him, trying to get him to walk faster. Revin looked down at the minari with gentle exasperation. "Nibbler stop that. I'll spill everything!"

Nibbler must have decided they were close enough and let go of Revin to bound off to find Cloud. Nibbler had gone with Revin to fetch the midday meal because the minari worried when Revin wasn't with the pack.

Duty done, Nibbler was quick to find Cloud and her pups roaming the perimeter of the field. Bilo, Fast, and Long were old enough to hunt now so Cloud was teaching them all the things they needed to know to be protectors of the pack, which included acting as guards while others relaxed or slept.

Ever since Precious was born, Cloud had been extra vigilant, and her pups were quick to pick up on her habits. Nibbler wasn't good at sitting still, so he was often part of their little patrol group.

And then there was Whisper. Whisper had laid at her back because he'd assigned himself as Precious's nanny and never left the child's side. That got him a soft spot on the

blanket with her. He grumbled a little when she sat up, but settled the moment she laid Precious on the blanket to continue his nap while she and Revin ate. Whisper inched closer to the infant and made a huffing sound of affection before gently touching the child with one of his neck tentacles.

“I brought all your favorites,” Revin said as he sat down and put the food on the blanket between them.

“I always get my favorites,” she teased. “You spoil me in that way.”

“You deserve to be spoiled,” he responded.

Whisper perked up and looked to her right. Following his gaze, Kamaril saw Diran and Tasin laughing and running across the field. Tizzy was between them, jumping and yipping. These two were part of the group of Decanted children Safena and Woken had rescued. After they’d finished repairs, the Steadfast had rushed to pick them up. No sooner were they on board than Kamaril had lost half her pack to the children.

No one protested as members of the pack bonded with one or two of the children and refused to leave their side. After seeing what effective protectors they could be, not a single Hissa suggested they be kept away from the children.

The bonding hadn’t broken once they reached the safety and open air of Hissa. If anything, the minari had grown even more attached to the children. Kamaril was mostly sure these two boys, Diran and Tasin, could talk to each other without having to use their voices and cried when anyone tried to separate them. She was less sure they could communicate with Tizzy, but she wouldn’t be surprised to find out that was the case.

Not long ago, Tasin had gotten stuck in a room when he didn’t understand how to open the door. Diran had pounded on the door, sobbing. The normally laid-back Tizzy had gone into a frenzy and ripped a hole in the wall to reunite the boys. After that, all the doors had been reprogrammed, and Tizzy was given an especially big meal as a reward for looking after the boys so diligently.

“Your species is amazing,” Kamaril murmured as the boys tumbled to the ground with shrieks of laughter, Tizzy galloping and yipping in a big circle around them.

“We are,” Revin agreed with a cheeky grin. “But why are you commenting about it now?”

“The main reason your species wants the Decanted technology is to grow girls,” she said, still watching the boys. More children and minari converged on the field to join in the fun. “But you kept the boys from the illegal Decanting facilities.”

“What else could we have done?” Revin asked. “We weren’t going to sell them!”

“No, of course not,” she agreed. “But you could’ve sent them back to Earth.”

“Never,” Revin spat. “We can’t trust them to care for Decanted children when they don’t really see them as human.”

“See, that’s why you’re all amazing,” Kamaril declared. “You’re giving them a home even though they could become competition for full Hissa later when finding mates. I wonder if any of the Hissa will become resentful of the Decanted males.”

“Ah, I see,” Revin said and leaned over to give her a kiss on the forehead, his expression gentle.

“We aren’t getting rid of anyone. Those Decanted boys are Hissa. Our child, Precious, is Hissa. You, Mouse, Safena, and her sisters are all Hissa now. Understand?”

“But do all of you think this way, or just you?” she pressed.

“All of us,” Revin assured her. “The Council had meeting after meeting and many votes to make sure everyone wanted the same thing. The only objections were practical ones regarding health and safety. No one tried to create laws against Decanted humans entering family pacts or having children with each other or other Hissa once they’re adults. Their genetic diversity can only help us. Besides, they’re children. Anyone who treats children as anything but the

precious gifts they are should be condemned to eternity on the Unseen moon.”

Kamaril smiled at him, relief easing the tension in her shoulders. “I’m glad.”

Revin’s grin turned mischievous. “Besides, no one dares to do anything that might upset the Decanted women.”

The confusion must have shown on her face because Revin elaborated. “You Decanted women are scary! Mian’s skills with a gun are legendary. Mara managed to take Woken down during hand-to-hand combat. I’ve seen Mouse’s ability to hurt others with her mind in action. And then there is you, sweetling. My fierce warrior woman with her pack of minari.”

Pleased at being seen as fierce, Kamaril grinned back at him. “What about me? I don’t have much of a pack anymore.”

“Not for long,” Revin assured her. “Even now, the Panoply is bringing in almost fifty new minari for your kennel.”

“Fifty?” she said with a smile. “That’s more than they thought they’d be able to get.”

Revin nodded. “They were eager to sell after they found out the minari were going to you. You’re a legend now!”

Kamaril frowned slightly. “Legend?”

“You single-handedly gave the Hissa a reputation for brutality and rumors that we breed minari specifically for warships. I’ve heard it said that a white-haired war goddess roams our ships, hungry for souls.”

She chuckled at the picture Revin painted. Not long ago she’d been a slave, scared of displeasing her masters. Now she was respected among the Hissa and feared by other species.

“I like this life,” she murmured.

The field was rapidly filling with playful minari and joyful children. Because of the close bonds between many of

the minari and the children, the large dormitory to help the children transition to their new lives was right next to the land they cleared for Kamaril's kennels and training facility.

Every section commander was now requesting for her to train handlers and minari for their ships. She'd managed to train two Hissa and several minari before Precious forced her to rest more. Soon she would go back to training, probably with Precious strapped to her chest and Revin constantly demanding she take breaks.

"So much for a quiet picnic," Revin murmured. "You better eat quickly before they make it over here and eat all our food."

Kamaril nodded her head to a group of Hissa walking onto the field, arms loaded with blankets and containers of food. "I think we're safe. Our picnic has turned into a party."

Then she saw Mara and Deena with their children, Lara round with her second child while Selon cradled their first, along with Mouse and several of her sisters. "It's too bad Safena is off being clever. It'd be nice to visit with her more."

"It's good she's out there working so hard," Revin pointed out. "She and Nova are the reason we have found and rescued so many Decanted women over the last year. Far more than we ever expected. And with the first of Nisha's Decanting facilities almost up and running, we're no longer a species on the brink of extinction. We're thriving."

Kamaril felt so much happiness swell inside her it was surprising she didn't burst. "The Hissa deserve all of these good things."

"So do you, sweetling," Revin said before claiming her mouth in a quick kiss. Then there were dozens of bodies surrounding them, putting down blankets, food, and making cheerful conversation.

Precious woke up and Kamaril cradled him to her chest. Revin moved to sit behind her, gently nudging Whisper out of the way. The minari gave ground and moved to rest a heavy head on Revin's leg with a happy sigh.

Leaning back against Revin, Kamaril smiled as people ate and talked and the children slowly joined them. With her hands full of Precious, Revin fed her bites of food until she was full. Warmed by the sun on her face and Revin at her back, she and Precious dozed off to the sound of happiness filling the air around them.



## AUTHOR'S NOTE

Dear Readers,

Thank you for reading *Defending Revin*. I can't tell you how happy I was when Kamaril turned into such a warrior! She made me so proud, especially when she wasn't even going to let the other Hissa pick on Revin. I know I say this every time, but I think she might be my new favorite.

I already have book 9 and 10 planned out! We're going to find out what secrets Nisha is hiding in *Trusting Revin*. (We met Nisha in book 7, *Teasing Woken* because she needed the help from the Hissa, but we know she's not telling them the whole truth!) Later we'll meet the vivacious Nova when Miran does his best to "rescue" her in *Evading Miran*.

As always, I hope you enjoyed *Defending Revin* enough to leave a review! As an indie writer without the support of a publishing company, I need all the help I can get. Your good reviews keep me writing.

If you have any questions, comments, or suggestions feel free to contact me via email: [author@rk-munin.com](mailto:author@rk-munin.com)

What to chat with the author? Join my Facebook group [Munin's Magpies](#)

I'm also on [Instagram](#), [Tiktok](#), and [Bookbub](#).

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Cheers,

Rye

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