

CRAVING THE HEVEIANS BOOK 5

THE ALIEN'S

Steel

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BOOK 5

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Claire

He is my patient, my subject. The gorgeous cyborg who has fought so hard to regain the memories taken from him recalls most of his life, except his childhood. We journey to the village of his youth to be reunited with his family. The journey brings us closer, blurring lines I swore I would never cross. But Craal's resurfaced memories don't match what we find at his village and I can't escape a sick feeling that we were not supposed to come here.

Craal

I was turned into a monster in order to destroy my own people. Slowly, I'm remembering who I am with the help of a human woman. Claire is beautiful, intelligent, and I'm powerfully drawn to her. When we arrive at my family's village, my memories don't line up with the behavior of the people there. A pulsing sound that can't be traced gives Claire headaches and is likely the root of the mystery. As we dig deeper, we uncover an explosive secret and someone will stop at nothing to keep it hidden.

CHAPTER 1

Claire

“**H**ow does that feel?” I asked him as I ran my fingers over the final scar that would—hopefully—ever be made on the head of the Heveian cyborg named Craal, and pressed the thin line on his scalp. “Any pain or discomfort?”

Long, dark blue lashes dropped over light teal eyes, one of which was synthetic. “No,” he replied. “Your touch does not give me pain.”

I knew his words were a simple response to my question, but my skin rippled at the low timbre of his voice. Soft, darker teal hair was growing in over the patchwork of healed incisions that covered his head, with gray streaking at his temples. Some scars were from alien scientists who had implanted memory blocks and aggression enhancers into his brain in order to make him into a killing machine. Others were the result of Jorok’s and my efforts to remove them.

And I meant “machine” *literally*. An arm and one of his legs were metal. Sleek steel alloy had been crafted into beautiful limbs by Wulfrex, one of the five Heveian males who operated the space cruiser we’d been living on. The work was impeccable, transforming Craal’s clunky, misshapen body into something functional and natural and much closer to his original proportions.

“What about here?” I pressed the base of his skull, where the worst of the damage had been done. Scars overlapped

scars.

“No.” Those remarkable eyes glanced up at me. The synthetic one—also designed by Wulfrex—emitted a glow that could be seen in the dark. “No pain, Dr. Turich.”

“Good.” I pressed my lips together and tugged my gaze away from the expanse of pale gray skin stretched over muscle. There was some scarring where his skin met metal, but it was minor. Jorok, the Heveian physician who was my partner in Craal’s rehabilitation, had done amazing work at minimizing the damage, but it was still there. It would always be there, especially in the places where no one could see. Craal’s brain was the most traumatized part of his whole body.

Despite what he’d been through, his mind was remarkably resilient. “Kiki told me you remembered more of the crash,” I said gently. “That was the time you were taken, correct?”

He absently opened and closed his mechanical left hand. “Kiki and I talked about it yesterday.”

I sat back in the chair opposite from him. We were in my office/lab space aboard the mostly empty cruiser, on the landing pad in the palace hangar. The only sounds were the hum of my equipment and our breathing. “Do you think you can tell me about it?”

His brow knitted. “Kiki didn’t tell you?”

Kiki Ricci was a human woman who had been abducted and wound up in the cell with Craal and a handful of other prisoners who were also being experimented on. Craal had somehow associated her with his sister and protected her from the other prisoners who would have killed her. To this day, she still called him “Friend” instead of “Craal” since he was unable speak his name. They remained very close friends. He, the brother she never had, and she, the “sister” who was the thread that kept him connected to his true self through the atrocities done to him. I wasn’t jealous of their close relationship any more than Jorok—Kiki’s mate—was. But I did wish he would tell me things first, sometimes. “She didn’t get into details, no.”

He nodded and leaned back. The chair groaned under his weight. The metal parts of his body made him larger and heavier than most Heveian males, who were big to begin with. Craal was larger than even Wulfrex, who was the biggest of the original five Heveian officers on the cruiser. Jorok and I had discovered that the aliens who'd experimented on Craal had increased his muscle and bone mass to support the extra weight of his metal parts. "I was mangled from the crash," he said. "My arm and leg were already destroyed. It was a relief to know they hadn't just taken them."

Jorok had suspected that Craal's limbs had not been replaced because of random amputation. There was bone trauma in other places of his body, as well as burn scarring that indicated an explosion of some kind. "Where did you crash?"

He shrugged. "I was delivering some shipments to a moon in the Dalog sector. I don't remember what, but it was something mundane, like harmless supplies, or I would have been trying to be secretive. I wasn't. Just coming down on an open pad. There was a wave of something." He shook his head. "A ground fluctuation. Nothing unusual, but it sent up a pulse at the wrong moment and I lost control. I crashed on the pad. Others crashed too. In the ensuing chaos, some guards grabbed my body. I remember hearing someone talking about a payout. A delivery. I remember the exact phrase, that someone would 'pay a lot for one of these.'"

"For a Heveian?" I asked.

"That's what I presume," he replied and inclined his head. There was something incredibly regal about Craal's movements, like a lion. His speech had drastically improved since we'd begun working on him, too. When the first blocks had been removed from his brain, his words had been halted and his speech basic. Now, he spoke with articulate fluency. Craal was not only intelligent, but seemed educated.

"Who would pay credits for a Heveian male?" I pondered aloud.

"The UCP," he replied. "The group who is trying to eradicate my entire species for the *vistran* lying beneath the

surface of this planet. They tried to create a monster.” His face darkened with anger. “And they did.”

“They did *not*.” I didn’t usually speak out so forcefully to my patients, but I felt strongly about this. Craal was not a monster. He was one of the most beautiful individuals I’d ever seen.

“At least they didn’t succeed in turning me against my own people.” He ran his flesh hand through his hair, which fell softly over his forehead. “Axlos, Wulfrex, and Ryland found Kiki and me before that.”

I wasn’t sure that would ever have happened. Craal’s iron grip on his true, decent nature had defied the best efforts of his captors. What they had done to him was overwhelming and horrific. It would have killed the strongest of humans and most Heveians. They had not been able to turn him into a vicious, murderous thing. Through the procedures, experiments, and painful treatments, his core self remained. That was what kept Kiki alive. That was what made him go with Axlos’ team when they came to rescue him.

That was what made me feel the way I did about him.

“Do you remember anything else? Any new memories?” I asked.

“Just what I’ve told you,” he replied. “I remember joining the dispatch courier team and carrying errands for Heveia when so many were falling sick from the disease the UCP inflicted on us.”

“Try to think about the home you grew up in,” I prompted. “You lived in the mountainous region, far from the capital city, yes?”

He shrugged. “That is what I’m told, based on my name and the green tint in my hair.”

“What about your family? Any memories about them?” I asked. “Perhaps just flashes of people that you aren’t sure who they are, but recognize as important to you. Kiki reminds you of your sister. Can you bring up any details about her?”

Craal leaned forward, causing the chair to creak. He rested his elbows on his thick thighs and dropped his head in his hands. “I have nothing,” he growled. “Just like the last time you asked. I would tell you if I remembered anything else.”

“Or Kiki.”

He looked up. Light teal eyes blazed for a moment. “I would tell you.”

I shrugged, because the truth was, Kiki usually heard about new memories first.

“The question I have is, *why* can’t I remember my young years?” he asked, clearly frustrated. “You said Jorok removed all the things they put in my brain.”

“He did,” I said. “But sometimes it takes a while to heal. And sometimes there is tissue damage that cannot be undone.”

He looked at me with an expression that made my heart twist in my chest. I held his gaze with my breath staggering and warmth stealing into my cheeks. He was stunning to look at. Thick slashes for brows and eyes so piercing they could stop a charging bear in her tracks. A few scars around his synthetic eye met and melded with the lines fanning out over his rugged cheeks. His mouth was full and expressive, set below a long straight nose and above a strong jaw. Grooves ran down his cheeks from smiles that were now rarely seen. “I refuse to believe that the early years of my life are lost to me.”

“I refuse to believe it, too,” I said, leaning forward. We were close now. Our faces were less than a foot apart. I reached up and placed my finger to his forehead. “I believe it’s all in there. In time, it will all come back.” I smiled for both of us. “Be gentle with yourself.”

“All I’ve been is gentle with myself,” he said. “Resting, doing those foolish exercises with Hoc.” He winced. “It’s absurd.”

“It’s not absurd,” I said, leaning back to get out of range of his scent, which did things to my system that weren’t even right. He smelled like a forest, of all things. He’d never been to a forest in his life and there wasn’t one even remotely near

to us on the cruiser, but there it was—warm pine and fresh air. “Hoc’s exercises are well-documented to improve mental strength.” Hoc, the cybot who lived on the cruiser with us and who had become a vital part of the crew, *did* know how to get Craal to work his mind and strengthen his synapses.

“They’re annoying,” he said. “And tiring.”

I laughed. “That means they’re working.”

“Annoying is good?”

“Tiring is good,” I said. “It means you’re working hard. Hoc, like the rest of us, wants you to improve.”

Craal frowned. “I don’t see how a robot can want anything. They’re programmed machines.”

I sighed. Craal’s views of the cybot were complicated with his own cyborg parts, which impacted much of his life. It wasn’t surprising that he felt some hostility toward the cybot, who was one hundred percent machine and entirely sentient. He struggled to accept his own nonorganic parts as part of him and not a constant reminder of what had been done to him. “Either way, you’re improving and that’s what I like to see.”

He grunted. “I’m glad you are pleased. That is all that matters to me.”

That statement moved through me like a gentle, low-rumbling quake. That low, rough voice. The slide of his gaze to mine, then away. Like he didn’t want to linger too long or get caught in a web.

It was absurd, of course. Nothing about me would catch anyone in any fashion. I was a plain woman with orange hair, freckles, and a long nose. I was too gangly on top and big on the bottom to draw the interest of a male like this—now, especially, as I was forty-seven. I was too involved in my work to pay attention to a man’s needs. I’d had my flaws pointed out vaguely by ex-boyfriends, and in unpleasant detail by my ex-fiancé. He wasn’t wrong about any of them. My body was what it was. I *was* all those things. And the only thing that loved me back was my work. I didn’t suffer the fantasy that when Craal looked at me he thought of me as desirable.

“Your progress is impressive,” I said, standing up to signal the end of the check-in.

He unfolded from the chair, rising to his full height of nearly seven feet. My head came up to somewhere on his chest. “Thank you, Doctor.”

“My pleasure,” I said.

“I will walk you back to your quarters at the palace.”

It wasn't a request, but I paused on the verge of refusing. The empty cruiser lacked dangers lurking around corners, and the palace was certainly not a place teeming with enemies. We—the Heveian crew and humans—were staying in guest quarters that were both lovely and profoundly safe, but if he wanted to walk me back, he could walk me back. “Okay. Thank you.”

We walked through the corridors that were once bright and full of energy with the busyness of a working cruiser. It had reminded me of the lab I'd worked at—fifty-two years ago. That was when I was abducted and put into deep hibernation, along with Dani Lin, an assassin who had been sent to kill my corrupt research and business partner. We were awoken here, on this cruiser, by Jorok, and it hadn't been an easy process.

But the hardest thing was waking up feeling like one day had passed, only to learn that decades had gone by. Everyone I had known was either very old or dead, including my parents, who'd been far more focused on their research projects than they'd ever been on me. I wondered if they worried about my disappearance much at all, or given more than the expected public hand-wringing before hurrying back to whatever paper they were writing. I'd been raised by babysitters and nannies who had shown more affection than my parents had.

I felt more connected to the women and Heveians here than I had to my estranged family, and I missed the way the cruiser was when we'd all been on it. I still worked out of my small office and lab space because it was too much to move everything, and I didn't know how long we'd be on Heveia. I liked my things just so, and once I found a setup I liked, I preferred to keep it that way.

The cruiser was huge, but we found our way to the ramp and descended onto the pad. Instantly, the air was cooler and fresh. Mixed with Craal's outdoorsy scent, I could have closed my eyes and breathed in morning mountain air. The Heveian capital city had been carved out of rock and earth over a long time. The surface of their planet was no longer habitable, but they'd made a thriving society underground. It was beautiful. The surfaces of the smoothly cut stone were polished to a gleam. There was hardly a sharp edge to anything, anywhere, as sinuous corridors and amorphous chambers made moving through the city much like wandering through a network of internal organs. Colors were quiet and natural.

The few people we passed moved about with purpose and grace. There were no stressed-out lab techs stumbling over their own feet amidst a pile of screens, books, and papers. No one hollering into devices with too many coffee cups balanced in their hands. Heveians had found a balance to their culture that humans had not, yet. Or maybe we had. It had been fifty-two years since I'd been to my home planet, after all.

We neared the palace, which didn't look like much from the outside. It was a wall with windows and a large archway. No doors. The people could enter the palace if they wished, and if the king and his advisors were available, they could speak to them. We had no sooner walked through when a familiar cybot walked up to us.

Hoc was an elegant, human-shaped bot with long, delicate limbs made of shined bronze. His head was a smooth egg shape with a black strip for vision along the front. Everyone on the cruiser was fond of him. "Hello, Claire and Craal. I was sent by Axlos to find you both."

I glanced at Craal, who looked just as confused as I was. "What for?"

"Prince Gavrox is calling an immediate gathering in the white room," Hoc replied. "Both of you are included in the summons."

A summons. Those weren't optional, as far as I knew. "Okay. We'll go there now."

Craal nodded. “Yes. Of course.”

After Hoc left, I looked at Craal. “Do you think we’re in trouble?”

His eyes tightened. The synthetic one glowed brightly. “Sounds like someone is.”

CHAPTER 2

Craal

Claire appeared worried. I wanted to smooth the line from between her brows and draw out a smile on her lips. It was hard to find words for what I felt when I looked at Claire. It was a mash of admiration, respect, and pure, unhinged lust. That mane of hair, the color of a hot star, beckoned my hands. She kept it contained in a tight twist at the back of her head, but I longed to pull out the clips holding it there and see it long and flowing. Her brilliant blue eyes, the color of a royal-born Heveian, flashed with her emotions. It was always easy to know what Claire was thinking based on her eyes. They revealed everything.

The rest of her made my fangs ache. Her bottom was full and lush. Her neck was long and delicate and her breasts were full and high. I loved the dusting of freckles over her nose and the bow shape of her lips. The smooth oval of her face was soft and lovely. She was not as young as the others. She was softness and brilliance. She was my center.

My fingers brushed the small of her back as we began walking, instead of to the guest quarters, to the palace white room. I'd only been there once. It was where the crown prince held private meetings. I truly didn't believe anyone was being reprimanded. Nothing had happened in the two standard galactic weeks since we'd arrived here. In fact, I had seen little of the others. Jorok gave me daily checkups, which were unnecessary now, but everyone was getting some well-deserved rest and relaxation. Myself included.

I glanced down at Claire's head. She had not gotten much rest. Every day, she returned to the cruiser and her lab, to do who-knew-what. Aside from my appointments with her, I didn't know what she did in there, but there was no shortage of screens or equipment.

We passed through the doors into the white room, which was true to its name. The stone was sealed in slick white, giving the round room the feeling of being inside a *betzel* egg. Seats were not arranged in any order, just loosely placed and facing one side. They were filled with familiar faces. Axlos and his officers—Drave, who ran communications on the cruiser, Ryland, who headed security, Wulfrex, the chief engineer and the amazing soul who made me the new limbs I now wore, and Jorok, the head physician. In addition to them were the human females. Some of them were mated to the males. Dani had been an assassin and had been abducted with Claire fifty-some years ago. She and Wulfrex made a formidable team. Kora, who had been a teacher, had found her mate with Ryland, who was almost as scarred as I was. Harp, who ran communications with Drave, was also mated to the cool, pale-eyed Heveian. Arria was a kind, sweet female who had not bonded with anyone, despite a palpable attraction from Axlos himself.

My gaze found Kiki, sitting with Jorok. She turned and smiled, waving me over to an open seat beside her. I nodded, but took a seat in the back, beside Claire.

Prince Gavrox, who was due to inherit the throne from his father very soon, sat with his mate, Princess Lila, who was expecting her first child with the prince. The king himself, who increasingly stepped farther and farther from governing, was not present. When Prince Gavrox saw that Claire and I had arrived, he stood up.

“Thank you all for coming,” he said. “I have updates I wanted to deliver personally. We have much to discuss.”

I looked around at the others in the room and wondered why I was here. My metal limbs stood out like a beacon of damage. I was still seeing Jorok and Claire regularly to make sure my body was healing and my mind was returning to a

state of stability. I had tried to attack Axlos during my rescue. I hadn't been able to speak or understand the words spoken to me. How was I worthy of being in a private meeting with the crown prince?

As if sensing my thoughts, Claire reached over and touched my hand. It was a gentle pat, but I understood. She wondered why she was here, too. Despite having lived on the cruiser and being accepted by both Heveians and humans, we had not found our place.

Gavrox talked about how the news of the United Coalition for Peace's attempt to exterminate the Heveian species was spreading. I had been off-planet during the worst of the sickness, but many had been killed. I had joined up to be a courier, so I'd been away during the outbreak and was not infected or exposed. The Malaise, as it had been called, was the UCP's attempt at gaining control over the planet to access the valuable *vistran* energy crystals lying beneath the surface. Gavrox and his mate had found the cure and had saved our species, but the UCP was not going to stop. *Vistran* was the most valuable power source in the galaxy. Everyone wanted it. It was bad luck for the Heveians that an enormous cache of it was on our planet.

The good news was that the proof that the UCP had infected our species with the Malaise was being met with surprise, but mostly belief. Kiki and Jorok had acquired a data crystal that contained proof that was hard to refute. The "peace" part of the UCP's sanctimonious name was being openly called into question. Life forms from systems far and wide were beginning to share their own stories of having suffered under the UCP's heavy-handed power-grabbing tactics. Others wanted an accounting from the UCP itself. There were denials from the group in question, of course.

Gavrox listed the systems that spoke out against the UCP and those who had reached out to him with offers of support. So far, we were nowhere near amassing a force strong enough to combat the powerful coalition if it came to a direct confrontation. Or rather, *when* it came to a confrontation.

“News from our strongest ally, the Mitrans, is that they are remaining publicly quiet, but are ready to fight the UCP. They are shoring up their arsenal and gathering more warships. They remain firm, however, that we engage human leadership over a breeding program sooner rather than later.” Gavrox winced. “We will need to call it something else.”

Lila did not look pleased. None of the females did. “Call it what it is,” Lila muttered.

“But it’s *not* that,” said Drave in his raspy growl. He had done the initial negotiation and knew the Mitrans’ intentions. “The Mitran males are looking for more than offspring. They desire mates, partners. They are not simply looking to breed.”

Lila regarded him. “If you feel sure the warlord you dealt with was speaking in good faith, then I believe you.”

“I believe him.” Drave raised his chin. As a lesser prince by birthright, he spoke with authority. “The warlord Ruzak was sincere. His people are desperate, and the research we’ve done on the Mitran people has shown them to be devoted to their females.” He shrugged. “It’s vital that we not lose them as an ally.”

Lila looked at the other females present. Harp, Drave’s mate, who had been present during Drave and Ruzak’s meeting as well, nodded. “Ruzak’s a good guy. He wants to save his people and he sees our women as the only way to do that. We’re compatible with them, like we are with Heveians.” She jerked one shoulder. “For the record, Mitrans are fucking hot. We won’t need to force any women to give them a chance, if you know what I mean. There are enough pissed off, burned-out women on Earth to fill a cruiser and send out there.”

“Thank you, love, for that assessment,” Drave said drily.

She winked at him. “Just telling the truth, babe.”

The conversation moved on to a discussion of when to approach Earth about this issue. By now, humans would have received the transmission about the UCP and would be forming their opinions about it. Considering they were

included in the information, it would be particularly relevant to them. The UCP's plans to completely take over their system and subjugate them would likely not go over well. It would also be the first time they would hear of Heveians.

My mind drifted during this discussion and I wondered, again, why I was here. I had nothing to add to this. I, with my metal arm and leg and hulking body, thanks to enhancements I hadn't asked for, felt like an alien among my own people.

"And there is an issue we are having in the mountains," Prince Gavrox said.

My attention snapped back to the conversation. I had been told I was likely from the mountains. I looked up to see the crown prince looking directly at me.

"I've received reports that there was past activity in the region to the north, where villages under the mountains exist. Contact with them has grown inconsistent."

"What kind of activity?" Axlos asked.

"Ground activity," Gavrox replied. "Unusual vibrations and pulses in the rock. None of the reports from the central communication station in the village of Bakka have raised alarm, but since this is where *vistran* is being mined by Heveians in the region, it's something I want looked into." He looked right at me again. "This is a mission for our friend Craal. Bakka is possibly your home village, is it not?"

Many heads turned as eyes fixed on me. I sat perfectly still, even as surprise raced through me. The crown prince chose me for a mission? What madness was this? "Possibly. I will do my best not to fail you, my prince." The words came out, even though I didn't even know what was being asked of me. "Are we still receiving *vistran* shipments from the area?"

Gavrox nodded. "The Bakkans are conducting *vistran* mining with shipments coming regularly."

"Craal should not undertake this mission alone," said Jorok. "We will go with him."

Gavrox raised a finger. "This is a fragile time as we prepare for likely war with the UCP over our *vistran* mines. I

cannot spare you. You are all heroes—symbols of Heveian resilience, strength, and autonomy. I am sending the rest of you to Dakak for a meeting of their quadrant’s senators. We must gather as many allies as we can,” he said.

Jorok frowned and glanced at me. “You don’t believe there is a threat?” he asked Gavrox.

“My advisors say our correspondences with the Bakkans have indicated nothing out of the ordinary. If anything, they’re exceedingly bland. It’s the irregularity of the communications that I don’t like.” He scratched his jaw and shook his head. “I need eyes on the situation. And this may give Craal a chance to regain some memories, if he can find his family. And give me peace of mind that all is well in our mining center.”

“I will go with him,” said Kiki. “It may be an easy mission, but Jorok’s right. He shouldn’t go alone.”

Although my chest swelled with love and appreciation for the gesture, I was already shaking my head. Kiki had just been reunited with her sister, Lila, whom she’d believed was dead, and had newly formed a bond with Jorok. I could not bring her away from those two people. Not now. “No, Kiki. Your mate needs you. The crown princess needs you. I can undertake the journey alone.”

“Perhaps we can assign some cybots. What about Hoc—?” Kiki began, but the female sitting beside me stood up.

“I will accompany him.” Claire didn’t look at me, but her head was high and her hands were relaxed at her sides. “I am working with Craal to regain his memories. This *is* an opportunity for him to locate his family. A reunion may jolt his brain into recalling the rest of his life, in addition to investigating the past disturbances there.”

Gavrox considered her. “Very well. I will assign a ground transport vehicle for your use.”

I looked at the female who retook her seat beside me. She looked back with a defiant tilt to her chin. Her blue eyes narrowed, daring me to object. But I would not. Could not. All

I could think about was traveling with Claire—*alone*—to a far-off village at the request of the crown prince.

She gave me a quick nod and looked away with a sniff, as if to say, *that's settled, then*.

Yes. It was settled. The only thing remaining was for me to find a way to keep from falling in love with the flame-haired female for whom I ached.

CHAPTER 3

Claire

“**T**his is a waste of your time,” he said to me, under his breath, after I had retaken my seat and the topic had moved to other things.

“It’s not,” I murmured back, face still hot. Hands pressed to the sides of my thighs. I’d never been one to want attention. That had been my partner’s role. Beth had been better at giving talks, discussing our work, and applying for grants... until we left academia to be hired by a huge corporation that supplied us with everything we needed for our research. I didn’t know, then, that she’d had an agenda of her own. That my research was being warped into weaponizing alien tech our employer had acquired. If I had picked my head up now and then and looked carefully at the whole picture, rather than my work, I’d have seen what was happening.

No. That was fifty-two years ago. Almost fifty-three. Everyone on Earth thought I was dead. Beth had died the night I was abducted—along with her assassin, who, ironically, was now my friend—and put into deep hibernation. It was a very strange life I lived.

“You do not need to watch over me.” Craal shifted on his chair. “I am not going to malfunction.”

I’d not heard him sound like this before—irritated, annoyed. He’d always been reserved and gentle. He only laughed when he was around Kiki. She brought out the best in him. I didn’t. “I don’t think you’ll malfunction,” I whispered,

since there was still discussion going on in the room. I had no idea what it was about. My attention was zeroed in on Craal. “I’m just going as a friend.”

His electric blue eye, which Wulfrex had made for him, and his less brilliant organic one narrowed on me. “A friend? Or a sitter to report back to Jorok on how I function?”

I narrowed my eyes right back at him. “Craal, what has gotten into you? I’ve never—”

“Meeting’s over, kids.” Dani gave me a light tap on my shoulder as she, and everyone else, headed for the exit. “But carry on.”

“I’ve never been your sitter and I’ve never reported back to Jorok like some—some informant.” We both stood. I kept my frown in place. “If you really don’t want me to go with you, then say so and I won’t go. I’m trying to help.”

“Everyone always wants to help,” he muttered, glancing away. “Like I need more reminders that I’m too broken to function alone.”

“Craal, that’s not what I meant,” I said, but he was striding toward the exit, metal and organic legs moving with smooth grace and power below an ass that was sheer perfection. Not that I was noticing.

I watched him shake his head at Kiki when she tried to speak with him. She turned to me with a questioning look. I shrugged, fighting a surprising sting in my eyes.

“What’s up with him?” she asked after coming to stand beside me.

I had no reason to blow off the question. “He said that my offering to go with him was a reminder that he is broken and needs a sitter.”

Kiki made a face as she pushed back her short, spiky hair. “He’s not broken at all.”

“I know that and you know that...” I shrugged again, at a loss. “I told him I won’t go with him if he doesn’t want me to.”

“It isn’t you.” Kiki shook her head. “He thinks the world of you.”

“Yeah, well. Not today, he doesn’t.”

“He’s probably nervous about going home and maybe seeing his family,” she said. “He can be sensitive about his cybernetics.” She scrunched up her forehead. “You don’t think they’d reject him because he has some metal parts, do you?”

I watched him disappear through the doorway and slip out of sight. “No one in their right mind would reject him.” If there was a hint of wistfulness in my voice, it couldn’t be helped. I was a bit smitten with the guy. Okay, a *lot* smitten. Not that it mattered.

Kiki’s eyes twinkled. “Then I hope you make the most of this trip with him. And leave the PhDs at home.”

“What do you mean?” Kiki had been on her way to earning her own PhD before she was abducted, having attended the prestigious Granrock Institute on the moon Titan. She’d had a taste of how hard it could be to separate yourself from your work.

“Just be his friend,” she said with a wink. “And make him aware that he’s more than capable of taking care of himself... and another person, maybe?” She giggled, then, like the pixie that was her nickname, and flitted away to find Jorok.

I sighed, standing in the empty room, wondering why I was so hopeless. For the first time in forever, I found someone attractive and he was, of course, a male who was wholly emotionally unavailable.

“Are you okay?” came a soft voice. Okay, so the room wasn’t completely empty. A soft-spoken woman walked up to me. Her light hair was held back in a braid. Pale eyes regarded me seriously.

Arria was a gentle, and terrifyingly intelligent woman who perceived *everything* in everyone else, except herself. She was the object of Axlos’ desire, but so far, hadn’t returned it. His interest was so obvious to anyone in the same room with them, that it was just sad. He was completely taken with her, but no

matter how hotly his gaze fell on her, she turned away and brushed off his interest as nothing real. I strongly suspected it was very, very real. I also knew some of what Arria had gone through as an abused member of a cult before her abduction from Earth. Based on that, it was no surprise she was hesitant to get involved with anyone.

“Yeah.” I smiled at her, hating to make Arria worry. “Craal isn’t sure he wants an escort to the mountain village of Bakka, that’s all.”

She nodded. “Give him a little time,” she said. “And try not to take it personally? It’s hard, I know. But all the Heveians hold Gavrox in high esteem. Maybe it bruised Craal’s ego that it was implied he couldn’t handle the mission by himself.”

Arria was absurdly wise and her theory made a lot of sense. She was incredibly smart, but more than that, she was the most intuitive of all of us *and* she was a locked safe. You could tell her anything and she wouldn’t share it without permission. “Maybe,” I said. “It makes sense.”

Her smile brightened. “Are you coming over for ice cream and wine tomorrow night?” Arria’s room had become the women’s meeting room for our frequent get-togethers. “We want to try your tweaks to the hot fudge formula.”

We’d been using the food replicator to recreate some of our favorite foods from Earth, but hot fudge on the ice cream Harp and Kora had perfected had eluded us. I’d spent an embarrassing amount of time tweaking the base proteins. After figuring out what it was missing, I was pretty sure I had it nailed down. “Definitely. It’s perfect. It just needed a little something extra.”

“Is everything okay?” asked a deep, authoritative voice.

We both turned to see Axlos standing in the open doorway. Framed by the darker corridor behind him, he looked like a dark angel. Arms crossed and wearing his signature frown, it wasn’t hard to be intimidated by Axlos, the captain of the cruiser, and, it turned out, a lord of some esteem of the royal court.

“We’re fine,” said Arria in little more than a whisper. She got quieter whenever Axlos was in the room. “Thank you.”

He nodded. His gaze was fixed on her with an intensity that would take anyone aback. “Good.” That was it. He turned and walked away, leaving us alone.

Arria let out a breath. It sounded a bit shaky. “*Are you okay?*” I asked her.

She nodded. The only other indication that she was affected by Axlos was the flush on her cheekbones. “I’m fine. He worries too much about me.”

I didn’t think *worrying* was what he was doing with her. “Or he’s having a hard time hiding his feelings.”

She waved a hand. “It’s not that. He knows I’m not interested and hasn’t tried to...make a pass or anything.”

A pass. Oh dear. “Well, as long as you’re happy. With things.”

Her chin came up as her nostrils flared. “I am.”

“Okay.”

“I really am.”

I sighed. “Good, good.”

“Enough about that.” She shook her head and sent me a smile that was just a little too bright. “Looking forward to trying that fudge tomorrow. Although, it tasted fine to me before.”

“That’s because you never had hot fudge before.” Arria had never had *anything* before.

We left and I turned toward my room, winding my way through the beautifully carved guest corridors. It was understated and elegant, and from what I’d seen from the rest of the capital city, was not much different from where the citizens lived. After being devastated by a disease intended to wipe out their species, the Heveians were resilient and, well, kind. They’d achieved a balance in their society that humans were still trying to find. At least, they were fifty-two years ago

when I was last on Earth. From what Harp and Kora had said, things hadn't changed too much since then.

When I turned the corner to reach my room, someone was standing there. A big, handsome cyborg with his arms crossed and his brows low. "Claire." My name was in no way sexy, but I liked hearing it come from Craal's lips.

"Hi." I stopped and clasped my hands in front of me, waiting to be told that, no, he didn't want me to go with him. That he could go alone, or would prefer someone else.

"We leave tomorrow at dawn." He strode off, metal limbs glinting in the corridor lamps. A hand swiping back his short hair.

He didn't hear me as I said, "Okay," to a now-empty hallway. It looked like my hot fudge formula was going to have to wait.

CHAPTER 4

Craal

It wasn't a large transport. It wouldn't be, of course. The tunnels and passages that linked the capital to the outlying villages and settlements were primarily used for shipments of goods, and passengers were rare. Heveians did not frequently leave their home areas. Or their families. I wondered why I did. I paused in the small cabin. My chest was tight. My body, tense.

So tense, I felt tightness and aches where my skin met up against my metal appendages. It was a sure sign I needed to calm down and relax. But that felt impossible.

First, I was furious with myself for being irritable with Claire. It would surprise me if she showed this morning. Why would anyone want to spend days on a mission with me after I snapped at her?

The other thing weighing deeply on my mind was what I would find at Bakka when I arrived. Would my family even be there, or did they hail from someplace more remote? It was possible they were dead. Or they could be terrified of me, which brought me to the troubling question that kept plaguing me—*Why did I leave?*

Was I exiled? Perhaps there was a reason why memories of my earlier years were missing.

A flash of orange through a side window caught my eye. I stopped pacing and watched as Claire walked through the

transport chamber toward me. The light was low, but her hair was a glorious beacon, like a flame in the dark.

She had decided to come. Relief flowed through me, along with familiar feelings that always came when I was in Claire's company—warmth, pleasure, and a coiled ache between my legs.

I opened the sliding door on the side of the transport. "You're exactly on time."

She craned her neck to look up at me, having to gaze higher than usual because of the height of the transport. "Of course." My feet were at eye-level with her, which was where her puzzled gaze fell. "How do I get up?"

The transport was held in its dock on thick metal arms that stretched out from the hull and held it up. From the outside, it made the transport look like a giant insect. It moved it without wheels or treads, but it needed to be elevated to protect the thrusters that lined the underside. It also kept the vehicle suspended high up off the ground. Easy enough for a Heveian to climb inside, but not as easy for a small human female like herself. She would need help getting in.

I crouched at the opening and reached down with both hands. She looked at my hands as if they were poisonous pinchers. "I'll help you up."

"Do you want my backpack first?"

I looked at her, confused. "If you want. It doesn't matter. You weigh nothing to me."

Vivid blue eyes met mine. There was a flash of wariness, followed by firm determination. She was dressed all in blue, from a thick parka down to sturdy boots. She carried a large bag over her shoulders that sat on her back. Her mouth was set. Her bright hair was contained in a thick braid that she had swung over one shoulder.

"Come here," I said, as she paused. "I will lift you."

Her brows raised as her gaze flipped from mine to the cabin interior behind me. "If you're sure."

I sighed. “I’m sure.” I motioned with my arms, slightly impatient. Did she think she weighed too much for me? She would know better, being that she had access to the data of my capabilities. I had far more strength than any Heveian male. And even if I didn’t, she was perfection. Soft and rounded in all the right places. Certainly not too heavy for my enormous strength. Few things were.

With pursed lips, she stretched her arms up towards mine and grasped my biceps. I felt her touch on both arms, including the metal one, which had feel-sensors running through a membrane-coated surface. I reached down and grasped her under the arms. My fingers pressed to her shoulder blades, which I held with enormous care for fear that I’d snap them. I could feel her heart beat fast against my thumbs above her breasts. I lifted her up.

As I expected, I may as well have been lifting a cup of Bakka spirits to my lips. It took no effort to pluck her off the ground and place her inside the transport. I dropped my hands immediately, noting the pulse fluttering in her throat. Her lips were parted.

“There.” I said with a quick nod. “I told you. You weigh nothing.” I pulled the side door shut, encasing us inside the cabin.

She blinked, adjusting to the brighter interior light. “Thank you.” She shrugged off the backpack and held it to her chest. “It’s...smaller than I expected. Everything I’ve seen so far that was made by Heveians has been big.”

The cabin wasn’t large. It had only some supplies that were standard for all voyages—food, medical items, possibly a weapon for emergencies. I hadn’t checked. The trip wouldn’t be that long for needing anything other than what was stocked. “Compared to the cruiser, everything is small.”

She let out a nervous chuckle. “That’s true.”

The center of the cabin had a few seats attached to the ceiling that unfolded when sat upon. “Let me have that.” I took her backpack and strapped it to one of the seats. “Not all of

this ride will be smooth. We secure everything, including ourselves.”

She nodded. “I don’t have anything breakable.”

“Good.” I felt enormous in the small space. As it was, I had to bend my head slightly or bump it against the ceiling, which was covered in tubes and rivets and more supply containers.

“Does being on this vehicle bring back memories?” she asked. “You seem to know what you’re doing.”

“I remember how to operate many kinds of transports,” I explained. “I did that for a long time before my, ah, accident. Those memories have all returned.” My metal hand flexed. I forced myself to let it relax at my side.

“Good. Okay.” She rubbed her forehead. “I shouldn’t have asked. I’m not here in any medical capacity, only—”

I stepped forward and lightly grasped her chin. “Stop. I apologize for the way I spoke to you yesterday. I should *not* have. It doesn’t reflect how I feel.” I kept my gaze on hers, knowing I would lose the words if I looked away. “I’m glad you came. That you’re here.”

I saw and felt the tension seep out of her. “Thank you.” Her gaze fell to my mouth. She didn’t try to pull away. “I’m glad I came, too.”

I could get lost here, right here, cupping her face and holding it close enough to kiss. But she was not here for *this*. I let my hand fall away and stepped back. “This way,” I said, moving toward the front of the vehicle. I had to duck to enter the navigation section, where two seats sat before a wide, flat instrument panel.

She followed, taking the seat beside me and methodically closing the straps over herself. I raised my finger to engage the engine. The feel sensors on my metal hand registered a warm touch. I turned to see her slender hand resting on mine. I paused and looked at her.

“Hey,” she said. “I just want you to know that I understand if you feel some nerves about traveling to the Bakka region.

You don't know what to expect. That must be stressful."

"It is." I let out a loud breath and shook my head. "I *don't* know what to expect. I don't know what I may find."

"We'll find it together," she said. "And just to be clear, I'm going as your friend, not in any medical capacity. I didn't even bring any of my devices."

My lips twitched at her statement, which came out in a rush, and if her expression was any indication, leaving those devices behind was hard for her. In fact, this was the first time I had ever been with Claire where she had *not* had devices either in her hand or easily within reach. It would be interesting to see this version of her—the person, not the scientist. The male in me was very interested.

I touched the panel in front of me and engaged the lower thrusters. The metal arms keeping the transport off the ground, bent on their hinges and retracted into compartments, as the vehicle held itself up. I steered it towards the designated tunnel that we would be using for most of the trip to the mountains. These tunnels, hundreds of them, ran all over beneath the surface of Heveia. They were only wide enough for two shuttles at once, in case one happened to be coming the other way, but that didn't happen often.

"Why didn't we take an air shuttle?" she asked. "That would be a lot faster, don't you think?"

"It would," I agreed. "But the surface of Heveia is prone to terrific storms, and this is the season in which they are the worst. Getting caught in one would be deadly. Even the cruiser would have difficulty navigating through one of them." We entered the tunnel and the interior lights dimmed to match the shadow and darkness outside. "This is the safest way, even if it is longer. By the calculations here, we should arrive at Bakka in eleven point three eight standard galactic hours."

"That's a long time." Claire stretched her arms above her head, causing her breasts to rise. My gaze began to follow the movement before I snapped my attention back to the tunnel in front of me. Most of this was self-navigated, with the route

locked in to the system, but I still needed to pay attention—to the passageway, *not* to the delectable female beside me.

She glanced over at me with a smile. “Well, then, do these seats recline?”

I had no idea. I looked over the controls and found, to my surprise, a setting for passenger adjustments. “There.” I pointed to the settings on the panel. “Make them suit your comfort.”

She made the seat lean back, let her head fall to one side, and promptly fell asleep. Her face went soft. Her lips parted, and her long red lashes fanned over her pale cheeks. Now *this* was a sight I could take in all day and never get weary of the view.

CHAPTER 5

Claire

If I hadn't slept so poorly the night before, I wouldn't have zonked out the instant my body reclined comfortably in the transport seat. As soon as the lights went down, I felt like a lead sheet had been draped over me.

I'd been thinking about whether I'd made a mistake by agreeing to come. Maybe, Craal didn't want me to come. There was relief in knowing that he *did*. Unfortunately, the worry of it kept me up the night before, and now the rhythmic sounds of the transport in the tunnel, and the sound of Craal's steady breathing in the darkness had the effect of a sedative.

I felt oddly free, and also incomplete without the devices I had purposefully left behind. Who was I without my computers and scanners and data? Who was I without a project to work on?

This seemed like something to think about, but not while I was this exhausted. Not while I was strapped into a small vehicle as it bulleted down a narrow tunnel. With each passing kilometer, the PhDs and the work they represented slipped farther into the distance. I was just Craal's friend, here. I wouldn't be taking notes. Although I couldn't promise I wouldn't when we got back.

I let myself fall asleep without a schedule or spreadsheet, or a to-do list in my mind, detailing all the many tasks I needed to complete by end of day. There was *nothing* to do but sleep and consider this an interesting diversion. Craal would

never see me as anything other than his doctor and friend. I would be okay with that.

When I awoke, it was to light spearing through the windshield and into my face. “Ugh,” I said, fumbling for the controls to put my seat upright. I blinked at the very different view. We were on land. The world outside the vehicle was a furious beige storm. Sand and rocks spattered against the transport’s windshield and metal sides. Light from the planet’s closest star worked through the sandy wind to illuminate a craggy, desolate landscape. I could make out the shape of mountains in the distance. The ride had turned bone-jarringly bumpy. The uneven surface was rendered inhospitable due to the storm raging around us. I could see why the Heveians lived underground.

“It took you long enough to wake up.” Craal slanted a look at me. His flesh hand was on a control stick. He made adjustments to the control panel with the other, working to keep our vehicle on course while avoiding large rocks and ground fissures.

“Have we been driving in this storm for a while?”

He nodded. “Had a big rock smash into your side,” he said. “You are a very deep sleeper.”

I knew this about me. When I actually slept, it was the sleep of the dead. I flinched as another rock hit the windshield. Whatever it was made of, the rock didn’t even scratch it. “Are we safe?”

“According to the readings, the vehicle’s structural integrity is high.” He didn’t *look* worried. That was something.

“How long until we’re there?”

“Approximately four hours. But we only have a little more than an hour until we are back underground.”

Who knew I’d be excited to be back in the tunnel again. “Good.” I yelped as another big rock slammed into the roof. “Very good.”

He raised one dark eyebrow. “Why don’t you go back to sleep?”

“Not a chance,” I whimpered. “I’m awake now. You’ll let me know if that structural integrity starts to go, won’t you?”

He let out a chuckle. “Yes. We are at ninety-four percent.”

That was good, considering the battering we were taking. But... “How did we lose six percent?”

His lips twitched. “We started at ninety-five percent.”

“Oh.” I bit my lip to keep from asking *why* the vehicle hadn’t been one hundred percent sound in the beginning. *How often did they do maintenance on these transports, anyway?*

He turned to me, briefly taking his eyes off the terrain before him. “What is going on?”

I flicked my fingers towards the windshield. “Hey. Eyes on the road.”

He shook his head and looked forward. “We’re fine. We’ll get through this.”

“Okay. I guess I’m a little worried. It looks bad out.”

“I think this is normal.”

I rolled my shoulders and forced myself to take a long, deep breath. “As long as *you’re* not worried, we’re good.”

He gave me an odd look.

“What?” I asked.

“I never imagined that you could be scared of anything.”

“Really? I have fears just like everybody else. Between the two of us, you’re the invincible one.” I nodded towards the raging storm outside. “If we were stranded out here, you’d survive this. I wouldn’t.”

“If we were stranded out here,” he said in a growl, “you *would* survive. I would make certain of it.”

He sounded so sure, so determined, my gaze snapped to him in surprise. “Oh. I...that’s reassuring, Craal.”

“It’s a fact.” His jaw was grim, then he released it and smiled. “And irrelevant. We won’t become stranded. This transport operates exceptionally well.” Craal’s vocabulary had

improved drastically. It was a far change from the early days on the cruiser when he answered with one word and struggled to find the most basic ways of expressing himself. As the implants were removed from his brain, much had returned, revealing a male with deep sensibilities and a very keen mind.

We passed the remaining time in pleasant companionship. I found the compartment with food and we ate. When we were back underground and Craal was sure the transport was on a stable course, he got up to stretch his legs. By the time the indicator lights turned on, letting us know that we were approaching our destination, any remnants of discomfort or uncertainty had faded away. We enjoyed each other's company. I had shared a little bit about my life—something I never would've done if Craal was currently my patient. And I discovered a delightfully dry sense of humor in him that made me laugh.

The vehicle slowed as the tunnel opened into a large station. It reminded me of a train station, with platforms and paths leading to more tunnel openings on the other side. It was a cavernous and dark space, enormous enough to accommodate large transports of freight. It made sense, since the *vistran* mines were close by. Teams of Heveians directed massive machinery to carefully collect the precious energy crystals and deliver them to either the capital or wherever they shipped out from. Prince Gavrox had made arrangements to sell to certain species, solidifying alliances and building new ones.

We came to a stop and the long, metal legs unfolded from the vehicle's body and held it still as the thrusters shut down. The side door slid open.

“Are we allowed to park here?” I asked Craal, but he wasn't paying attention. His brows were low as he gazed out of the windshield before us. “What's wrong?”

“Strange,” he said. “I expected more people. More vehicles. *Something*.”

“Oh.” I hadn't expected anything, but now I looked out with a more critical eye. Sure enough, there were several

vehicles, but they were stationary, and something about them gave me the feeling that they hadn't moved in a while. On the far side of the station, on a platform, a single Heveian male shuffled along. He appeared to be limping and used a walking stick for support. "Let's go talk to that guy," I said. "Maybe he can tell us where we should leave the transport."

"I suspect it's fine right here." Craal rose from his seat, scowl still in place. "Let's get our things and see if that male has answers."

I climbed out of the transport, or rather, jumped down, since the floor was so much higher here. "Ooh," I said, rubbing my forehead.

"Did you injure yourself?" Craal asked, leaping easily to the floor.

"No, I..." I shook my head. "There's a weird noise in here. It hurts my head."

"What does it sound like?"

"Like a cross between a pulse and a hammer falling, over and over." I peered up at him. "Can't you hear it?"

He shook his head. "My auditory systems were heavily altered with the brain implants. I can hear sounds, but differently than I used to. And this thing you can hear..." He waved a hand in the air. "Doesn't make it through."

"I wonder what it is." It really didn't feel good. My temples felt tight. An ache had started up beneath my eyebrows. "And I hope it stops at some point."

"Let's see if we can find out what's going on." Craal took my backpack and slung it over one shoulder. He had brought only a small case that he slung crosswise over his chest. Our footfalls echoed as we walked on the stone floor.

"I'm beginning to see your point," I said. "It seems desolate for a main thoroughfare."

He grunted. "If I didn't know better, I'd say this station isn't in use anymore. That they're using a different station."

I liked the sound of that. “Maybe that’s it,” I said brightly—*too* brightly. This station was creepy. “Although, I can’t understand why they would abandon a big, nice-looking station like this.” It didn’t look crumbling or fallen down. It was clean and efficient-looking. “Especially without letting the capital city know.”

“They wouldn’t,” he said grimly. “All big projects are approved by the capital, since they need to finance them. Let’s see what he has to say. Stay close.”

We headed for the lone male. He appeared elderly and stopped when he heard us approach. He slowly turned. “What’s your business here?” the male asked. He spoke in Heveian, which meant my translator took a bit to switch languages so I could understand him. His clothing looked worn and there were rips in his pants and stains on his jacket that looked suspiciously like blood. A bruise that had begun to fade made a dark smear on the gray skin of his cheek. There was a bandage around his head, covering one eye. Up close, his injuries were worse than farther away. “What happened to you?” I asked, rubbing my head again. That sound was beyond annoying. It was like something burrowing into my brain. “How were you injured?”

He waved a hand. “It’s nothing. Don’t remember.”

There was no way anyone could just forget injuries like these. I opened my mouth to say so, but Craal held up a hand. He watched the older Heveian closely. “Tell me, do you hear a rhythmic sound, like a pulse?”

“I hear nothing, visitor.” The male’s watery blue eyes held Craal’s in a hard stare.

“Very well. We are visitors from the capital,” Craal replied in Heveian. “Why is the station empty?”

The male leaned heavily on the stick. “I’m to send anyone from the capital back,” he said. “No reason to check up on things. All is well in hand.”

I may not have been an expert, but this didn’t sound right. I gave Craal a sidelong look. His tense expression made it

clear that he didn't like the response, either.

"Point the way to the center of Bakka," Craal said. His voice offered no option for refusal.

But the old male shook his head. "You don't want to go there, visitor. We don't like outsiders in these parts."

Craal's synthetic eye, which glowed a bit brighter blue than the other, flared hot. He bared his teeth. "Which way to Bakka?"

The male did not appear afraid. Rather, his shoulders rounded and a pitying look crossed his face. "That passageway, there." He nodded in the direction of a tall archway cut into the rock. "No reason to check up on things, though. All is well in hand."

"You just said that," I said. "Those same words."

Confusion crossed his face, before he shook it off. "You don't want to go there, visitor. We don't like outsiders in these parts."

I turned to Craal. "He just said that, too."

Craal's expression changed. He took my arm and guided me away from the old male. "Come, Claire. Let's leave this old fellow in peace."

"But—"

Craal's arm was firm as he propelled me away. "Let's go," he said in a low voice. "I don't think he's in his right mind."

"Does he even have a mind?" I whispered as we walked towards the archway he indicated. "He sounded robotic. Maybe he's a cybot."

Craal glanced over his shoulder, eyes narrowed. "He is not a cybot. The scanner in my eye would've seen that. But something *is* wrong here."

Ice crawled over my skin, adding to the headache caused by that incessant pulse. "Should we go back?"

"No. If people are getting hurt, we need to know why," he said.

I would have been fine with going back. Getting away from that noise felt like a great idea, but I saw his point. We needed to know what was going on if we were going to get help. “What do we do?”

We passed through the archway, into the dimly lit passage beyond. Craal’s mouth brushed my ear as he spoke. “We be careful. Very, *very* careful.”

CHAPTER 6

Craal

I didn't know what to make of the male we saw at the station. I didn't remember him, but the station did. It didn't spark a specific memory, but it felt familiar.

The male may have just been a poor, damaged soul who ran into trouble on a regular basis, or had imbibed in too much spirits at one time, and this was how he spent his days. Then again, there could be a darker reason for his wounds. Whatever the cause, he had to be in a lot of pain.

The passageway to Bakka was mostly empty. A few Heveians were either on their way to the station or leaving it. That would be a good sign, except all of them had injuries, too. They nodded, but didn't speak, which wasn't the norm for Heveians. I put my arm around Claire, not because anyone looked like they wanted to attack her, but because of the general sense of unease I felt.

And that sound she heard, which I couldn't. It was obviously wearing on her. Tension marked her brow, which she rubbed frequently. Whatever caused this discomfort was troubling. I wondered if there was malfunctioning equipment somewhere, putting out a pulse that caused headaches.

Marks on the floor indicated that not long ago, transports brought people to the station.

But I saw no transports here. The walk was not terribly long before the passage opened up into a huge, cavernous space.

“Is this Bakka?” Claire asked.

I opened my mouth, but I couldn't answer her. Everything I saw before me I had seen before. Here, the rock was a dark, moody gray. Homes were not built, but instead had been made from the rock itself at the same time the village was created. Massive pillars had been carved out of the rock. They widened towards the ground and were dotted with holes—each hole was a window. Each hollowed-out pillar was a home or business. I knew that smoke used to escape through the top of the pillars, but burning things was no longer done to generate heat. Lights winked from the windows. Food was still grown in water pools on the southern end. The distilleries and brewers on the north side still scented the air with their fragrant spirits. *Affops* lounged in their livestock pens. Everywhere I looked there were signs of life. Heveians, moving about, living their lives.

The familiarity of it all felt like a punch to the gut. Pulling in a deep breath took enormous effort.

“Craal?”

I knew Claire was talking to me but I just couldn't make words happen.

“Are you okay?”

I nodded and pointed to the tall waterfall that tumbled from the far, righthand wall. It discharged into a deep pool, which was the village's primary source of water. “We used to jump off up there into the pool below. Got in so much trouble.” It was all I could come up with. The best words I had at that moment.

I felt her hand close and tighten on my arm. “So you *have* been here,” she said. “Do you remember this place?”

“Yes.” But that didn't really cover it. I remembered it in a way that made my ribs clench around my heart and ache in the deepest part of me. “Yes,” I repeated, as everything that was familiar here came into focus like a shift in a lens.

“Well, shall we go into town?” she asked.

We were still standing in the entryway just beyond the arch from the tunnel. I wanted to go. And I was afraid. What would I find here? *Who* would I find here?

But I took a step in, and then another, and Claire and I entered the village of my young years.

Heveians looked at me as we walked. There was recognition, but also wariness as their gazes moved over Claire. No one here would have heard of a human before, let alone seen one. The only thing that matched with Heveians was her eye color. Her hair and skin were vastly different colors than those who lived here.

My coloring, on the other hand, blended in perfectly. The people of Bakka had a slight greenish tint to their hair and eyes, a tint that those from the capital city did not have. I knew without question that this was where I came from. My hidden memories were locked away in this place.

“Do you recognize any faces?” Claire stayed at my side, keeping my slow pace.

I couldn’t stop gazing about, taking in everything around us. “No. I have no specific memories, yet.” My voice felt slurred, as if I were pushing out words with a heavy tongue. “I just know that I have been here. I lived here.”

I didn’t know where we were heading, but I knew we were walking *towards* something. I allowed my body to lead, twisting through the paths and around the thick pillars of homes.

And then, my feet stopped moving. I stood frozen in place beside one particular home. Beside one particular door. There was a smooth metal plaque fixed to the outer wall. A symbol was etched on it. I placed my hand on the plaque, *knowing* that symbol. The shape of it under my hand was familiar in a way that made my breath catch.

“This was my home.” My voice was barely breath. I wasn’t even sure if Claire heard me. Movement from the opening drew my attention, and I turned. A female stood in the doorway. She was older, rounder, but her face... *Oh*, her face.

“Dak’craal?” She stepped out, eyes wide and disbelieving.
“Dak’craal, is it you?”

Dak’craal. My full first name. She spoke in Heveian and didn’t spare a glance for Claire. Her entire attention was on me.

“Yes. It’s me.”

She let out a cry, closed the distance between us, and held me close.

I closed my arms carefully around her, being cognizant of my strength as my mind cracked like a rock hit by a hammer. *My mother.* This female was my mother. I knew the smell of her hair and the feel of her as she embraced me. She let out sobs as she cried against my chest. All I could do was stand there holding her gently while trying to breathe and to school my chaotic thoughts.

Finally, my mother pulled back. Her hands stroked my cheeks as she babbled words I couldn’t hear because of the buzzing in my head and how fast she was speaking.

I needed some grounding; I needed something real. I turned to look at Claire. She had been standing there, watching. She gazed at me in awe, with tears streaming down her face. “We found them,” she said. “We did it.”

We did, but I couldn’t kick that strange sense of foreboding I’d picked up at the station. That something wasn’t quite right in Bakka. That something wasn’t quite right with any of this, and our coming here might not be the help these people needed.

CHAPTER 7

Claire

There was no doubt that this was Craal's mother. She called him "Dak'craal." She looked just like him, from the color of her eyes and hair to the winged eyebrows that looked fierce on both of them. She was no small female, either. She stood taller than Dani and possessed an imposing strength that made me think it was fine with me that she only had eyes for her son.

I'd received plenty of skeptical looks during the time I'd been in Bakka. I did not exactly look forward to being judged by this female, who looked like someone whose eyes missed nothing. I couldn't understand anything she said. My translator couldn't keep up with the speed of her speech and the dialect that was unique to this region.

I did, however, observe barely healed cuts on her hands, a pink, puffy scar on her temple, along with a purple bruise.

I surreptitiously looked around at the handful of Heveians who had gathered near us. I saw more injuries. Significant ones that looked to be a few weeks old, based on the healing process. In fact, every Heveian I observed had been wounded. One male used crutches to get around as he was missing the lower half of a leg. It was still bandaged, indicating it was still healing. I took in bruises, scars, burns that looked like they could have been caused by a blaster—but I was no expert on this. I suspected there were even more injuries hidden under layers of tunics and robes. Everyone here dressed in multiple

layers in mostly neutral tones. There wasn't much in the way of bright color in Bakka, except for the livid bruises.

All the while, the pulsing, pounding sound thudded rhythmically away. It was louder here. More intense. More irritating. The headache that had started in the station had increased to a roaring ache. I reminded myself to check if I'd packed a general painkiller in my bag.

I turned back to Craal with alarm. He was looking at his mother like he'd just won the lottery. Under any other circumstance, I would've pulled him aside and told him my observations, but this was *not* a good time. My thoughts could wait, but this reunion between him and his mother could not.

Craal reached out a hand to me. It was his metal one, and that was interesting because he usually took pains never to touch me with his metal hand, but only his organic one. It was as if he thought the touch of metal would be unpleasant. It wasn't. It was just his hand, and I took it without hesitation.

"Gura," he said to his mother. "This is Claire. She is a very close friend from another planet. Claire, this is my mother, Gura." The way he said her name—reverent, gentle—made my heart melt for him. Had she rejected him, he would have been crushed.

I resisted the urge to drop into a curtsy as this female and her intense gaze turned to me. She looked over my red hair and pale skin before focusing on the one thing that would look Heveian—my blue eyes. "What happened to her to make her look this way?" Concern tightened her eyes.

"Nothing," Craal said with a smile. "She isn't Heveian. She comes from Earth, a planet far from here."

"Ah, I see. But her eyes." Gura didn't break her gaze, making my own eyes water with the effort to hold it. "Her eyes are Heveian."

"Eyes can be blue on Earth, too," Craal said patiently. "People have many eye colors on Earth."

"Blue is rare, actually," I said and dipped my aching head. "It's a pleasure to meet you, Gura."

Her gaze moved down to where Craal's and my hands connected. "You are a friend to my son?" she asked me.

"Yes," I replied. There was a slight pause, as the translator in my head worked hard to puzzle out her words. "I was also one of his doctors."

Her brows furrowed. "Doctor?" She looked up at Craal, seeking understanding.

"Yes. She helped me to regain my...everything, after this." He gestured to his metal leg and arm.

Fresh tears welled in her eyes as she took in her son's cybernetic appendages. She had just noticed them. She'd seen only her son first, not the changes in him, which made me like her. "What happened to you?"

Craal shook his head as he smiled. "It's a long story. I'll tell you later. But I am well. Better than well, now that I see you."

Gura's expression softened as she turned back to me. "You helped my son; I am indebted to you. You're welcome in my home, Claire from another planet."

I smiled back at her. "Earth," I said, then, "Oof," as her strong arms locked around me and squeezed me in an embrace that would have broken a more-delicate woman's bones. Poor Arria would have been sent to the medic.

She'd never heard of my planet, didn't care, and that was actually fine. I was relieved that she had accepted me. "Come in, come in," she said. Her strong hands moved us through the open doorway and into her home, but not before she looked outside. Anxious eyes looked upwards at the soaring ceiling of the cavern. The onlookers did the same, before whispering tense warm wishes and moving hastily off.

That was weird. Another thing to bring up to Craal when he came back down to earth. Or wherever.

We went inside. Craal ducked to get into the unique home. The way these structures were designed was genius, carving out this village, leaving sections of rock to be hollowed out for dwellings—a cavern within a cavern. Inside, it was absolutely

delightful. I could not hide my wonder at the living space. A hearth had once been in the center, but now a *vistran* crystal sat in a cylindrical heating unit that made the large space warm.

Comfortable furniture sat around a small fountain. Glowing stones had been placed around the space to illuminate it like lightbulbs. A stairway on one side of the wall circled around and up to more chambers above. A kitchen area lay off this room. Something that smelled fairly awful bubbled in a clear pot on a hot plate. However, I also recognized a food synthesizer and canisters of base ingredients. I had wondered how a civilization that existed completely underground had managed to feed itself, but it was now clear that plenty of things grew and lived down here. The Heveians had found ways to produce food, and *also* utilized synthesizers.

“Sit, sit.” She had us sit on a cushioned bench. “I will bring you something special.” She went to the kitchen area and ladled some of the bubbling liquid on the stove into two heavy, handleless mugs. She returned, handed one to each of us, and looked at us expectantly.

Craal’s eyes lit up like a kid just given a balloon. He brought the mug to his lips and drank deeply. He moaned. “Ah, thank you. I’d forgotten how good this is.”

“What is this?” I gazed at the thick, dark green stuff that smelled vaguely like steamed broccoli and vinegar.

“It’s *croka*. The best thing,” he said, drinking more. “Heveians in these parts offer it to all guests. It’s a sign of acceptance and generosity. Have some.”

The best thing was a pretty incredible claim, I thought, especially for a beverage that smelled like my fridge after I’d been away for a few weeks. “Does it cure headaches?”

He looked at me with a concerned expression. “It does not. Have they gotten worse?”

“It’s fine,” I lied. With Gura staring at me, I took a small sip of the *croka*. It took every ounce of my restraint to not spit it out. My mouth wanted to. It tasted like it smelled, but gritty,

as if mixed with sand. I forced it down my throat in a sheer test of endurance. I wasn't a picky eater, but this was something else. "Thank you," I said. "It's very unique."

"Isn't it?" Craal murmured. "Thank you, Gura. We are honored."

"You are my son." Craal's mother sat across from us in a seat. "I am overjoyed that you are here."

"You were injured," he said, pointing to the bruise and scar on her temple. So he *had* noticed. "What happened to you?"

Her fingertips brushed her head. "I don't know," she said. "I don't remember." She let out a chuckle. "It was probably something foolish. I'm always hurting myself."

"You've never been clumsy, Gura." Craal's frown had returned. "Are you well?"

Gura laughed and waved a hand, dismissing his question. "I am perfectly fine, my son," she said. "If I can't remember how I did it, it couldn't have been that serious."

"Where is Father?" Craal asked.

Gura's face fell. "He left some time ago," she said.

Craal's body went tense. "He *left*?" He rose to his feet. "Where did he go?"

"It's a bit of a blur," his mother replied, frowning. She rubbed her forehead as if trying to dig out memories. "I can't answer your questions. He left some time ago."

My skin crawled. Like the male in the station, she had repeated a line exactly as she had said it before. What was more curious was, how could she not remember how her husband, or mate, as they called them, had *left*. It was an event that was usually burned in a person's memory. But Gura didn't look like she felt anguish at her mate's disappearance. She only looked confused.

Craal looked as if he were digging deep for patience and fighting his own grief. "Did he leave of his own choice or was he taken?"

Gura looked at him helplessly. Her brows pinched and she shook her head. “I’m sorry, Dak’craal. I don’t know.”

If not for the overwhelming number of injured I’d seen in the village already, and the encounter with the male at the station, I’d wonder if she had a concussion and some associated amnesia. But something else was going on here and Craal was nearing the end of his rope. Now, on top of everything, he was worried about his father. I figured I’d try to see if she knew *anything* about the state of things here.

“Many others are hurt, here in Bakka,” I said. “Did something happen? Equipment malfunction, maybe?”

She shook her head, still looking perplexed. “No, nothing happened. All is well in hand.”

All is well in hand.

I didn’t need to remind Craal where we’d just heard that exact phrase. My gaze snapped to his as he looked at me with clear alarm in his eyes. He turned back to his mother, cybernetic eye shifting to a dark blue. That color meant he was doing a deep scan. “Tell me, Gura. Do you hear a pulsing sound? My friend Claire does and it’s causing her head to hurt.”

She shook her head again. “I hear nothing.” Her expression cleared. “But enough of me. Tell me about you. What has brought you back to your home village?”

Craal took a deep breath and schooled his emotions, which I was sure were running high. “Crown Prince Gavrox has sent me to make sure *vistran* mining operations are running smoothly, and perhaps to help me recall my early memories. No reason to worry,” he said as her expression clouded. “I’ve remembered much. The rest will come back to me.”

She smiled again. “I’m happy to hear that.”

“I hope your lost memories return, too, Gura,” he said.

“What lost memories?”

CHAPTER 8

Claire

We finished out the evening with food from the synthesizer, then Gura brought us up to our rooms. Craal had what I was certain was his childhood room. It was small with a small bed—small for *him*—with an interesting collection of rocks on a shelf and clothing that would likely not fit, stacked on more shelves that were carved into the rock. Gura brought me to the room next to his, which was convenient, because on the way up the stairs, we had shared a quick, whispered plan to meet up and talk about the day. We didn't need Gura hearing this conversation, since a good deal of it would be about her.

Gura smiled warmly and opened the door to my room. It was simple and basic, much like Craal's, but with a bed that was actually larger than his and a window with heavy curtains.

"The washroom is right across the hall, there." Gura pointed to a door across from Craal's room. "I'll bring you some fresh clothes."

"No need," I replied. "I brought some in the backpack Craal was carrying. I think we left it downstairs. I'll go get it."

But before I could, she grabbed my arm in a tight hold. "No. I'll go get it for you, just in case."

"In case what?" I asked.

"In case they come around." She said it breezily, as if discussing a neighbor who didn't understand boundaries.

“In case *who* comes around?” Maybe she really was discussing nosy neighbors.

“The little machines,” she replied. Again, it was as if she were talking about mosquitoes or an elusive spider hiding out in her bathroom.

My skin prickled with unease. “Little machines?”

She pursed her lips and tilted her head, peering intently at the window. “Yes. Little machines.” Her voice lowered to a whisper. “They fly around and check up on things. It would be best to not let them see you.”

What the hell was happening in this village? I nodded and thanked her as I waited in the doorway with a twist in my stomach and that incessant headache that made it hard to think. Gura padded back downstairs. Moments later, she returned with my backpack and the small bag Craal had brought with him. I said good night, closed the door, and sank onto the side of my bed with a shuddering breath. Something bad was going on here. Something very, very bad.

Little machines. I went to the window and pulled the heavy drapes just enough to peek out. I searched in the darkness for movement, a telltale light, a sound, but nothing pricked my attention. The cavern was darkened with the scheduled nighttime rest period.

I heard the murmuring of voices outside my door as Gura and Craal said their good nights. The low timbre of his voice was reassuring, but also worrying. There had been such joy in his eyes upon seeing her, that I hoped he could also see the problems. I also hoped whatever was going on here wasn't putting these people in extreme danger, but I had a bad feeling it was.

The idea of cleaning the grime and weariness of the day from my skin held a lot of appeal, so I stole across the hall and into the washroom. It was a cool little room with the usual facilities, but also something that made me squeal just a little—a shower. An actual shower with *water*.

No one used showers here in the future, in space. I got that. Showers were on their way out when I was on Earth fifty-two years ago, in favor of other methods. It was a waste of a most valuable resource and didn't clean as well as the aerators that were everywhere and that could be attuned to each body's needs, but I wasn't going to pass up an opportunity to feel water raining on my head.

After hastily stripping down, I stepped inside the small, circular chamber carved from the rock. Above, hundreds of tiny holes had been bored into the ceiling. The wall before me had a series of knobs and levers. It took a little time, but I figured out how to turn on the water and set the temperature and pressure I wanted.

A shelf held a number of earthenware jars that revealed pleasant-smelling soaps and lotions. I found one that reminded me of lavender and scrubbed it into my hair as warm water rained on me. The pain in my head even eased with the lovely smells and the sound of falling water. I closed my eyes and let out a low moan as the stress eased up just enough to let my muscles relax.

Just then, a wave of cool air hit my skin. My eyes flew open to see Craal standing in the open doorway, dressed only in a tiny pair of shorts and holding a towel. A sound like a yip came out of my lips. I reached instinctively for a shower curtain that wasn't there.

“What are you doing?” I grabbed a gray towel from a stack beside the shower and wrapped it around myself.

He held up his hands, dropped the towel and turned around. “I apologize, Claire. I thought you had finished.”

“You could have knocked,” I said testily, hiding my embarrassment under a layer of annoyance.

There was a pause. “Knocked?”

“Yes,” I snapped, then demonstrated by rapping my fingers against the wall. “You knock to see if someone is in a room before barging in.”

He sighed. “I’d forgotten about that human custom. I will leave now.”

“Don’t bother.” My movements were jerky, agitated. “I’m done in here. Take your shower.” I made to sweep out the door, but he partly blocked it.

As I passed, his arm came out and his hand flattened against my back. “Claire,” he murmured. “I didn’t mean to interrupt you. Are you angry with me?”

“No,” I said. “Yes. I was surprised. And I don’t like that you saw me naked.”

He cocked his head. Slitted pupils widened on mine. “You’ve seen me naked,” he said. “I know you have.”

My mouth had gone dry. “That’s different.”

“How?”

“You were a patient, undergoing a complicated surgery,” I said. “And I wasn’t, you know, *looking* at you like that.”

“Like what?”

“Like...I don’t know.” I needed to stop speaking. *Now*. “Like the way you were just looking at me.”

A grin curved his gorgeous mouth. He leaned in closer, crowding me. There was nowhere to go with my spine pressed against the doorframe. And besides, my feet were glued to the floor. “And how was that, exactly?” he asked.

“Like a woman,” I said breathlessly.

His head lowered. “That’s what you are, isn’t it? A woman. A female of your species.”

Oh god, I could barely breathe. “Y-yes, but I’m not...that is—”

He cut me off with a brush of his lips to mine. His hand slid down to the small of my back, fingers spread wide. He

drew me forward, toward him, and I didn't, *couldn't* resist. "Do you want this?" he whispered against my mouth. "Or shall I apologize and let you go?"

Please don't let me go. I looked up at him with my heart thudding thickly in my head, drowning out the pulse, making me forget that I was naked, and well into my forties, and had given up on ever feeling like *this* again. Desirable. Beautiful. Wanted. "Yes," I breathed.

He frowned. "Yes to which part?"

A small laugh bubbled out of me. "The first part. I—I like this."

His forehead smoothed out. "I like it too."

I closed my mouth and released a shuddering breath as his mouth came down on mine again, softly, but without hesitation. My body melted against his. I was vaguely aware that all I wore was a towel, and it was shifting around and might not be covering everything anymore, and I didn't care. The male I'd been secretly pining after was kissing me. I'd fantasized about this, but the real thing was even better.

My hands slid up his bare chest and around his thick neck. Thoughts melted away. Maybe we could—

"Oh, my apologies." But it wasn't Craal saying this. It was his mother. Gura stood in the hall, blinking at the two of us with a confused expression. "Why didn't you tell me you were mates?"

"We aren't," I said, stepping away. My hands went to the top of my towel, desperately hoping it was intact enough. It was. "We're, um." I looked at Craal, whose cool gaze moved from his mother to me.

"We are friends," he said. "Not mates."

She tilted her head and her gaze lowered to my neck. "Have you bitten her?"

My face felt like it was being held in an open flame.

"No, Gura," Craal said patiently. "I haven't bitten her."

She nodded. “She isn’t Heveian,” she said, giving me a critical once-over. “But not that different.”

Craal’s lips twitched. “No. Not that different. The crown prince’s mate is human.”

Gura’s brows winged up. “The crown prince?” Then her face crumpled in confusion. “There is no prince here. There is only us.”

Craal gave me a light nudge toward my room. “I will see you shortly,” he murmured, then turned to his mother. “Go to bed, Gura. You need rest.”

She shuffled away, muttering to herself about nonsense, as if her thoughts were jumbled together and made no sense.

My gaze met Craal’s. “We still need to talk.” *About several things.*

His eyes were bright, hot, lit with a predatory gleam. The front of his shorts bulged dramatically. “We do. When you’re done in the washroom?”

He nodded. “I will come to your room.”

I scurried back to the room I was staying in and put on clean underwear and a pair of lounge pants with a simple T-shirt. Nothing provocative, not that I owned anything that would fall into that classification, and not too restrained. Just standard sleep clothes.

I waited and paced in my small room, wondering what he was thinking. Wondering if we were going to discuss the kiss. What if he kissed me *again*?

There was a knock on the door. I jumped at the sound, then went to the door and opened it. He stood there wearing only a pair of loose white pants and nothing else.

“Hi,” I said, struggling to keep my mouth from hanging open. It was ridiculous. I’d seen him shirtless before—ten minutes ago, to be exact—and other times, too. Like when he was heading into surgery with Jorok, to have his brain implants removed, and when Wulfrex replaced his metal appendages with the good ones he had now. As Craal said, I’d

seen him *naked* before. But he was unconscious those times and now he was very much awake and very much *not* a patient.

“Thank you for coming,” I said. “Come in.”

“Don’t thank me,” he said. “Of course, I came.” His large hand reached back and hastily closed the door behind us. “Before we discuss what just happened in the washroom—and we *will* discuss that—we need to talk about what is going on here,” he said in a growl. “I don’t like it.”

I nodded, relieved his reunion with his mother hadn’t clouded his observation. “I know,” I said. “And your mother just said something very strange about little machines that sometimes check in on residents.”

His eyes narrowed. “Explain.”

I relayed to him the conversation I’d had with Gura. “It was so strange,” I said. “This isn’t something that your people do, is it? Sending out spies? Because it sounds like these little machines are surveillance drones that go out to make sure everyone’s staying in line.” I paused and gave him a meaningful look. “To make sure everything is *well in hand*.”

“Stars, no. Never.” He raked his fingers through his short hair. “Bakkans do not spy on each other. And the capital would never do such a thing. If there are surveillance drones in Bakka, an outside force sent them.”

“That’s what I thought.” I chewed my bottom lip and sat on the side of the bed. “And Craal, I’m concerned about this noise.” I rubbed my temples, as if I could rout out the source of the pain throbbing through my head. “It’s got to be related to what’s happening here. Your mother said she couldn’t hear it but...” I shrugged, frustrated. “I don’t know what’s going on.”

He stood straighter, gazing down at me with a fierce look. I was eye-level with his cock, which wasn’t at full mast any longer, but wasn’t all the way down, either. He looked like a powerful god, standing there. Dark blue hair, streaked with

gray, was slicked back from his head. He looked at me like he wanted to protect me and devour me, in no particular order.

“First thing tomorrow we’re returning to the transport vehicle and leaving,” he declared. “We will relay our observations to Gavrox. He needs to know what’s happening so he can send appropriate forces to this village.”

I looked up sharply. “Leaving? But you just found your mother.”

He shook his head. “Being here is causing you too much pain. We will return to the capital where you can rest and get some medical attention. I suspect there’s an outside force at work, quietly trying to affect mining activities.”

“By messing with these peoples’ memories and behavior?” I asked. “Still doesn’t explain all the injuries.”

“I hope I’m wrong,” Craal said, sitting beside me on the bed. “But I think you’re right. The sound, the injuries, and the odd behavior of the Bakkans—including my mother—is related to something much bigger than what we can take on.”

The mattress dipped beneath his weight, causing me to slide right into him. My hip bumped against his. My shoulder against his arm, which he moved back and curved around me. I took the invitation and tucked myself against the side of his body. He was so warm and solid, I gave in to the urge to rest my head in the space below his collarbone. I could feel the slow beat of his heart. Heveians had larger hearts than humans, and they beat slower. That rhythm did not match the relentless pulse that seemed to emanate from every rock around us.

I sighed, privately relieved that we would be leaving this place tomorrow. I would never have asked him to do so. Craal had endured pain that I couldn’t begin to comprehend. I was willing to brave a headache for a while so he could spend time with his mother.

But his mother’s behavior was troubling. That was beyond obvious. The simple fact that she didn’t know what had happened to her mate was a big red flag. Craal was right—we

were two people, not an army, and that might be what was needed. “Okay,” I said. “If you’re sure.”

His thick arm tightened around me. His big hand rested on my waist and hip. “I am. I can’t endure seeing you in pain.” He winced. “And I shouldn’t have kissed you in your current state.”

“Actually, your kisses swept the pain away for a short while,” I said. “I—I didn’t mind it. At all.”

He looked down at me, one eyebrow raised. “You didn’t mind kissing an alien cyborg with no home and a spotty memory?”

“No.” I wrinkled my nose and smiled. “I liked it a lot.”

His thumb traced over my cheek as his gaze moved over me with a proprietary gleam. “I’m not going to kiss you now,” he said.

“Why not?” I did my best not to sound disappointed.

“Because we are both exhausted and tomorrow will come quickly.” He brought his lips to my ear and brushed them to the sensitive skin there. “However, when we get back to the capital, I intend to do much more than kiss you, Claire.”

I shivered at the promise in his voice, even as doubts screamed at me that this wasn’t real. I was having a delusion, surely, if such a gorgeous male wanted *me* in that way. I was a scientist. The woman had been buried deep, relegated to dreams and whimsy. I swallowed hard, forcing myself to keep my expectations low. He could change his mind by the time we returned to the capital. He could change his mind in five minutes.

“Okay, then. The capital.” I wasn’t even sure what I meant. I was trying to keep it cool and breezy, but I’d never been good at either of those things.

“Thank you,” he said in a rough voice, pulling me into an embrace. “There’s no one I’d rather be here with.”

I wanted to just enjoy those words, take them at face value and lean into them. “Not even Kiki?”

He rested his cheek against the top of my head. I could feel his face shift into a smile against my scalp. “No, Claire. I should tell you that I—”

But I never heard what he was going to say. As he spoke, a high-pitched tone replaced the pulse. It was so piercing, it took my breath away. I clamped my hands over my ears as my body contracted in response. I slid off the bed and onto my knees, leaning forward as grinding, horrible pain went through my head like a jagged knife. I struggled to drag in breath. My ears had to be bleeding. They must have... And then, suddenly, it stopped.

For one brief, absolutely glorious moment, there was no sound at all. I let out a shuddering sigh as the pain lifted from my mind and pure silence filled my awareness. It felt like cool water on a hot day. “I—I think it’s over.”

As soon as I said the words, the pulsing noise started up again. The same pulse, stirring the ache anew behind my eyes.

Arms wrapped around me and drew me against a broad, warm chest. “We’re leaving *now*,” Craal said. He looked around the room. “Where’s your bag?”

“No.” I placed a hand on his chest. His heart was beating faster, on par with the speed of mine. “Tomorrow, like we planned. So you can say goodbye to Gura, and besides, you *do* need to sleep. I know for a fact that you can’t function at full capacity without rest.” I raised my brows at him. “Jorok will be furious if I bring you back in bad shape.”

“Claire, you were in agony a few moments ago. You’re in pain now. You need a medic.” He shook his head. “Everything else can wait. I will not watch you suffer.”

I smiled up at his fierce, handsome face. “I’m okay, honestly. Let’s both get some rest and leave tomorrow morning. To be honest...” I sank deeper into his arms. Exhaustion had sapped every scrap of energy I’d been holding. I could barely keep my head up. “*All* I want to do right now is sleep.”

“Fine,” he said tightly. “But we leave at dawn.”

I smiled, thinking that if I had something in the tank, I'd make a joke about dawn being his favorite time of the day. But words faded from my lips as he placed me on the bed and curled in tight beside me. I felt the press of firm lips on my forehead, fingers smoothing back my hair, and heard some whispered words I couldn't make out, before I fell into a deep sleep.

CHAPTER 9

Craal

I slept that night, but only because I forced myself to do so. I had control over how long I slept, and if I slept at all, and Claire was correct—I didn't function at my best when I was under-rested. Being able to put myself to sleep was a rare advantage of my cybernetic implants. It meant I had a little more control over my brain than I used to. I could avoid lying in bed worrying about what happened to my father, why my mother was acting so strangely, and why everyone in Bakka was recovering from wounds.

It would allow me to avoid thinking about how amazing kissing her mouth had felt and the elation that followed when she hadn't pushed me away. I wanted her so badly. Holding her against me was sweet torture. Her curves felt incredible under my hand. Her body was warm and soft against mine. She had leaned into me willingly. She had welcomed my touch. Maybe...

I shook myself from such foolish thoughts and lay down on the small bed I would share tonight with this female. *My female*, my inner beast growled. But that was not a *gaornet* nest I wanted to kick tonight. Claire needed comfort, and she needed supervision—though she'd hate to hear that—after an acute episode. Her eyes had gone shockingly bloodshot. Her face had flushed dangerously, and her entire body had spasmed. I would not leave her side until this was over. In the meantime, I would endure the soft, incredible curves of her body against mine and enjoy the closeness. Her deep

breathing. The soft beat of her heart. I would not have to fight the pull I felt whenever she was near. Tonight, I could touch her, even if just to hold her.

Come morning, there would be no discussion. Claire and I were leaving. Whatever this sound pulse was, it was dangerous and I needed to get her away from it. And we needed more help here. Whatever was going on required more than two people poking around. I had intended to get eyes on the mining operation, but I feared doing so would put Claire in danger. If there were outside forces interfering with the mining operation, those outsiders would not greet us warmly. And if something happened to me, who would protect her?

I awoke before standard galactic dawn. Reluctantly, I extracted my body from Claire's splayed limbs and got up. My cock was hard. My hands itched with the desire to pull her close and kiss her breathless. But instead, I collected my things and waited until she stirred to get her up. "Claire," I began, but a hand came up and waved me off.

"I know," came the muffled response. "Just a minute."

I leaned down and lightly nipped her ear, causing her to yelp. "Get up, beautiful. It's time to go."

She rose slowly, like a fiery goddess, revealing a beautifully ruffled Claire. Her bright orange hair was a cloud of curls, springing out in all directions. She was pale, making her freckles stand out. Her eyes were puffy with sleep as she blinked at me. "Okay," she said, climbing out of bed. "I'm up, I'm up. Pushy."

She took some clothes from her backpack and headed for the washroom, tossing me a look over her shoulder that was part saucy, part irritated. "Two minutes."

"Hurry." I closed up her backpack and slung it over one shoulder. "I'm anxious to be away from this place."

She returned, as promised, in two minutes and sat on her bed to pull on her boots. She looked up at me as she worked the fastenings. "Have you seen your mother yet?"

"No, but I will say goodbye to her before we leave."

“Good.” She stood up, grabbed her hair with both hands and began wrestling with it as if she were going to war.

Without thinking, I reached out and placed a hand over hers. “Gentle,” I said. “You seem very angry with your beautiful hair.”

She rolled her eyes. “My hair is not beautiful. It’s enormous, garish, and impossible to tame. I should cut it all off.”

How could she see her hair this way? I shook my head and dropped my hand. “It is the color of fire, of passion,” I said, knowing I was sounding poetic and foolish. “It is beautiful and cutting it all off would be...”

“Efficient?” she offered.

“Tragic,” I said, then shrugged. “But it is your hair. Cut it if you wish.”

She held my gaze for a long moment, then made a *humph* noise, but her hands were gentler as she smoothed back the curling trusses and twisted them into a ponytail low on her nape. “Do you really think my hair is beautiful?”

“I think all of you is beautiful.” There, I said it. It was only the truth. She could take that however she wanted. I felt lighter for having told her that.

An interesting look crossed her features—wonder, mixed with something else. I couldn’t interpret it. She cleared her throat. “Well, thank you. I’ve barely heard it described as anything but a rat’s nest.”

“What is a rat?”

“It’s a small rodent on Earth,” she said. “They’re not... well, some people like them a lot, but they’re usually associated with vermin.”

My eyes flared. “How dare anyone associate you with vermin.” My hands clenched into fists at the very thought. “I should like to have a word with them.”

Claire laughed. Her face transformed from tense and tired to light and relaxed. Then she winced and rubbed her

forehead, reminding me of the very reason we had to leave.

“Come on. Let’s say goodbye to Gura, then leave.”

My mother was in the kitchen, preparing more *croka* on the stove. The aroma made my mouth water. Somehow, I didn’t think Claire enjoyed it as much as I did.

“Gura,” I said, walking up to her.

She turned around. Blinding surprise made her expression fill with joy. “Dak’craal? It’s you! My child! When did you arrive?”

Craal cocked his head and looked at her carefully. “We arrived yesterday, don’t you remember? My friend Claire and I. You made *croka* for us and we slept in rooms upstairs.”

Claire shifted closer to me, pressing against my arm. Her fingers wrapped around my metal hand and squeezed as my mother looked away with a concentrating expression.

“I think, maybe I remember.” She looked up at Claire. “Yes! You are Craal’s friend from another planet.”

“That’s right,” Claire said gently.

Gura’s gaze fell to our bags and she frowned. “You’re leaving already? You only just arrived.”

I leaned down and kissed my mother’s cheek. “We have to go, Gura. But I will see you again soon.”

“But I...” She shook her head. “You *were* here. Why can’t I remember?”

“We’re going to figure out why, but Claire is ill and I must bring her home.” Granted, the capital city wasn’t her home, but it was safer by far than *my* home was.

Gura nodded distractedly. Her gaze was still far away. “We tried,” she whispered. “We tried to fight them off.”

I froze, knowing those words were important. “Fight who off?”

Her eyes cleared and she blinked up at me. “What?” she said. “I don’t know what I was saying. Everything’s fine. All

is well in hand.”

That line was beginning to grate on my nerves like grit on metal. “I understand.” I kissed her cheek and led Claire out of the house. We needed to get out of this village and back to the capital immediately. I was determined to help my mother and the other residents of Bakka, but we needed medical personnel and a whole lot more support.

We moved through the passageways and paths and avenues of the village, winding back around the homes and businesses we’d passed on our way here yesterday. But this time, instead of wonder, and hope, and the feeling of familiarity, I was overwhelmed with dread and braced for any possible attack. I didn’t know what I was expecting to happen, but something dark was at work here.

Heveians watched us as we passed. There were faces that looked familiar to me, but they gazed blankly, or with the slightest flicker of recognition, before it banked. A few looked fearful, and I thought about what the older Heveian had said in the station, about sending visitors back. The warning had been clear—we weren’t supposed to be here.

We crossed through the archway into the corridor leading to the station. It was far from empty this time. Many dozens of Heveians moved through it, trudging quietly, on their way to the station. They were mostly younger males and females and I knew where they were going—through a tunnel to the mines that lay beyond.

I kept Claire close to my side as we moved along with them, keeping pace. In the station, she pulled me aside. “What’s going on here?” she hissed. “It looks like the zombie apocalypse.”

“There shouldn’t be this many working in the mines,” I said. “It’s automated. The work is done by machines.”

“All these people are going to work in the *vistran* mines?”

“Unless they’re getting in transports headed for the capital, yes. There’s nothing else out this way. See the tunnel they’re going into?” I asked as I pointed. “It leads straight to the

mines. This station was used to ship *vistran* to the capital when I was here as a child. Back then, only small amounts of *vistran* were mined. That was before the giant cache was discovered deeper in the mountain. Now, it's largely shipped out from the mine site itself." I shook my head. "I don't understand what all these people would be doing in the mines."

"Should we follow them?"

"No," I said firmly. "I'm getting you out of here. Gavrox will approve one of the big ships to come out with troops and medics."

I looked over to where the vehicle we'd arrived in sat. No one had moved it. It looked untouched from the previous day. "Let's go," I said. "Walk casually."

"Instead of?" she asked.

"I don't know," I said, under my breath. "Nervously? We just don't want to arouse suspicion."

We broke away from the group and walked across the lonely platform to the transport vehicle.

The crowds of Heveians walking quietly into the mine tunnel had thinned out as we got aboard. I lifted Claire up and climbed in after her. I shut the door behind us.

"Oh," she said as she sank into her seat. "The pulse is quieter in here. Not completely gone, but it's lessened."

"Good." I switched on the transport. "In a few moments, we'll be out of here and you won't hear it at all."

But when I turned on the engines to engage the thrusters, the screen filled with error messages. It was so crowded with them, I didn't know where to look first. Every system that could possibly fail, had failed. The thrusters were offline for fifteen reasons. The thick, metal arms that kept the vehicle raised off the ground were locked and unable to retract. Navigation systems were down. Shielding was compromised. Crucially, communication systems were down.

“What’s going on?” Claire asked, wide eyes on the screen, which was filled with red symbols. “What does all that mean?”

“It means we aren’t going anywhere.” I removed my hands from the controls and looked at the screen, palms up. “Something, or someone, thoroughly disabled our vehicle.”

“Oh, no.”

“I agree with that sentiment.” I went back in and began a full diagnostic run of the systems. “Everything is offline. We have no way to repair it.”

“Can we send for backup from the capital?” Claire asked anxiously.

“No.”

“What about a distress signal?”

I turned to her, feeling the weight of the situation bear down on me, heavy as lead. “No. We cannot leave, and we cannot call for help.”

Her gaze was intense on mine. “So we’re stuck here, you and me?”

“Yes,” I replied, furiously trying to form a plan. “But I know Bakka has its own communication terminal. They have been sending messages to the capital.”

“The ones that Gavrox thought were off,” she said. “The reason why we were sent here.”

I nodded. “If we can find that terminal, we can get a message to the capital.”

“Okay,” she said. “Do you know where this terminal is?”

I sighed. “No. But it can’t be too hard to find.” I looked out through the windshield. The crowds of Heveians had passed through, leaving the station deserted. Even the old male was gone. “I am sorry, Claire.”

“Don’t be,” she said. “I’m the one who volunteered to come here with you.”

“If I’d had any idea we would be walking into this, I would never have allowed you to come.”

She snorted. “If you’d had any idea this was going on, Gavrox would’ve sent an army here.”

That was true. I looked up at her. “We’re going to have to solve this ourselves. I won’t let anything happen to you. I promise.”

She shook her head, her expression sad. “You can’t promise that. You *know* you can’t. We don’t even know what we’re up against.”

Blood surged in my body as fierce, protective urges swelled inside of me. “Oh, no, I *can* promise you that. I will tear this place apart with my hands and destroy anything that threatens you. I *will* keep you safe, Claire. I vow it.”

Her lips parted. A soft sound released between them. And without warning, she surged forward, shifting out of her chair and into mine. Her bottom was in my lap. Her arms, around my neck, and her mouth—sweet stars, *her mouth*—was on mine.

I couldn’t move, couldn’t breathe. My head worked desperately, trying to catch up with what was happening. Claire had initiated this kiss and it wasn’t a thank-you kiss. Not a friend-like kiss. This was a *kiss*, deeper and more passionate than the ones I’d given her, and as soon as that sank into my thick head, I slid my hands up her back and kissed her with the desire I had tightly leashed.

Her mouth was warm. Her lips were soft and welcoming. A questing tongue slid between my lips and touched mine. Her fingers slid into my hair. My scalp was riddled with scars from so many procedures, but she didn’t pull back. There was no hesitancy in her touch or kiss. There was desire, and desperation, and hunger. All of it matched my own feelings. I moaned and sank into this, whatever *this* was. I could taste the fire in her. I could feel the passion. Electricity built and sparked between us.

She pulled back on a gasp. I assumed she had remembered what she was doing and I prepared myself for awkward apologies and regret. But instead, her gaze was fixed on something outside the vehicle. She pointed. “Craal, what’s that?”

I followed where she indicated and there it was—a small shadow shifting about in the opening to a dark tunnel across the way. It was a figure, clearly trying to stay hidden. I focused my synthetic eye, using the magnification feature and light exposure to make out what the thing was. It could be one of those small machines Gura had been worried about. It could be anything. I wasn’t expecting to see what came into focus.

“It’s a child.” I looked at Claire with shock. “A female Heveian child, no older than twelve.”

Her mouth fell open. “Does she appear injured?”

“Not like the others,” I said, looking at the child again, who had folded herself up tight in the tunnel. Her knees were drawn up to her chin and it looked like she was crying. “She’s terrified.”

“You know what we have to do.” Claire’s hands lingered on my chest, even though her voice was firm. “We’re saving her.”

CHAPTER 10

Claire

The figure I was looking at became clear now with his description. It *was* a young Heveian female.

I looked down at Craal, whom I had just wildly kissed. His hands were still on my back where they had been moving in sensual circles. It had definitely been a mutual kiss, and the kind one engaged in before clothes came off and penises found their ways into vaginas.

I wasn't one hundred percent sure what had propelled me from my seat, onto his lap, and into his arms. It may have been the knowledge that we wouldn't be picking up where we left off when we got to the capital, because we weren't going to the capital anymore. A part of me wondered if we ever would, now. A sense of hopelessness had worked through my usually positive outlook and it wasn't unfounded. We *were* fucked. Well and truly. No one was going to rescue us, because no one knew we were in trouble.

All I knew in that moment was that I liked Craal's kiss, his touch, *him*. I wanted to kiss him again. Our time together may be limited. My time with my mind intact may be short. Seeing that child huddling in the tunnel across the station meant that any more kissing would have to wait.

I slid off his lap and he stood up. He pointed a metal finger at my nose. "We *will* get back to the capital."

I nodded. "We will. Yes."

His brow furrowed, as if he didn't know what to make of me, before walking past and going to the side door. "Stay in here."

"No. I'm coming." I went right to the door and stood next to him. "You're a giant male cyborg. I'm an alien to her, but at least I'm closer to her size and female. It might take both of us to make her calm enough to come with us."

"But that noise you hear is worse for you outside."

"So?" I placed a hand on his chest and felt the quick beat of his heart. "I can take it, Craal. Come on. Let's help her."

He knew there was no arguing with me and shook his head as he hit the controls to open the door. It didn't work, of course. Just another system that was now offline.

"Hold on," I said, before he pulled open the door. "Let's bring a peace offering. Are there blankets on this transport?"

He nodded, understanding where I was going with this, and went to the compartments. I headed to the food synthesizer, which was still working, along with all life support systems, and had it produce a few basic nutrient bars. With a blanket and food, Craal jumped out, then held his arms up for me. By now, leaping into his arms felt much more natural. I trusted that he would catch me and he did, gently and with certainty.

He took my hand and we crossed the station platform to the tunnel where we had seen the small female. "I don't like that tunnel," he muttered.

"Why?"

He shook his head and frowned at it. "Something about it brings a bad feeling. It'll come back to me. Many other things have."

I heard a scurrying sound and she disappeared from view. "She saw us," I said. "She's afraid."

"An alien and a cyborg are approaching her," he said. "Of course, she's afraid."

“She might not have a translator,” I said. “If she only speaks Heveian, you’re going to have to do the talking.”

The tunnel was completely dark. There were no lights on down there, making me think it was no longer in use at all. I held out the blanket and food, which was wrapped in a clear cloth. “Try to reassure her,” I said to Craal.

“We’re not here to hurt you,” he said into the darkness. “We’d like to help you. We are sent by Prince Gavrox from the capital. We’re hoping you can tell us what’s going on in Bakka.”

The child did not emerge. There was silence in the tunnel. I placed down the blanket and put the food on top of it, then held up my hands and stepped back. “Maybe she’ll see this and understand we’re not here to hurt her.”

“She’s not safe down that tunnel,” Craal said. “I remember now. We were forbidden from going that way as children. There was a collapse. The ceiling is not stable.”

“Let’s back up then. We have to coax her out.”

We backed up to the tunnel entrance. I could barely make out the shape of the blanket and food I left.

“Come out of there, young one,” Craal said. “You’re not safe.” He raised his hands and made a symbol with his fingers.

“What was that?” I asked.

He shrugged. “Trying something. If Heveians are still teaching their offspring the *farr’ast*, she will know what it means.”

“What is the *far*—”

But Craal cut me off with a raised finger and a sharp, indrawn breath. His attention was on the tunnel. “Look.” He could see better than I could in that dark space, with his augmented eye. “She’s coming towards the supplies you left.”

I could barely make it out, but I saw the shape of a small figure moving in the darkness. “What is she doing?”

“She’s holding the food,” he said. “Now, she’s wrapping the blanket around her shoulders.”

He raised his hands to make another symbol. “Interesting,” he murmured.

“Share with the class,” I grumbled, wishing I could see as well as he.

“She’s coming out.”

Sure enough, a terrified-looking Heveian female stepped into the light. Her hair was so filthy, it looked black. She’d tied it back from her face. Her clothes were ragged and her body was painfully thin. Her sea green eyes were wide with terror. She shoved one of the nutrient bars in her mouth and chewed ravenously.

“What is your name, child?” Craal asked after she had swallowed every bit of food.

The girl looked at him long and steady. She did not reply, but moved several fingers in the air in a clear gesture.

“Ah,” Craal said. “She cannot hear.”

My first thought was, *then how will we communicate with her?* But Craal’s hands began to make a series of distinct movements that reminded me very much of sign language on Earth.

The girl’s hands moved fast and her face relaxed as she almost sank to the floor in relief. Craal responded just as quickly, clearly able to speak to her in this silent language.

“You have sign language here,” I said, more to myself than to him. “We also have a language like this, on Earth.”

“When all this was being built, the Heveians who created it developed the *farr’ast*—or, *the quiet language of hands*. It was made to keep voices to a minimum, as there were many places where the rock was so fragile, the vibration of sound could make entire tunnels collapse. Ever since, mountain Heveians have been taught the *farr’ast* as part of our tradition.” He smirked. “It’s helpful for young ones who wish to communicate without their parents hearing their conversations.

And in this case, it's allowed this female to speak and be understood."

"Until now," I said. "It looks like she's been abandoned here. Thank goodness you remembered the *farr'ast*, or we wouldn't be able to communicate with her."

He glanced at me. "I never lost the quiet language of hands. It returned when I learned to speak again. Yes, it is a good thing I know the *farr'ast* or I would not have just learned what happened here."

My heart sped up. "She knows? She *told* you?"

"Only a little. She is an orphan." He motioned for the girl to come forward and she did, shuffling along on shaky legs. "Let's get you both in the transport. It's safer in there."

The female kept her gaze locked on Craal. The look on her face was a shade shy of adoration. If he noticed, he acted as if he didn't. He did look at me, however, with a furrowed brow. "How badly does your head hurt?"

I shrugged. "It hurts, but I'm fine."

The truth was, being back out had tripled the effects of the pulse. I felt a little dizzy. I had to struggle to make my thoughts turn into words, and I had to concentrate on putting one step in front of the other. They were very troubling symptoms. They were also not things I needed to discuss right now. If this girl could tell us what had happened here, that was worth every stabbing pain in my skull.

Craal boosted the girl, then me, up into the transport before leaping up behind us. He shut the door, and I released a sigh of relief. The pulse had dimmed again. It wasn't gone, but it was fainter.

The Heveian girl's fingers clenched around the blanket. She suddenly looked unsure and glanced around with worry. Craal lowered one of the flip-down seats and gestured for her to sit on it. She did, and made a tentative sign with her fingers.

"She's wondering if there's more food, and perhaps some water," Craal said.

“You got it,” I said, and went to the food synthesizer and had it produce more of the same bars as before, as well as a pouch of water. I brought it back to her. Craal and the girl were once again signing to each other.

She smiled tentatively up at me as I handed her the food. “What is your name?” I asked, knowing she couldn’t understand me. Not only did I not know the *farr’ast*, I also didn’t know Heveian. I spoke in the common galactic tongue, which few mountain Heveians spoke.

“Her name is Tissa,” said Craal. “She says it’s fine for me to tell you what she just told me.”

I smiled at Tissa. “Thank you,” I said, and was rewarded with a smile.

Tissa tucked into her meal and Craal pulled down another folding seat. “I would sit down for this,” he advised.

I did so, as he raked his fingers through his hair in a gesture I now associated with him feeling stress. Stress that now stretched over to me and made my stomach tight. “How fucked are we?” It took a lot for me to curse. It wasn’t my thing, but even I had limits.

He fixed his gaze on me, heavy and sober. “The problems here are worse than we could’ve imagined. The pulse you’re hearing is a weapon. Tissa isn’t affected because she can’t hear it, but it seems the rest of the village is.”

“A weapon?” Ice slithered down my spine as the implications sank in. “Who is wielding it?”

“Who do you think?” He raised one eyebrow. “It would appear that Heveia and the UCP are at war, but the Bakkans are the only ones who have known it.”

CHAPTER 11

Craal

Claire stared at me. Shock and horror shown in her blue eyes. “You’re serious.”

“It would appear so.”

“And Tissa knows what happened?” Claire asked.

My heart squeezed, thinking of what Tissa had just told me. “Oh yes, she knows what happened.”

Tissa watched me as I leaned back in the seat and prepared to tell Claire what she had just shared with me. I could see the trust in her eyes and I didn’t feel deserving of it. Where was I when my home village was attacked? I had deserted these people long ago and I didn’t know why. I certainly wouldn’t get answers from my mother in her current state. And Tissa had been born after I left.

I was now responsible for *two* females. The young one was in fragile health and Claire was being assaulted *as we sat here* by the weapon that altered the minds of everyone living in Bakka.

Claire put her hand over mine. “Tell me,” she said. “What are we up against?”

“Tissa tells me that burrowing machines broke through the mine wall. She said it was a sudden assault and several species of aliens emerged from those vehicles and immediately attacked. No one was expecting it and therefore, no one was prepared. The invaders immediately disabled the

communication systems and engaged a machine that lets out a sound that causes headaches.” I raised my brows. “It’s the one that’s affecting you, Claire. I’m sure of it. Tissa said that despite the pulse, the Heveians fought hard. They battled for days and many died, including her parents, who were in the mines during the initial attack.

“But as the days went on, Tissa says the people stopped complaining about the headaches and they also stopped fighting. They seemed confused and disoriented. Then, their memories seemed to be affected. She says she was the only one who remembered the battle, or that we’d been invaded. They acted like they didn’t recognize her. Everyone was like that. Neighbors who had been good friends were suddenly polite acquaintances.” I glanced at Tissa, who was drinking from the water pouch. “They wouldn’t take her in. They acted like they didn’t know her. They were afraid of the surveillance machines that came through. The invaders suspected she wasn’t affected by the sound and pursued her. She’s been hiding ever since in the tunnels.”

Claire swallowed hard and turned her gaze to the clenched hands in her lap. “So the UCP...” She looked up at me. “Do you think they know we’re here?”

“I don’t know,” I replied. “It seems that their goal was to subdue the population so the attackers could focus on the *vistran* mines. They achieved that. Now, as long as they keep the pulse going, they don’t need to worry about the Bakkans resisting, or anyone else who might come along, like us. They can send a surveillance drone through now and then to see if anything is amiss. We are fortunate they did not send one through the first night we arrived.”

“The pulse *isn’t* working perfectly,” Claire said. “Think about what your mother said when we left—that they tried to fight them off. You know she was remembering the battle, even if for a moment.”

A sudden thought came into my mind, and I turned to Tissa. I asked her, with the quiet language, if she knew my father. I told her his name and asked her if he had been one of those who died.

Her face immediately clouded as she nodded. She replied that my father had been one of the leaders who had fought hard against the invaders. An uncertain light came into her eyes and she asked me if I was truly Vak-craal's son.

"I am," I replied. I told her who my mother was, and tears came to mist her eyes.

"What's wrong?" I asked her in *farr 'ast*.

"I know who you are," she replied. "You were spoken of often." Tissa hesitated before continuing. "There were people who missed you very much. Who feared you were dead."

It was right there—the question I wanted to ask. *Why did I leave?* But I could not bring myself to ask this girl that question. One day, perhaps my mother could answer it. "I promise you I will do everything in my power to remove those who took your parents from you and did such harm to Bakka. I will protect you with my life."

Tissa's eyes filled with tears. She threw herself into my arms. I felt her small, bony body and looked at Claire in desperation, but she only nodded encouragingly and waved her hands in a motion for me to return the embrace. I did so, awkwardly, with a fair deal of panic. Claire was a capable adult female, but Tissa was a child in poor health, who needed a medic. Surely, when this was all over and the residents regained their memories, someone would open their heart and home to this orphan girl. In the meantime, she was mine to care for.

When Tissa sat back, she smiled. "Thank you, Craal. I am grateful." Then she screwed up her face and asked, "You're not going to attack the aliens, are you? You won't get far. The mines are heavily guarded."

"I'm not looking for a battle," I said. "We need to access the communication facility to get a message to the capital. Do you know where it is?"

Tissa winced. "The communication terminal was in its own chamber near the primary *visstran* mine," she replied. "But it was accessed through its own tunnel. The mine itself is

completely taken over by the aliens. They guard it with small drones, guards, and our own people, now, who have been mind-controlled.”

I repeated to Claire what Tissa had said. Claire nodded thoughtfully. “It doesn’t give us a lot of options.”

“None,” I said. “We find a way to this communications hub. Without being caught, obviously.”

CHAPTER 12

Craal

I held up a finger before Claire could say, *That doesn't sound too hard*. I knew those were the next words to come out of her mouth. I appreciated how she looked for the positive in things, but this wasn't going to be easy. I knew it in my gut. "Both of you are staying here," I declared.

I didn't know what I was thinking. Claire actually laughed. "You're not going out there, doing all this, alone. I'm coming with you. We're in this together."

"The sound causing your headache isn't going to improve by leaving this transport."

"Craal, this is not a one-person job. You'll need help, believe it or not."

All the while, I told Tissa in *farr'ast* what Claire and I were saying.

Tissa waved at me, then signed, "She's right. I don't mind staying here alone."

I sighed. Well, at least one of them wasn't going to argue about staying put. I gave Claire a level look. "Have you ever shot a blaster?"

The infuriating female actually perked up. "I did. Once. In a shooting range."

"Have you ever shot and killed anyone?"

Her brows dropped. "No."

“You realize coming with me might force you to do this. We will be engaging with enemies at some point.” *Stars*, I couldn’t even think about this. The idea of Claire being attacked made me want to destroy something.

“I’ll do what needs to be done,” she said. “As for the pulse, this will block out some of it.” She moved to a rack of helmets near the compartments of survival gear and pulled a headset off the wall. It covered her ears completely and stayed in place by a band over the head and under the chin. As far as I knew, these were used for short-range communication relays. Which we wouldn’t be sending unless we wanted to broadcast our business to every UCP guard on a frequency. “The pulse affects people through their auditory nerves,” she said. “With this on, the pulse is dampened like it is when I’m inside the transport.”

I grunted. “Fine.”

“We know the communication terminal isn’t in the primary mine,” Claire said. “So we can avoid the place of concentrated enemies to get there.”

“Do you honestly think they’ll leave the communications terminal unguarded?”

“No, but there won’t be as many, will there? We can see what we’re up against and fight off a few, if needed.” She crossed her arms. “Craal, look. I’m coming with you. I’ll stay out of harm’s way whenever possible, but if you think I’m going to let you plunge into a dangerous situation alone, you’re mistaken. I’m not as incapable as you think I am.”

I leaned over and cupped her chin. “I don’t think you are incapable. I think you are a scientist with no experience in battle.”

“True. I don’t have experience in battle,” she said calmly. “But neither do you.”

She raised her brows, and I couldn’t say anything back. She was right. I may have been given this powerful, cybernetic body, but my experience was in being a transport operator. Maybe we *were* better off working on this together.

“Fine. But we’re both carrying weapons.” I found the compartment that held a few basic combat supplies. Four standard, simple blasters were included. I gave her one, myself two, and left one with Tissa in case anyone came here to bother her. It wasn’t likely. With interior lights off and the transport powered down, it would just be another abandoned vehicle among the others.

I handed her a blaster and a belt for it to attach on. Tissa wasn’t interested in the blaster at all, but I showed her where it was and how to use it, and left it in its case with the lid open. It was a worst-case scenario, I told her, to which she said she would rather hide. She knew she was good at that.

We left Claire’s backpack on the transport so Tissa could change clothes and clean up while we were away. I put some food and water in my smaller pack and I pulled open the door.

Claire adjusted her bulky ear coverings and we hopped out of the transport and onto the station platform.

I signed up at Tissa, “Don’t open this door to anyone but us.”

Her dirty, narrow face gazed down at us. “I won’t. Be careful. Come back to me,” she told me before sliding the door shut behind us.

Something about the girl’s eyes reminded me of someone. I shook my head and promised myself that one of us *would* come back for Tissa. She’d endured the loss of her parents, the mental loss of her town, and now we were her only lifeline. There wasn’t much more the child could take.

“Let’s make this quick,” I said to Claire as we crossed the deserted station. I wondered what happened to that older male—if he got confused and lost, or if he was now somewhere in the mines doing the business of the enemy.

Tissa had given directions as best she could. As a Bakkan, she could likely navigate the tunnels in her sleep. She’d been to the mine many times, since her parents both worked in them. But we were relying on the memory of an adolescent girl who had not spent considerable time memorizing the route

to the communications terminal. Every slight scuffle and sound had me tense and ready for a fight.

“They *have* to know we’re here,” Claire whispered, echoing my thoughts. “But they haven’t attacked.”

I hadn’t thought earlier that they knew of our presence. But now, having returned to the transport and finding it disabled, there was really no question. We were being herded into something.

“Perhaps they have a reason for keeping us alive,” I said.

We reached the tunnel entrance that Tissa said would bring us to the communications chamber terminal. We paused just inside to catch our breath and regroup. Claire’s comment made me think—why *were* we still alive, if the UCP forces knew we were here? I didn’t like the implications. “We’re taking this slow,” I said to Claire. “This could be a trap.”

She nodded. I noticed that she watched my face whenever I spoke. The sound-dampening headphones made it harder for her to hear me.

“How are you holding up?” I asked her.

She nodded. “Good. These dampen the sound. Not as much as being in the transport did, but it’s good enough.”

My cybernetic eye had the ability to see in different spectrums of light, which also allowed it to see surveillance devices that my organic eye would miss. I used it now as we crept slowly down the dim, narrow corridor.

Greenish lights barely illuminated the passageway. They were spaced out and left long patches of shadowed tunnel. We continued on our way.

Before long, I could see a chamber that opened up at the end and was much better lit. My first thought was to hurry forward, but that would be a mistake. We kept our pace slow. I saw a movement up ahead. So did Claire. She squeezed my forearm and pointed, wordlessly.

We rounded the curve and got a good look at what was inside the chamber ahead. At first glance, it looked like a

normal communications terminal. A large, cylindrical tower sat in the center of the room. Terminals with chairs and consoles circled it. And there, four Heveians sat with their eyes on the screens before them and hands moving over controls.

Claire did not step forward. Neither did I. She noticed the same thing I did.

Something wasn't right here. The Heveians sitting at the consoles weren't *doing* anything. I could see by their repetitive hand motions that they weren't entering anything or receiving any data from their blank, black screens. The comm tower itself was dark, except for a few winking lights. It should have been lit up brightly and blinking away.

I looked back at her and shook my head. Her face was tense and rigid. I motioned for her to turn around so we could return to the transport and regroup. A new plan was needed. A new approach.

But the moment we turned, we saw a small, hovering surveillance bot. Claire let out a little gasp. It had one flat black lens, like an unblinking eye, and it was trained right on us. I saw it magnify. A blue light scanned us, and it made a clicking noise—a sign it was preparing to send a transmission.

I didn't think twice. My metal hand flashed out. I grabbed the thing out of the air and crushed it instantly. The blue light dimmed and went out.

As if on cue, the four Heveians sitting at their terminals rose and turned towards us.

“Uh-oh,” Claire murmured. The Heveians lurched towards us, walking unevenly, as if something other than their own free will animated their bodies. “They look like the walking dead,” she said. “Zombies.”

I didn't know what that was—if the dead actually did walk on Earth, but the idea of these *zombies* struck terror in my female. Yes, she was mine. Everything inside of me was sure of it. My fangs, especially, had already laid their claim. They wanted her blood. I wanted her heart.

“Let’s go.” I grabbed her hand. We raced back along the tunnel we had just slowly made our way down. Luckily, we were faster than our Heveian-zombie pursuers. I could only hope they were fighting against whatever force was controlling their minds.

We burst into the station. The old Heveian male was back there, leaning on his stick. His gaze fixed us with an unnatural intensity. “I told you to go back to the capital,” he snarled. “I told you we had everything well in hand. Visitors need to go. Now, you’ll never leave.”

Claire made a whimpering noise and tugged me in another direction. “That way. We’ll hide in the dark tunnel.”

I was not eager to go down the tunnel that Tissa had been hiding in. It was unstable. Everyone knew this, but no one else could see quite as well as I could in the dark. Perhaps we could find a spot to hide and wait for our pursuers to pass.

We dashed past the old male. He stood there, gritting his teeth at us because he wasn’t mobile enough to chase us, but the four individuals from the communications hub were steadily shuffling up the corridor towards us.

We dashed into Tissa’s tunnel. The ceiling was low and the floor was littered with rubble. Claire couldn’t see a thing, so I scooped her up and tossed her over my shoulder to navigate quicker. She let out a slight *oof*, but otherwise remained quiet. I worked my way around sections of fallen rock, abandoned drills and equipment, barely sparing a look behind us.

They were still coming. I could hear them. Thank goodness they were slow. A small offshoot tunnel, barely more than a crack in the wall, caught my attention. I plunged into it, holding Claire carefully. I sank to the floor, slipped her around so she was cradled in my arms, and placed a finger over her lips. She went still, immediately.

My cybernetic eye gave off a blue glow regardless of how I used it, so I shut the eye to neutralize any light. I didn’t know if I could bring myself to kill one of my own kind. They had no control over their actions. My hand brushed the blaster at my hip. I desperately hoped I wouldn’t have to use it, but I

didn't know what I would do if one of them tried to hurt Claire. I had to hope that they would overlook this craggy fissure and eventually give up.

The shuffling came closer. Claire burrowed herself against me, hands gripping my shirt. Her breath came hot and fast against my neck. I tightened my arm around her. I wished I could say something to reassure her, but we needed to be silent. Heveians had good hearing and our low-light vision was quite good, but their natural senses were no match for my augmented vision and hearing.

Claire held her breath when the sounds of footsteps were right outside our hiding spot. There was a pause, but then the steps moved on, passing away deeper into the darkness.

I opened my cybernetic eye and scanned for heat sources nearby. There were none. Only the faint traces of Heveians who had passed by. Still, I made no move to leave yet, and neither did Claire. I let my body relax against the cool stone behind me. This was as good a spot as any to think and figure out what to do next.

"The communications terminal was a trap," she whispered. "They were waiting for us."

I nodded. "We should've seen that coming. Axlos would have."

"We're not Axlos," she said. "We survived, though, didn't we?" She flashed me a grin in the darkness. "I'm pretty impressed with us. Especially with how you got rid of that little drone thing. It was hot."

I decided I would bask in that praise later. "Destroying it may have caused us more problems," I said. "I acted out of instinct."

"I still don't see why they aren't storming the tunnels," she said. "They must have all their forces concentrated on the *vistran*. That would make sense."

I thought about that. "We are an annoyance. They know we're trapped. Why spend resources on a pair of capital

bureaucrats—that must be what they think we are. Lackeys sent to check up on *visstran*.”

“We may not be bureaucrats, but we *were* sent to check up on the *visstran*.” She shook her head. “We need to come up with a plan B.”

“What’s a *plan B*?”

“You know. Plan A didn’t work—finding the comm terminal and sending a message to the capital. We need a plan B. We can’t return to the transport now, or we’ll risk being seen and expose Tissa to harm. So we have to come up with plan B right here.”

She was correct that there would be no returning to the transport vehicle. Tissa was safe only if we were not with her.

Claire took some of the food out of my pack and handed some to me. I took a bite of a nutrient bar. “The pulse is so much stronger here,” she said. “I can’t imagine what it would be like without the ear coverings on.”

That gave me another thought. “If we can’t contact the capital, perhaps we can disable the device making the pulse.”

She took two bites and wrapped up the rest of her bar, securing it back in my bag. “Do you mean, follow it to its source?”

“You said it’s stronger here,” I said. “Perhaps it’s nearby.”

“I’d love to stop it,” she said with a wince. “It’s as good a plan B as any.”

Getting close to the pulse machine would be unpleasant for her. But if we could stop it, she would be free of it for good. But there was another reason why it needed to be shut down. According to Tissa, it took a few days for the Heveians of Bakka to stop hearing the pulse, stop fighting, and to become either dim and forgetful like my mother, or controlled like the four Heveians that had pursued us. Claire was aware that either of those things could happen to her.

I brushed some stray strands of hair from her face, feeling the warm curls beneath my fingers. I was more determined

than ever to do what I said I would, and get us both back to the capital. I wanted to touch her hair whenever I wanted, under much better circumstances, to be free of these caves and this dangerous pulse. Time was running out for her. Rescue was no longer an option. We would be solving this, alone.

“Do you think you can do it?” I asked her. “Follow the pulse to its source?”

She looked up at me with wide, haunted eyes. “I will have to take these off to do it,” she said. “But I will. Otherwise I might turn into one of those...” She trailed off, her gaze following the path that the four Heveians had taken. “Promise me one thing?”

“Anything,” I said.

“Don’t let me hurt anyone, and that includes you.” She swallowed hard. “I know I’m almost out of time. Soon, I’m likely going to stop hearing the pulse.”

I wanted to tell her, *Never mind, we will find another plan, find another way*, but I knew there wasn’t another plan right now. This was the only way we had. No plan C that would accomplish anything.

I leaned down and pressed a kiss to her lips. “Very well, Claire. I promise that I will not let you hurt anyone.”

CHAPTER 13

Claire

I tentatively removed the headset covering my ears. It had provided much-needed relief from the relentless pulse that felt like it was tearing my mind apart. Now it pounded through my skull like a hammer, over and over. Blistering pain made everything hurt, from my teeth to my fingertips. I moaned and Craal's arms came around me. He let out a curse in Heveian that my translator implant didn't, or couldn't, decipher. "If you can't do this, we will think of something else."

"I'll be okay." We were both well aware that there was nothing else, and if this torture was going to stop, I would have to make it stop, myself. At least I had Craal here to go through it with me, and to help destroy the machine causing this.

We slipped out from the crevice we'd been hiding in. Craal's arm was snug around me, which was good because my balance was off. My head felt like it wasn't quite attached to my body any longer.

"Do we go further into the tunnel?" Craal asked.

I knew he didn't like this tunnel. It was unstable; that was obvious. The evidence was everywhere—in the rubble littering the ground and the fallen sections we had to climb around.

"Yes," I said. "We need to go on."

The way became harder. Craal moved boulders and huge chunks of rubble out of the way. We could hear the rocks

shifting around us, rumbling unhappily at our movements.

“This is where the *farr’ast* would come in handy,” I said quietly to Craal.

“It would, if only you knew it.” He smiled. I only saw it because of the illumination given off by his eye. “The four Heveians who were looking for us have not come back this way, so it must lead out somewhere.”

“Hopefully, to the source of this pulse.” I was speaking now through clenched teeth. The pulse was taking over. My body was beginning to throb with it. “My heart is starting to beat to the same rhythm,” I said. “That can’t be good.”

In response, Craal picked me up again, cradling me against his chest. “Listen to my heart beat instead. Feel it, don’t give in to this weapon.”

I pressed my ear to his chest and tried to do as he suggested. His was a very different beat from the pulse. “We’re getting closer to it,” I said. “It’s stronger ahead toward the right.”

We reached a juncture and Craal took the righthand fork. We continued on. I was grateful he was carrying me. My breath came in time to the pulse, as if I were being taken over one body function at a time.

“I think we’re getting somewhere.” Craal’s rough voice was thick with desperation. I could feel the tightness in his limbs.

The stone tunnel had changed to a metal one. Squared-off edges and sleek shining walls, with harsh white lights, replaced the craggy stone. I acknowledged the shift with a nod. It was all I could manage. What I wanted to say and what I *could* say, were different things. It felt like my throat was being squeezed by an invisible hand.

“I’m going to place you down here,” said Craal. “And look up ahead to make sure there are no surprises.” He placed me on the floor. I was boneless, heavy beyond words. Cool metal floor and wall replaced his warm, strong arms. I let out a noise

like a mewling cat. I was afraid of how I felt—like a part of me was being wrenched away.

Craal was the only thing keeping me, *me*, but then he was striding down the corridor, pulling a blaster from his belt. I wanted to stop him, but all I could do was watch.

Blaster shots sounded up ahead. I winced at the bright, repeated flashes of light. Smoke curled down the corridor. The walls reverberated with the sound of blaster shots and I flinched every time. Another one rang out through the tunnel.

Fear speared through me. Craal was in danger. I tried to uncurl myself, to make my muscles and bones work, but they wouldn't. I tried to cry out in frustration, but only a garbled groan escaped my lips. I struggled against invisible bonds. *Why can't I move?* I could barely think.

And then...

The pulse stopped. Blissful, smooth silence washed over me like a cool bath on a hot day. My entire body shuddered with relief.

The blaster shots had stopped. Someone had stopped the machine causing the pulse.

I was free. I drew in a shaky sigh as tears slid from the corners of my eyes.

But when I tried to get up, my body wouldn't obey. What was wrong with my body? My bones were frozen, fused together. With extreme effort, I turned my head, but I felt like my neck was made of ice and I was shattering it when I moved. All of me was like this. Little by little, my limbs seemed to thaw until I could move them again, and then I stood up.

The metal hallway swayed. The air felt mushy. There was a cottony feeling in my mouth.

I looked down the corridor. Something was at the end that was important to me. I looked back towards the rough-stone passage behind me. It was dark that way and I didn't know where it led. I felt like I used to, though. I must have forgotten.

I knew I had to keep going, but I didn't know why. It was right there, at the edge of my mind. I shuffled forward, one step in front of the other.

How did I even get here? I shook my head, which ached slightly. I wondered if I had some ibuprofen in my bag.

Oh, right, I didn't have a bag.

Voices up ahead were dim. They spoke in a strange language that reminded me a little bit of whale calls. Not words, exactly, but feelings, both acute and desperate. I kept going, and the metal hallway opened up to a huge room.

I gasped at the sight of several creatures lying on the floor. Purple and blue blood oozed from their lifeless bodies. I covered my mouth and stumbled back a few feet.

"It's okay, Claire," said a deep voice.

My head snapped up as my gaze locked on an enormous male. He had dark gray skin and his hair was a brilliant shade of teal. Snug black clothes outlined a massively muscled body. One of his arms was made of metal, and one of his eyes was different than the other. Both had slits for pupils, like a cat. I backed up. "Who are you?" His face was worn and beautiful, etched with exhaustion. The sadness in his expression made my heart hurt, even though I didn't know why. "Do I know you?"

He held out his hands in a soothing gesture, but one of them still held a blaster and my gaze went right to it as I cringed away. "How do you know my name?"

"Do you know your name is Claire?"

"Yes," I said, annoyed. "I know my name. I know...a few things. But all I know right now is their sadness."

"Whose sadness? It's only us here." He shook his head and hastily put the blaster back on his belt. He took a step towards me. "Look at me, Claire. It's Craal. Your friend. Your...we're more than friends."

I couldn't believe *that*. This enormous cyborg was my lover? He certainly was handsome, but he looked quite

terrifying. “I don’t think so,” I said. “I don’t know you.”

The look of dismay on his face said otherwise. It was hurt I saw there, genuine hurt feelings. Maybe I *did* know him. It wasn’t easy to replicate that look of raw vulnerability.

I looked away from him because those voices had grown more urgent, intensely clear. They burrowed into my mind. With each passing moment I could understand them better. “Who is talking?” I asked to myself, but the other guy, Craal, must have thought I was talking to him.

“There’s no one here, but you and me.”

“No,” I said. “There’s someone else here and they’re hurting.”

He looked around at the room and I did too. There wasn’t much in it except for two huge black storage containers. They looked like they had to be eight feet high and sixteen feet long, placed side by side. They dominated the space.

“What happened to them?” I asked, veering around to the dead life forms on the floor. They were small and green with long, bony arms and a mass of thick tentacles on the lower half of their bodies.

“They were UCP guards,” said Craal. “Watching the boxes in this room.”

I walked up to the closest black crate and placed my hands on the wall of it. “Ah, they need help.” There were creatures inside. I was sure of it and they were the ones talking to me. “They’re suffering,” I said. “They’re begging me for help.”

Craal’s brow furrowed in confusion. “Who is suffering? I thought we would come here to find the machine that was making that noise, but there are just these boxes. No obvious power connection. No transmitters.” He raked his fingers through his hair. “I don’t know how to get into them. I don’t know how to help *you*.”

The big male—Craal—rubbed his chin and stared at them. “The machines must be inside of these, but they’re made of *yalignan*. I can’t see heat signatures through it. Even my strength can’t bend these panels.”

I didn't know what he was going on about. There were no machines in this room. Only the creatures trapped inside the giant boxes. "They need my help."

Pity crossed his features. "Who needs your help?"

"*They* do." I ran my hands along the box, searching for a way to open it. "They're screaming. Can't you hear them?"

"No. And I don't hear any living thing moving inside of them. They're silent. No thrashing. Nothing at all." He looked so sad. "Are you sure?"

I nodded emphatically. "They need to be together."

Craal looked at the boxes with a grimace. "I don't know what you're talking about, but if I can help you, I will."

His words soothed me. I decided I would take his word for it that we knew each other. I certainly felt comfortable around him. There was no way he was my lover though. "Why were you looking for a machine?"

"Try to remember," he coaxed. "We were looking, together, for a device that created a pulse that either controls the minds of anyone who hears it, or causes them to forget recent events. It's affecting you right now."

I was about to deny it, but I didn't know how I got here, and I had no recollections before standing in that metal hallway. And yet, I remembered that I was a scientist. I was from Earth, and where we were was definitely not Earth.

"I don't know anything about a machine, but there is one being inside each of these boxes and they are suffering."

"What do you want to do?"

"We need to free them." I was more certain of this than anything in my life.

Craal took a deep breath and rolled his shoulders back. "Fine. Let's free them."

CHAPTER 14

Craal

My heart was breaking, slowly, into pieces, as I watched the vacant eyes of the female I loved look at me as if she had never seen me before. Part of me had hoped—no, *all* of me had hoped—that if Claire succumbed to the pulse weapon, there would still be recognition in her eyes.

That she would still know me. But it was a foolish hope. She looked at me like a stranger and her first reaction was fear. I had managed to soothe her, but she kept going on about hearing someone hurting, hearing voices, saying that someone was suffering.

It had to be the mind-control device. And it had to be in these boxes. But when I looked them over, they weren't attached to any power source. They looked like massive storage crates, nothing more. They were sealed up with no obvious way of getting in. But I would play along with Claire. Perhaps, on the other side of the pulse, she could hear and perceive things that she couldn't before. Things my brain couldn't process.

I watched her slowly make her way around the first crate. Her hands slid over the metal as if she were in a dark place feeling along the wall for a light. Her eyes fluttered. Her nostrils flared as she made her way to the front, between the two containers. She made a cooing sound. Then, her eyes filled with tears. She was *crying*?

“What are you hearing, Claire?” I asked. “Are they still speaking to you?”

“Yes,” she said, in a broken voice. “They know the other is there, but they can’t get to them. They can’t touch. They must always touch.”

I pressed my lips together to keep from pushing her. For all I knew, she was babbling nonsense. Perhaps these were empty, this was all just part of the UCP’s mind-control device, messing with their victims’ minds.

“Do you have any ideas on how to open them?” I asked her. Perhaps if they were empty, she’d see it and come to her senses.

“They know,” she replied in that wispy, faraway voice that I was beginning to despise. “But they’re inside.”

“Can they tell you?” I glanced at the chamber exit. We would not be alone in here for long. If we were going to make something happen, it had to be soon. “Not to rush you, but there will be more enemies coming here. Ask them how to open the crates.”

Claire didn’t respond. She pressed the side of her face to the second crate and closed her eyes.

I clenched my jaw and tried to hold my patience, while mentally figuring how many charges I had left in my blasters. Enough, I knew. I could hold off a wave or two for a while.

After a few moments, she opened her eyes and turned her gaze to the dead guards. “They have it,” she said breezily, in the same way my mother described my missing father. “They have a key.” Her fully dilated gaze turned desperate. “Hurry. They’re coming. We’ve got to help.”

I was well aware I was not speaking to someone in control of their mental faculties. This was a different version of Claire. Just like we had met a different version of my mother.

“Let me check them.” I proceeded to look through the clothing and equipment of the fallen Qualat that I had slayed getting in here. I felt no guilt, there. After all, they had shot at me first and their species was firmly entrenched in the UCP.

They were not here to negotiate a peace treaty. No, they were likely the ones who had killed my father.

Around the neck of one of the *qualat* guards was a chain with a flat square made of a shiny black *plastoid*. I pulled it off and held it up. “Perhaps this is something.”

Claire came forward slowly and took it from my hand. “Yes,” she said. “Let’s see. We have to help them.” She sounded almost childlike now. “Yes, I’m coming,” she murmured to one of the black boxes.

She motioned for me to come to her, giving me only one quick look of distrust before pressing her lips together and deciding that, whoever I was, it didn’t matter. She needed the help. “Help me find it,” she said.

“Find what?” I asked, coming to stand beside her.

“The place where this goes. It’s a key so we can open the boxes and let them out.”

I sighed and joined her beside the black box. There was nothing else to do. I had to trust that she knew what she was doing, even in the state she was in.

I almost didn’t believe it when my fingertips brushed against a narrow slit on the wall of the box. “Here,” I said.

Claire came over and inserted the black square into the slot.

Instantly, the slot became a palm-sized square opening. From there, it began folding outwards like black tiles snapping open, one by one. *Yaligian* was one of those rare, amazing alloys that could be programmed to behave in certain ways. No door, here. The key changed the programming, ordering one wall to rearrange itself and open.

But there was no time to gawk. I could see what was inside the box, now, and it certainly was no machine. Rather, it was a massive creature that looked like a diseased grub. The brown thing inside had no eyes and it was covered in sores. It lifted its huge, sticky head, as if it had just been awoken from sleep. It turned toward us.

“Oh, no.” It looked to me as if Claire had been nicely tricked by the UCP into arranging our own deaths. I grabbed Claire and yanked her away from the shifting beast inside. “Is this what you were trying to free?”

The front of the worm’s head opened, revealing a wide circular mouth and a ring of sharp teeth. It thrashed, clearly eager to be free.

“Yes,” she said breathlessly. “They’re in so much pain being apart.”

“Claire, this is madness,” I said, drawing my blaster. “They’ll destroy us.”

“No,” she said. “They just want each other. We have to free the other one.”

“There is no way we’re letting the other one out,” I stated emphatically.

She twisted out of my grasp. “Then I’ll do it myself.” She ran to where the small key card lay on the floor, having fallen from the *yaligian* wall, and snatched it up.

“Claire, no!” I stared at her in horror as the behemoth beast in the box rose up behind her. Its mouth was open. All of those teeth dripping with something foul-smelling and sickly. It slithered out. I took in the thick segments of its slime-covered body. It rose up, about to lunge at Claire.

I aimed my blaster at the creature. “Claire, get out of there!”

“Craal, don’t shoot them. Please.” She shook her head, hair floating around her like an orange cloud. She looked serene, of all things. “Trust me, Craal. Trust me.”

As if in a trance, I lowered the blasters. She brought the small key to the other box and felt for the slot. Miraculously, the huge, grub-like creature did not attack her. It hovered there, waiting, undulating in a way that looked like it was eager for something.

Claire fit the key in the other hole. It opened to reveal another creature, identical to the one she had just released.

Now, finally, she stepped away. I grabbed her and pulled her back as the other worm slid from its box, which was barely bigger than the creatures themselves. Joy spread across Claire's face like sunlight. "Look," she said dreamily. "That's all they wanted. To be together."

The two creatures slid over and around each other, rubbing their bodies against one another in what could only be described as a frantic greeting. Neither of them attacked us.

"Sweet *stars*," I murmured, watching the dance of the two giants. They were very beautiful to each other, that much was clear. Without paying us any mind, they pressed up against each other, twisted into a coil and began to rotate. They turned blue and glowed. It would have been a beautiful sight if not for the sound of footsteps pounding up the metal tunnel.

Claire swayed as if in a trance. She looked up at me with pupils so dilated, there was no blue at all. "Do I know you?" she asked in a flat voice before her eyes rolled up and she crumpled to the floor, or she would have, if I had not caught her.

"I've got you," I whispered against her clammy forehead. "I will always catch you." I held my female close.

UCP guards poured into the room. There was no other way out of here. We were trapped.

CHAPTER 15

Claire

I awoke in a pair of warm arms, cradled against a familiar body, full of chiseled angles and strength. My body felt amazing. My limbs, fluid and loose. My mind, clear and quick. I stretched in those wonderful arms. One was firm flesh, the other smooth metal. I loved both of them, along with the male they came with. I opened my eyes and smiled up at Craal. “Hello,” I said.

His face was the most welcome sight I could imagine. The lines etched into his skin from hardship, trauma, and time spent living, were as welcome and beautiful as the gray streaks in his hair and the brilliant blue of his eyes. He looked wary, but overwhelmingly relieved. “Welcome back,” he said, then paused. “Do you know who I am?”

“You’re Craal.” I reached up and placed my hand against his cheek, warmed by how he instinctively leaned into my touch. “I can’t tell you how good it is to see you.”

“You remember me, do you?”

“Yes,” I replied with relief. “Memories are back. Headaches and pulses are gone.”

“What exactly do you remember?”

I stretched again. After holding tension and pain for a while, it felt good to have my body back. Then, belatedly, I remembered that we had previously been in a dire situation. Craal didn’t look worried at the moment. “I remember everything until I fell asleep.”

“You mean passed out.”

“I just remember being really tired.”

“You fell unconscious in my arms,” he said. “It scared the life out of me. For a moment, I thought I’d lost you.”

I slanted him a look. “Weren’t we being surrounded by UCP guards?”

“We were,” he said in a dry tone. “There you were, passed out, with every available UCP guard pouring into the room.”

My eyes widened. “Oh, no. Looks like we got away from them. Or is this a prison?”

“It’s not. We got away thanks to the two love grubs you freed.”

“They were not meant to be apart,” I said. “Not even for one moment. They were in agony.”

“I suppose that’s how it feels when one is separated from their mate.” He was looking at me with a funny light in his eye.

“I think it does.” I remembered with crystal clarity everything the two beings were feeling and communicating. *They* were the weapon the UCP had used to control the Heveians. “It wasn’t a machine like we thought.”

“No. It was a mated pair of Plin-lars kept apart in separate cages.” He shook his head. “I have to say, it’s brilliant. Machines can be deactivated. Plin-lars are deadly and ravenous, but more sentient than the UCP thought, since they chose not to harm us.”

“They’re not malicious and they *knew* I was trying to help them. They could sense each other, hear each other, but could not touch. For them, that was torture. Their pulses were cries for help. A distress signal,” I said. “I could only understand what they needed when I was close enough. Interesting that without being in range of the Plin-lars’ calls, people become manipulatable. Some will do as they’re told, while others will just...forget.”

“Either way, the population is subdued,” he said.

“But when we were in the room with the Plin-lars, I could hear and feel everything they did, like I was let into their conversation. It’s like their pulse was meant to reprogram the brain in a way that made their language understandable to other species. There was nothing about them that wanted to harm us. They couldn’t help their need for each other.” I looked up into his eyes, the one he was born with, and the one that was made for him. “They were complete with each other.”

His hand slid over my hair as his gaze moved over it reverently. “We have some time to rest now,” he said. “We’re safe.”

I raised my brows at that. “Safe? Is that actually possible?”

“It is for now.” Craal tilted his head and gazed down at me. “Your kind deed paid off. You asked how we got past the guards. It was the Plin-lars. Once they were reunited, they were quite angry at the guards who kept them apart and quite grateful to us for reuniting them,” he said. “They obliterated the enemy, smashed their way out, and, ah, consumed a few of them along the way. So much for being mindless space grubs. Last I saw them, they were bashing their way towards the mines, putting the entire UCP operation into chaos, and giving us a chance to escape.”

“And where did we escape to?” I asked, as I looked around. We seemed to be in a small hut of some sort. A dark purple crystal flickered in an alcove, giving off heat and light. And I could still hear the trickle of water coming from somewhere.

“We’re in the Old Village,” he said. “Another forbidden place.”

“Forbidden place?”

“Yes, like the tunnel we weren’t supposed to go into.” He shifted me in his arms, drawing my back to his chest and looping his arms around my front. “I figured, the Old Village was so obscure that the UCP probably doesn’t even know it’s here. I was right.”

The hut looked like it was made of cut and stacked stones, not carved into the mountain itself. There was a little round window and narrow passageways that led off someplace else in the dwelling. Empty shelves lined one wall. It appeared, we were lying on a thick pile of cushions and blankets. “Why was this place abandoned?” I craned my neck and looked up at him with a frown. “What happened?”

I felt his massive shoulders shrug behind me. “I don’t know. I’ve heard that it was too small and the population outgrew it, but as for the forbidden part, there may have been rumors of spirits.”

I twisted in my seat so I could fully face him. “Like *ghosts*?”

He looked at me with a straight face and shrugged again. “That’s what I was told. Like I said, we weren’t supposed to come here. But, of course, some of us did.”

“Did *you* ever see a ghost?”

He grinned at me. “Would you think less of me if I said yes?”

“No, but I’d have a lot more questions.”

He shook his head with a chuckle. “No. I’ve never seen an apparition in the Old Village. It is small though, and quite a bit farther from the mines and station than would be convenient.”

The station reminded me of Tissa. He seemed to be thinking the same thing because he ran a hand over my hair and said, “She’s fine. She’s safe and glad to have a better place to hide, with food and water, than that tunnel.”

“And we *are* safe?” I needed the extra reassurance.

“I brought you here so you could recover. I didn’t know what state you’d be in when you woke, so...” He glanced away. I could see the uncertainty in his eyes and I knew why it was there.

I hadn’t remembered him when I had fallen fully into the mind trap of the Plin-lars. “Hey.” I threaded my fingers through his. My hands looked absurdly small compared to his.

“I know you,” I said quietly. “And even when I didn’t, for those few moments, I trusted you.”

His eyes warmed. “I know you did.”

“And I trust you now.” I slid off his lap and sat on my knees to face him. “Being inside the Plin-lars’ minds was strange,” I said. “But also enlightening in a way I had never expected.”

“How so?”

“It’s just, I felt what they felt and I could see how tightly I hold myself back from feeling anything like it.” I dropped my gaze, because even now, it was hard to be vulnerable. “I’m just going to say it—I care about you. And not just in a friend way.” I blew out a breath, hating that I sounded like a middle schooler trying to choke out a class speech. “I have feelings for you. I’ve had them for a while and I’m—”

His mouth was on mine. His hands cupped my face. His breath was stealing mine and wiping the rest of what I was going to say out from under me like a clean sweep to the knees. I moaned and wrapped my arms around his neck.

Craal broke contact long enough to say, “I feel the same way about you. And I have, for a while.” He grinned, flashing white teeth and fangs that were suddenly longer than they used to be. I knew what Heveians did with their fangs. I fully understood how his species shared blood with their mates and how their saliva increased sexual pleasure during those bites.

I suddenly knew that I wanted it. *All* of it. I wanted to be his, if he would have me. I knew he found me attractive. We had kissed. There’d been moments where his desire had been clear. I didn’t know why some part of my brain refuse to believe that this male could want me. *Really* want me. “I—I love you,” I said in a rush before I could take it back.

A smile bloomed on his face so pure and open, I wanted to bottle it and keep it for another day. “And I love you, Claire.”

I surged forward, capturing his mouth again, pressing myself against him. His arms were sure and strong around me, but for just a moment. The next, he pushed me back, breathing

in a deep, shuddering breath. “You’ve been through an ordeal. You need rest, food. You don’t need *this*.”

“Don’t tell me what I need, Craal. I feel like I’ve waited my whole life to feel this way, and for someone to feel this way back.” I shook my head. “We may never get out of here. I want you. Right now.”

He bared his teeth in a hiss. “I cannot deny you, but I tell you this now, Claire. If I take your body, I take all of you. And I will not give it back. Ours will be no casual coupling.”

My heart stuttered fast and hard at his possessive words, which ignited an ache and passion inside of me. “You already have all of me,” I said. “And I won’t take less from you. I’m old enough to know what I want, and to know what it is I give you.”

“Very well,” he said quietly. “It is not a choice I make lightly, but I confess it’s what I’ve wanted for a long time.”

How foolish I had been to think that he harbored some latent romantic attachment to Kiki. This had always been there in his eyes when he looked at me—this flame, this intense interest. But I’d allowed my past to cloud what was right before me, literally looking at me. Craal did not see a woman with ugly hair and a heavy bottom, who had risen to a level in her career that far outpaced her male colleagues. He desired me, all of me. And it was high time I reveled in that.

I reached for the bottom of his shirt and pulled it up. He raised his arms and the skintight fabric came up and off. I paused for a moment to just take in the sight of this male, who was *mine*. “You are so beautiful,” I said.

He shook his head. “I am lost in your beauty every day that I am fortunate enough to look upon it.” One firm finger slid down my throat, over the throb between my collar bones, and between my breasts. “I want to see you, Claire. All of you.”

My coat was off in an instant. The shirt I wore wasn’t much different than his. Designed to keep one warm in a cooler place, it was snug against my skin and Craal wasted no time in removing it.

His hands moved over my breasts reverently, as if I were the most precious thing he had ever touched.

I gasped as his thumbs scraped over my sensitive nipples, which had grown hard and tight and ached under his touch.

My hands were not idle either. I stroked the firm planes of his chest, drawing out a moan as my hands passed over his own nipples before traveling downwards over his rippling abdomen to the fastenings of his pants, where his cock bulged, insistent and huge. I moved my hands over the length and he moaned.

His hips instinctively pressed upwards into my touch. He groaned out my name, expression taut with exquisite agony. "Take your pants off," he ordered.

I took off my boots, then wiggled out of my pants, leaving on my panties. He laid me back and kissed me. His hands were everywhere, stroking, exploring, finding sensitive places that surprised me. He moved down, laving my breasts with attention, suckling, nipping the firm buds.

I was a panting mess by the time he reached my aching pussy. He looked up at me, as he placed his hand over my mound. "I will make this enjoyable," he said. "I promise you."

"I know," I said, thickly.

His hand began to massage me through my underwear. Surely he could feel the dampness seeping through the fabric. There was no missing my shattered breathing and the way I bucked against his touch. I barely realized it when he hooked his fingers around my panties and pulled them down my thighs, stroking my skin as he went.

And then, I was naked, bared to his view in the purple glow of the crystal in the room. I lay there, resting on the soft nest of bedding, holding my breath as his gaze swept me from head to toe.

"Well?" I asked shakily as the silence and his perusal stretched.

His gaze slowly moved to mine, dark with heat and hunger and a feral glint. "You are more perfect than I imagined," he

said. “And all this is mine.” He cupped my pussy again, but this time, he slid two metal fingers into my slit. My body surged around him, clenching as if to hold him there.

“Is this what you want?” he demanded. “Tell me.”

“Yes,” I gasped.

One corner of his mouth tipped upwards. “Are you sure?”

“Yes. Fuck!” I looked up at him, finding it hard to believe that he could interpret that any other way.

Suddenly, those two fingers inside me began to vibrate. A noise came out of me that was barely human. The shock of arousal, coupled with acute need, drove me hard towards a passion I couldn’t comprehend.

“And now?” he asked languidly.

Now, I couldn’t even speak. The pulsing fingers inside of me were too much. It had been too long since I’d given over to anything, even for myself. I had shut off the passion inside of me, dammed it up behind a thick wall, and Craal came and blasted it apart.

Now, desire exploded. An orgasm took me by the heart and tore me apart. I gasped his name as the throbbing pressure in my sex and waves of pleasure throbbed through me.

I was gasping for breath as his fingers eased from my body and my heart ceased its furious pounding. My eyes focused and there was his face. He grinned, revealing obscenely long and impossibly sharp fangs. Holding my gaze, he raised his fingers to his nose, and breathed in my essence. “You smell like lust and need. I’m going to take you now,” he said. “I’m going to fuck you, and bite you, and make you mine.” He shook his head. “If you object to any of that, say so now.”

I swallowed hard, struggling to find my voice again. All I managed was a strangled, “Yes, *please*.”

He nodded. His hands went to his pants and he flipped open the fastenings. He pulled his pants down his hips and released his cock, and it sprang upwards, bouncing as it escaped its confines. Similar in shape to human males—but

not in size—it was huge, dark blue, and rippling. Beneath it hung full, heavy balls, filled with seed.

I had not thought about pregnancy in a long time. It hadn't been a possibility since I'd had no lovers, but as I looked at that impressive set before me, my brow furrowed. "I don't think I can get pregnant," I said. "I'm forty-seven, but—"

He pressed a kiss to my lips. "I cannot give you babies, Claire. The procedures I endured during captivity made that impossible. If you want them..." His eyes tightened with concern. "*Do* you want them?"

Babies? Maybe twenty years ago I would've had a different answer, but the thought of diapers and feedings, and all that came with it, wasn't something I craved. I was looking forward to being a fun auntie to any of the other women on the cruiser who might have babies, but for myself? "No," I said. "I am more than satisfied with just you."

"Are you sure?" he asked. "If you wanted a family—"

"No. Honestly, I'm relieved," I said. "As for family, sometimes we're born with one and sometimes we create one. Our family will be unique to us."

He smiled again, flashing those incredible fangs. His organic eye was fully dilated, but his cybernetic one remained a slit. It looked wicked and hot. "That can be arranged." He pressed me back into the bedding and nudged my knees apart with his thighs. He settled between them, bracing himself on thick arms, with the head of his cock pressed into my wet folds. "I promised I would bring you pleasure," he ground out. "You must tell me if I hurt you."

It may have been a while since I'd done this, and, as big as he was, it *would* be an adjustment, but I knew I could take him. "I will let you know if you hurt me," I said, wetting my lips with my tongue. "Now, please, Craal. Don't keep me waiting."

A sound came out of him that would've been a chuckle under different circumstances, but instead emerged as a groan.

He pressed forward, notching his cock into my sex. He rocked there, slowly forcing himself inside.

I felt the stretch. I felt my body open, shifting aside to accommodate him. Yes, there was an ache, a pinch, as he *was* quite large, but it wasn't pain. It was simply the feeling of being filled for perhaps the first time.

I sighed as he filled me, sheathing himself entirely.

His entire body shuddered. I arched, wanting more, ready to feel everything.

He began to move, thrusting gently, but I could see when his control began to slip. When he stopped trying to be gentle and allowed instincts and hunger and need to take over. His powerful body pumped into mine with force.

Finally, I was being taken the way my body had always wanted it. Ravished and loved and *desired*. I clutched his shoulders as he rode me hard. His face was a mask of need. His eyes were dark fire as he held my gaze. I put a hand on the back of his neck and guided him down to mine.

I knew he wanted it. I could feel how much he wanted to bite me, and I was ready. "I said I want it all," I said against his ear. "So give me everything."

He let out an animalistic growl and those needle-sharp fangs pierced my skin. I felt the surge of pleasure immediately. It was like a current suddenly ran through my body, amplifying the sensations of all I was feeling and kicking it into a higher gear.

His hips pounded into me as his mouth latched onto my neck. I knew what this meant. My blood would run in his veins forever. For the rest of his life, I would always be a part of him, and I knew that meant a lot to him. It was a mate bond in many cases, but not all. Craal had made it clear that in our case it was. After this, I would be his and he would be mine.

I hooked a leg around his thigh as another orgasm built. This one was more powerful, like a tsunami, as opposed to a wave. The sensation exploded from my neck where his fangs pierced, to my pussy where his cock throbbed. I was flying,

breaking apart. My body arched like a bow, rigid by the shock of pleasure that exploded in me. I pumped my hips against his pounding cock mindlessly, undone by sensations. No one in my previous world would have ever pictured me—uptight Dr. Claire Turich, being taken by a gorgeous, cyborg alien like a wild creature. But here I was, binding myself to this beautiful, wonderful male, and finding true, full sexual pleasure for the first time in my life.

I cried out his name over and over as I came hard. It was a relentless throbbing, as I pulsed against him. I could hear the sounds our bodies made, smell our combined arousal, and when, finally, my body began to calm down from the ecstasy, he withdrew his fangs from my neck and swept his tongue several times over the skin there, closing the pinpricks he'd made. He pumped hard into me and found his own release with a guttural groan. His cock twitched and throbbed inside of me as he emptied his seed.

He was gasping, as was I. Both of his arms shook as he carefully, awkwardly, lowered himself beside me and gathered me into his arms. Only then did he remove his cock from my body. He was still hard, but we were both spent, overwhelmed, and definitely a bit mind-blown.

“Wow,” I said in a tiny voice. It was all I could muster.

Craal grunted. It was apparently all *he* could muster. He gathered me close to his side. “Mine,” he murmured as his body relaxed. “My love.”

With a smile, we fell asleep in each other's arms.

CHAPTER 16

Craal

There were no words. Nothing I could put together to describe what it felt like to be with Claire. To *really* be with her, not as a friend, or a patient, or a shipmate, but as her lover and her mate. I had not thought someone as broken as me could catch and hold the affection of a brilliant, vibrant female such as her.

When I awoke with her in my arms, I thought I had dreamed the whole thing. But no, she was there, curled on her side with her face resting on my chest. Soft waves of orange hair splayed over my gray skin. Narrow, capable hands rested on my abdomen.

I felt her stirring and I knew our time was about up. We needed to finish whatever was happening under the mountain, if we were to escape. I could only hope that we'd get a chance to start over again in the capital.

Claire stretched, letting out a lovely sigh. I ran my hand longingly down the soft curve of her body, wishing we had more time.

I did a quick check-in with my body. I had spent enough time with these cybernetic limbs to gauge how well I was functioning. Rest was vital, which was one reason why I was glad we had a safe place to sleep. My own body's energy helped supply the power to my cyborg parts. When I was not rested and recharged, neither were my metal limbs.

I sat up, easing away from Claire's delectable body, then rose to my feet. This little dwelling was tucked far back, away from the central homes in the small Old Village. I had chosen it because someone had squatted here first. There had been the pile of bedding and the *cralat* crystal, which provided light and warmth. The bedding was made of *eka*, a fabric that was indestructible and costly. Whoever had hidden out here had left in a hurry without these things. It made me wonder what else had been abandoned here over the years.

I was happy to have a comfortable place to fuck and rest with my mate.

My mate. I liked the way that sounded. I placed a hand on her hip and nudged her. "It's time to get up."

"Is it morning?" Claire sat up and pulled her wild mane of hair into a knot at the top of her head.

"My internal clock says no," I replied. "We slept for about four and a half hours."

She nodded. "Good. Not too long, then."

But not long enough, in my opinion. Yes, I was recharged and felt good, but we were still facing big problems. I got dressed and directed Claire to the chamber where she could relieve herself.

When she returned, we ate some food and drank some water from the pack I brought, as reality returned in full force. The purple *cralat* light was beginning to dim, reminding us that our time here was ending.

When we were dressed and ready, we left the small house. "We should search for some supplies," I said. "This home was used in the past few years. Someone used it to hide out for a while. It's possible that other things have been left—devices, weapons. We need to go house to house and see if there's anything we can salvage that could aid us."

She nodded. "We have blasters, but a communication device would be ideal right now."

"My thoughts exactly. I'm hoping we find a discarded transmitter." I slanted her a look. "I bet you wish you hadn't

left all your devices at home.”

She winced. “I do regret it. I probably could’ve treated my headaches and determined the source of them. We’d probably have found the Plin-lars before it got to the point it did.”

“Ah, the Plin-lars.” I pushed open the door of the first house. “I remember what they are, now. An unbelievably ancient and advanced species. No one even knows what planet they’re originally from. I can’t imagine what methods the UCP employed to capture them. Subjecting them to such torture is an atrocity.”

“They aren’t a vicious species,” she said. “I still feel them, in a way. It’s like they didn’t quite leave me.”

I grunted. “I didn’t like seeing you in pain, so I hope they don’t return. At least we found the solution, even if in the low-tech way.”

She grimaced. “A lot less painful the high-tech way.”

There was nothing in that house, so I closed the door, and we moved on to the next. “Funny. I remember rummaging through these houses as a young one. I recall playing games with my friends and scaring each other with ghostly tales, but I still can’t recall why I left Bakka.”

“That’s the last piece you’re looking for?”

I nodded. “I don’t understand. My parents and I had a good relationship. I was close with my father, whom I will grieve. There is nothing I can think of that would drive me away.”

“What about your sister?” she asked. “She’s the one Kiki reminded you of when you were imprisoned. You haven’t mentioned her.”

“My sister and her mate are living in the Bislok4 sector.” He shrugged. “I remember that, too. She’s a brilliant artist, of all things. She and Dakat departed two years before I did. I can only imagine that it was just another thing that *didn’t* bind me to this place, but I have no ill feelings toward her or her mate for leaving. I was pleased for them.”

“I’m sure it will come back,” she said. “Perhaps you will encounter something that jolts that last memory free.”

“Or it will never come back,” I said with a shrug. “There may be a good reason why I can’t remember. Maybe I don’t want to know.”

She didn’t say anything to that. There was no need. And the truth was, with her by my side, I was content to let the past lie. The future was with Claire, not with whatever event caused me to leave Bakka. I would not have met her if I’d stayed.

Halfway through the village, we found a fully functioning torchlight, a blaster with maybe two or three charges left, and a few other miscellaneous items—a laser for healing minor wounds and a short-range transmitter. Those weren’t fully charged, and there was plenty of broken gear.

We were about to enter a new house when my senses pricked. Instinctively, I grabbed Claire, held her against my body and flattened us both against the wall. “Someone’s coming,” I whispered. We peeked around the corner of the house. In the tunnel opening there were figures running in. I heard whispers, shuffling feet, and the sound of a baby crying.

Claire’s gaze snapped to mine. “That’s not the enemy,” she said. “Those are Heveians.”

“They’re not mind-altered anymore, either.” I grabbed her hand and we left our hiding place, crossing the small village quickly. Sure enough, Heveians were flooding into the Old Village. The older individuals and young mothers who had been in Bakka, carried children or led them by hand. The children’s faces were full of terror. The adults looked grim and frightened. I recognized one face immediately.

“Gura,” I said, and hurried to my mother’s side.

She had a small baby in one arm and held the hand of a toddler. Another child clung to her robes. Her eyes were bright and clear as they latched on to me. “Dak’craal,” she cried out. “How pleased I am to see you. We are evacuating the children.

UCP guards are coming through the village, taking prisoners or killing anyone who defies them.”

“Your mind is back,” I said with enormous relief.

The quick, sharp smile that I remembered slid over her face. “It’s good to have it back, son.” Her gaze slid to Claire. “And I am glad to see your mate, too.” She winked and handed off the children to a girl of Tissa’s age. “We must get these people into shelters, and we need to be on the lookout for drones. They are investigating all the tunnels now. The situation out there is dire.”

“How?” Claire asked. “What is happening?”

“Something happened that released our minds. We began to regain our senses and as we did so, the UCP released two giant blue worms into the mine. They did a good deal of damage, before...” She shook her head and shrugged. “Disappearing. They coiled together and vanished in a bright light.”

Claire and I exchanged a look. “They are called Plin-lars, and the UCP didn’t release them. We did,” I said. “The UCP was torturing them by keeping them apart. They made a distress call that caused everyone’s minds to be altered. Once released and allowed to reunite, everyone affected returned to normal, including Claire.”

Gura’s lips pursed. “So that’s what happened. Yes, everyone is restored, but the UCP that is here is trying to contain the damage. They’ve suspended mining, of course. They’ve rounded up everyone they can. There are many furious Heveians who would like to fight, but we can’t win this.” She looked desperate.

“Why can’t we?”

“Who are we?” she asked. “We are a small mountain village, more known for producing liquor, than warriors. They outnumber us and have better weapons.” She looked around as escapees hurried to shelters with the children. “All we can do is hide here for as long as we can and hope they don’t find us.”

“No,” said Claire. “There is more we can do than that.” She looked at me, eyes flinty. “There is still a communications hub someplace down here. The UCP is using it to send fabricated messages to the capital. We need to find it and call for help. Someone must know where it is.”

Gura blinked at her. “Everyone who worked in the mine, who might know where it is, is a prisoner. It was just us in the village that managed to escape with the little ones. And we couldn’t even get all of them.”

“What do you mean?” I asked, unsettled by the thought of the UCP taking children as prisoners.

“I saw the UCP guards dragging away Runa and Herruk’s girl, Tissa. She’d been hiding someplace in the station.” Gura shuddered. “Probably in one of those derelict vehicles.”

The name Runa struck something in me. It was deep, like an old ache someplace locked away. But the other name made my stomach clench hard. “Tissa, you say?”

“Yes. You wouldn’t know her. She was born after you left, she was—” Gura cut off suddenly. “Tissa can’t hear. We speak to her in the *farr’ast* of course. She wasn’t affected by the creatures,” she said.

“The Plin-lars’ calls used auditory nerves to affect the brain. Both her and Craals’ auditory nerves don’t work the same as ours, so neither of them were affected,” said Claire. “And we know Tissa. She was hiding in a tunnel. We brought her to our transport vehicle where we thought she’d be safe until this was over.”

“We were wrong,” I said grimly.

Gura’s gaze ran over my form. I knew how different I must look to her. “I want a full accounting of what happened to you after this is over,” she said, then leaned forward and kissed my cheek. “But I’m glad to have you back. Your father would be proud of you for being here.” Her eyes bloomed with tears at the mention of my father, making it clear that she remembered now what happened to him. That was a conversation for another time too.

Someone let out a shout from down the tunnel. Every face turned to see a frightened boy run towards us. “A surveillance drone is coming,” he gasped out. “Saw it...in the tunnel.”

“Everyone stay here,” I ground out and ran into the passageway, using my enhanced eye to scan for an electronic signal. Up ahead, there was a pale blue light scanning the tunnel. Its small, hovering form hummed as it moved slowly up the corridor.

I held myself tightly against the wall and waited until it was almost upon me. Then, I reached out and crushed the thing in my metal hand, as I had the last one. I dropped it to the floor and crushed it under my foot, destroying any signal it could've sent.

I looked down at the pile of machinery at my feet, and my hands curled into a fist. I might not be a warrior, but I could fight. I could fight better than anyone here, thanks to what I'd been turned into. The UCP tried to turn me into a killing machine to set upon my own people. I could use what they had done to me, to help them. I returned to the Old Village, where there was general confusion and disarray.

“Listen,” I said, loud enough to be heard. Not loud enough to echo. The entire chamber went silent. “We are not going to lie quietly here and wait to be slaughtered. This is our mountain, our minds, and our planet. We are going to protect it.”

“Have you seen what we're up against?” called a familiar voice from the crowd. It was the older male who had confronted us on the station platform when we arrived. He looked more tired and drawn than before, and more terrified. “We don't have weaponry to match theirs.”

“Do we need it?” I asked. “We know these tunnels better than anyone. We know the mountain. This human female and I managed to take out their mind-altering weapon—just the two of us—and neither of us are soldiers. If we can accomplish that, surely we can accomplish more.”

I could feel Claire staring at me as I spoke. She was quiet, and I could sense her gaze like a touch. A glance her way

revealed wide, soft eyes brimming with pride. It gave me the confidence to go on and say the rest. “We’re getting organized, starting now. First, I need anyone who has knowledge of the mine layout, up here right now. You three.” I pointed to a trio of boys standing close together near a pregnant female. “Search every house in this village. Bring any devices, weapons, useful items here. We’ll distribute what we can use to defend this place. Everyone else, get the small children comfortable in the dwellings along that wall. The sound will not travel as far, and they are sturdier than the ruins over here.” I pointed to another section of the village, where several homes were falling apart.

“If more drones come, smash them with anything you have,” Claire said to my mother, who stood there staring at me, as well. “If guards come, take everyone further into the mountains.” She looked at me briefly. “We may not be trained soldiers, but we were rescued by the best and picked up a few things from the Heveian warriors on the cruiser. Enough to make me think we have a chance.”

“Very well.” Gura paused and looked back at me before she hurried off to join the others in the houses. “Your father would be *so* proud.”

I watched her go, filled with a strange sense of gratitude. To Gura. To Axlos and the crew. To Claire. Despite my differentness and the long time I had been away, these people listened to me as if I were a leader.

Claire’s hand slid up my arm. “Well done,” she said quietly.

“Do you really think we have a chance at surviving this?”

She grinned up at me. “You promised me we’d get to the capital. I’m holding you to it.”

“So, yes.”

She snorted. “*Fuck*, yes.”

I raised my brows. “Is it me, or do the mountains bring out the spicy side of you?”

“Neither,” she said. “It’s probably thanks to the running-for-our-lives bit. Cursing seems appropriate.”

“It does,” I said, thinking of the insurmountable odds against us.

“But in all seriousness, I’m pretty sure we’ll get out of here.”

“Why is that?”

Those impossible blue eyes didn’t blink. “Because you promised Tissa that you’d take care of her and you will. That’s why.”

Her logic was flawless. I would not let anything happen to that young girl. We would find a way to defeat this enemy, one way or another.

“You are Dak’craal?” came a female voice behind me.

I turned to see the pregnant female who had been trying to watch the three boys I’d sent to search the houses. She held a hand protectively over her heavy belly. “Yes.”

“My name is Valul. I’m an engineering technician in the mines,” she explained. “My baby will come soon, so I wasn’t working when the attack happened. For the sake of my baby’s father, who was lost, I hope we can drive them out.”

“Me too, Valul,” I said. “Is there something you wish to tell us?”

She nodded. The young female looked tired, but there was a determined glint to her. “I can tell you where the UCP put the communications terminal.”

CHAPTER 17

Claire

“**T**hat sounds like the worst possible place.”

“It is.” Craal groaned and ran his hands through his hair. “Of course they put the terminal on the surface.”

“We never would have found it.” I blew out a heavy breath. “We probably *won't* find it. How will we even get to it?”

Craal and I were in the tunnel leading to the Old Village to watch for drones and to plot out our next steps. He paced, probably making too much noise, but neither of us cared at this point. We were ready to act, but we needed a plan. We were dead without one.

“There are shafts to the surface,” he said. “And the enemy likely dug their own tunnels in, if the accounts of how they arrived are accurate.”

Footsteps from the Old Village and the sound of young voices alerted us to the arrival of the three boys who had diligently gone through each house searching for usable items. The shortest boy looked like he was gathering his courage as he approached us.

“What is it, young one?” Craal asked.

“I—I have some practice in fixing stuff,” he said nervously from behind a mop of dark blue hair.

I wished Craal would give him a smile, but there was so much on his mind, he probably wasn't even aware of the scowl on his brow. "Yes?" he prompted.

"Well, I'm...um."

The boy next to him elbowed him in the ribs. "Just say it. It's okay."

"Okay." The boy looked up, his gaze traveling over Craal's enormous metal limbs before meeting his eyes. "I fixed a transmitter with some of the broken parts," he said in a rush. "We can hear the UCP on it, but none of us knows the language they are speaking in."

Craal regarded him. "What is your name?"

"Tangan, sir."

"Don't call me sir," Craal said. "Craal will do. So, you don't know what they're saying, but you can hear talking?"

"Yes, sir. Craal." The boy looked up hopefully. "Is that useful?"

Craal finally bestowed a full smile on the boys. "Very. You've done very, *very* well. Take us to this transmitter. Perhaps I can decipher what they're saying."

The boy just about glowed in the dark from the praise. His friends smiled and nudged him as if to say, *See? We told you so.*

They led us back to the Old Village, heading to a small, crumbling house where a collection of instrument parts lay strewn across the floor. A patched-together lamp illuminated the room, bathing it in a yellow glow.

Tangan went inside and picked up a device. It looked like scrap, but then I could see the pieces carefully woven together with metal wiring and repurposed tubes. A shard of *vistran* crystal, no larger than a grain of rice, powered it. It let off a dark blue glow in the heart of the rough-looking device.

"Where did you get that crystal?" I asked, curious.

“Oh, wherever.” The boy shrugged. “They’re all over the place. Tiny fragments can be found in most tunnels in the veins of rock.” He nodded vaguely towards the direction of the mines. “I keep a bunch of little pieces like this in my pouch to power my inventions.”

I chuckled at his ingenuity as Craal examined the device. “Are you sure this works?”

Tangan nodded and turned it on. The *vistran* crystal glowed a little brighter. Suddenly, voices could be heard faintly through a speaker that looked like it had been repurposed from a headset.

Craal leaned down, listening acutely. “Hmm. They’re speaking in *quala*. Figures.” He looked at me. “Those guards we encountered in the *plin-lar* room? This is their language.”

“Sounds as lovely as they look,” I said drily. “Does your translator have that language in its databank?” Mine didn’t. All I heard were indistinct noises.

“Yes,” he said. “I have over five thousand preset languages. Everyone be quiet while I listen.”

We waited—the three boys and I—as Craal closed his eyes and trained his senses to the murmur of sounds coming from the transmitter. The boys looked at one another, exchanging looks of curiosity. Then, Craal stood upright again, and pulled in a deep breath. “The UCP is preparing to leave,” he said.

The boys let out whoops of joy, but Craal’s expression was heavy.

“Is that a good thing?” I asked.

He hesitated. The boys’ faces were intent. “What is it?”

Craal smoothed over his expression and smiled gently at them. “Nothing for you to worry about. You’ve done excellent work. Thanks to you, we know what to do.” He held up the transmitter. “May I keep this, to listen further?”

“Yes! Of course,” Tangan said, blinking furiously. “I—I’m so glad my invention was useful. For once. I mean, they’re *all* useful, but this was really useful.”

The boys began chattering away, congratulating Tangan on his invention and arguing over who found what component. Craal put a firm hand on my shoulder and led me from the house and away from them. When we were out of earshot, he leaned down and said quietly, "It would seem the UCP has something planned before they leave."

"Oh, no. What?" I asked.

"They are coordinating a plan to flood the tunnel system with a deadly gas. Apparently their plan of quelling the population failed outright. Extermination is their goal, now."

"No," I breathed. "We have to stop them."

"We do," he said grimly. "And we have no time to waste. Do you have your blaster?"

I patted my hip where it sat unused, as it had since he had given it to me on the transport.

"Good. You're going to need it. I would prefer to go in alone, but I know you won't listen."

"No, I won't. We're a team. We stick together."

He grasped my chin with his fingers and pulled my face close. "Listen to me. You *will* stay alive, do you hear me? No matter what happens to me. You. Will. Live."

I surged forward and captured his mouth with mine in a hard kiss. "And so will you. Now, let's go see what we're up against."

We told Gura what we'd heard, of the bitter, double-edged news that the UCP was leaving, but not without exacting a deadly toll on the Heveians. Her mouth went hard in an exact copy of her son when he received news he didn't like, but she nodded.

"We have a few weapons," she said. "We'll defend ourselves if anything comes through that tunnel. This better not be the last time I see the two of you." Her voice turned steely. "I won't lose my mate and my son to this filth."

"You won't, Gura." Craal rested his forehead to his mother's, then we hurried to the tunnel, feeling like we were

racing to beat a ticking time bomb. Only, we didn't know where it was, or when it would go off. Our best bet was still finding that communications terminal and calling for help, but the immediate stakes were impossibly high. Help, if contacted, might not even arrive in time.

Craal knew these tunnels well. All Bakkans knew them, and he led us confidently through the twists and turns towards the mine. Twice, Craal stopped to disable flying surveillance drones. Once, we were able to let one slide by as we hid behind a boulder. He stopped at a fork in the passageways, drawing me against the side. "To the left, up ahead, is one of the lesser-used entrances to the mine," he said. "We go quietly and look at the situation."

I nodded and we crept forward.

At this point, I had no idea what to expect. I envisioned a blackened tunnel filled with hideous machines, broken bodies, and *vistran* shards, shattered like glass over the floor. I imagined being greeted by a thousand bloodthirsty UCP guards.

What I saw was no less terrifying. A massive machine, at least two stories high and outfitted in the front with hideous drills and blasting lasers, sat in front of a gaping hole in the side of the cavern.

The main mining cavern was large. Intricate scaffolding lined the walls and supported the ceiling like ornate, silver pillars. Smaller devices were attached to the scaffolding. They appeared to be precision instruments with delicate lasers and appendages for gently grasping precious crystals. They weren't moving. It appeared operations had been suspended. All the devices were powered down. I saw no dead bodies. No trace that anyone had been killed here.

However, the ones who did the killing *were* here. Large, bulky cybots stood in precise rows around the drilling machine. More than two dozen of them were there, ready to fight, bristling with weapons. Other beings, smaller and more delicate, that looked like the life forms Craal had killed in the

Plin-lars' chamber, were loading crates—likely filled with *vistran*—onto floating platforms.

We eased away from the opening and retreated enough so we wouldn't be spotted. "What *are* those things?" I whispered.

He bared his teeth. "They're *qualat* exoskeletons."

"There are living creatures inside of those robots?" I asked, trying to imagine the small green creatures tucked inside those metal monsters.

He nodded. "Living and intelligent and one hundred percent UCP loyal. They must've been sent here to organize this stealth mining operation. The UCP does not want to lose any more allies than it has to. This was their last-ditch effort of trying to maintain the façade of being a peace-loving coalition."

"To come in here and quietly steal the *vistran*."

He shrugged. "They've tried everything else. After this..."

"They'll have nothing to lose," I said. "It'll be war."

"It already is, but yes," he said quietly. "The Heveians didn't stand a chance against them. Many, including my father, were killed by them right out there."

He vibrated with anger and grief, being so close to where the enemy had burst through the wall and fought back the Heveians who tried to defend themselves. There were no signs of that battle left, but it had happened. All for the crystals that formed in the mountain millions of years ago.

"How do we get through them?" I asked.

"I'm not sure we do," he said. "In their exposed state, Qualats are vulnerable and easier to kill—as you saw. I didn't have trouble taking out the three who were watching the Plin-lars' prison," he said. "Those mechanical exoskeletons are incredibly powerful, though. They're wearing them because they anticipate a fight."

"I count twenty-five of them," I said. "We need a distraction. Also, where are all the Heveians we saw march in

here before we freed them from the Plin-lars' influence? They must've been put somewhere."

"Tissa would be with them." A muscle in his jaw jumped and he slid back to the corner and peered around again. When he returned, he looked pained. They're inside the metal beast the Qualats arrived in. And what they'll be leaving in. I read over fifty heat signatures inside it."

"I don't know how we'll get inside that drill and rescue everyone, *and* get up to the communications tower on the surface," I said.

He turned dark eyes to me. "We can't."

"But if we don't, we lose."

"I can create a distraction," he said. "It'll give you time to run past their ship and up to the shaft beyond. There must be one. You just need to go upwards, find the terminal and—"

"No. We're not doing that," I said, cutting him right off. "You're not sacrificing yourself. We'll find another way. What about those mining bots on the wall? Can we turn them on somehow? *That* would be distracting."

His eyes narrowed. "My brilliant mate." He removed the transmitter Tangan had given him. "Maybe..." he mused and held up his metal hand, palm up. "Open the plate on my palm," he said. "Wulfrex told me that if I ever wanted upgrades, like built-in blasters or lasers, he was leaving ports open on this spot," he said. "I refused then, foolishly, much to Wulfrex's disappointment. He really wanted to add a laser. That'd be helpful right now. But we might be able to use the ports in my hand with that transmitter to tap into the mining bots' access system."

I raised my brows. "Nice, Craal," I said, impressed. "I *did* study Wulfrex's engineering schematics of your limbs with great attention. My expertise is integrating biologics with tech, but let's see what I can do."

I slid my fingernail under the plate he indicated, which was contoured to the shape of a palm, and lifted it up on its tiny hinges. Inside was a riot of mechanics. I looked up at him and

flashed a grin. “I know what I’m looking at here,” I said. “Give me the transmitter. Connecting to the bots isn’t something you’ve done before. Do you know how?”

“No, but the mining bots are controlled remotely and a transmitter is a transmitter. I’m going to try to tap into their frequency and turn them on.”

“That is a much better distraction,” I said. “If it works. If it doesn’t, we’re still not doing your suggestion.”

“Fair enough,” he replied gruffly. “I don’t want to lose you.”

I grunted, focused on my detailed work. “You won’t. Now hold still and give me a light.” At once, his synthetic eye brightened and aimed right at his hand, where I carefully connected the transmitter into the ports on his palm. Thank goodness Wulfrex was the genius he was and had the forethought to add the potential for upgrades. Didn’t surprise me that Craal didn’t want them. He just wanted to be normal, but in this case, normal would *not* save our lives.

Sweat itched along my scalp as long moments dragged by and I performed the painstaking, delicate work. I worried that we’d be found. That a drone would come in. When I finished, a mess of wires and tubes sprung from his hand and attached him to the transmitter. I settled the transmitter in his metal fingers as best I could so that he would still have his other hand free to use his blaster.

I looked up at him, wiping sweat from my brow. “Okay. Give it a shot.”

His eyes fluttered as he concentrated. Craal’s brain was not used to performing like this. Although he was neurologically linked to his metal parts, allowing them to move and function as he willed, operating a remote device was an entirely new function for his brain. “Just a moment,” he said quietly. “I’m figuring this out.”

“This transmitter is like an extra limb,” I said to him. “Think of it as an extra arm that you’re learning to flex and move.”

He nodded. “Almost there.”

The telltale hum of a drone burned through the air. It was close, but the lights of it weren't visible, yet. Craal's metal hand, which would've usually smashed it, was very much occupied.

“Craal,” I said warningly. “We're not alone.”

CHAPTER 18

Craal

I knew the drone was coming, but it was taking all my concentration to focus on operating the transmitter. Claire was right—this was exactly like finding myself with an extra limb, and trying to learn how to control it.

I forced myself to block out everything—the drone, even Claire—and work through the functions of making the transmitter connect with the mining bots. My metal hand felt hot. The connections were good, but the materials were crude and not a true match for my system.

Still, I felt the connection like a peg fitting into a slot. It was a satisfying sensation as I could feel all of the mining bots power up at once and immediately resume their activity. I opened my eyes to see Claire looking nervously at something past my right shoulder. It had to be the drone.

“Pick up your blaster and shoot it,” I said.

Her gaze flicked to mine. “It will be loud.”

“That’s fine. Our distraction has commenced.”

Her eyes brightened. “It worked?”

“Of course it worked. My mate is a genius.”

“Certified,” she said. “But we *are* in a situation.”

I liked the confident side of Claire. It reminded me of the doctor who so competently worked with me to help my organic and cybernetic parts work together. But this

confidence needed a little redirection. “Does it see us?” I asked.

“It’s scanning the tunnel behind us.”

“Claire. Shoot it.”

I saw her throat work as she swallowed hard, then pulled the blaster off of her belt and raised it.

“First, power it on,” I said gently. “The switch near the trigger.”

“Right,” she whispered, and hit the switch. It emitted a buzz as it powered up. She licked a nervous tongue over her upper lip.

“Aim and fire,” I said. “And try to not hit me.”

“I know, I’m—oh shit.” She fired. A white flash of light seared past my shoulder. I felt the heat on my skin and turned to see the smoking remains of the drone clink to the floor.

“Well done,” I said. “I think you got it before it transmitted our presence to the UCP, not that it matters.” The sounds of confusion and upheaval in the mine carried out to the tunnel. “They’re busy right now.”

I could tell Claire wanted to drop the weapon on the floor and leave it there, but she gingerly turned it off and put it back on her hip. She shook out her hand, which probably held a strong vibration from the force of the blast.

“I would keep that turned on, if I were you,” I said. “You’ll be using it again.” Wide eyes turned up to mine, but we didn’t have time for this conversation. “Now’s our chance,” I said. “Let’s go.”

I grabbed her arm and we darted into the mine. Sure enough, the Qualats in their powerful exosuits were floundering about, trying to determine how the bots were activated and how to halt them. It would be difficult, because I’d set them to continuously mine unless multiple override codes were used. It wasn’t impossible, though. It would just take time. Time we desperately needed.

We didn't manage to slip through unnoticed, however. We caught the attention of one *qualat*, which came towards us, moving as fast as it could on its bulky, hulking mechanical legs. They weren't very fast. The exosuits were made for strength and defense, not speed. But, of course, they were armed. It raised an arm, which blossomed open, revealing compartments that held multiple built-in blasters, and started shooting. Luckily, we managed to dart behind the huge drilling ship and take cover.

I shot back with one of my blasters, aiming for the joints, which was usually a vulnerable spot for cybernetic machines. They certainly were vulnerable spots for me.

Claire was panting beside me. Her blaster was clutched tightly in her hands. Right above us was the ship's holding bay window. Heveians crowded there. They banged on the thick, clear plastoid and shouted, but we could neither hear them nor get to them.

I forced myself not to look at them. I couldn't afford to be distracted by anything. The *qualat* in the exosuit was slowly making its way forward. One leg was dragging, thanks to my well-aimed shots. A few more hits, and then I might be able to take it down.

Then, a face appeared in the window that I couldn't ignore. Tissa. She was clean. Her face cleared of dirt and grime. Her hood and head wrappings were gone. I could see her whole face for the first time.

She was pressed against the glass with her hands flattened on it. Her eyes stared intently at me, wide and unbearably familiar. *Not* familiar because I knew who she was, but because her features, now fully visible, were ones from my past.

Runa. Her mother. The final piece of my puzzle. The reason I had left. All of it came crashing back with exquisite heartbreak. Long ago, I had loved this young female's mother, but she had chosen another.

The timing of this revelation could not have come at a worse time.

The *qualat* in the exosuit was slowly making its way towards me. The rest of the UCP operatives in the mine were desperately trying to shut down the mining spots, and when they did, their focus would center on us. Claire and I could not defeat all of them.

And on top of this was the young female I'd promised to protect, staring at me through the glass.

Tissa made a sign in *farr'ast* to me. A single sentiment: *strength*. It snapped me out of my trance. Now wasn't the time to let the past rule me. I fired several more times at the *qualat*.

Claire nudged me. Her expression was urgent. "There's a vertical shaft," she shouted over the noise. "I'm going up it." She pointed behind us to where a lift with green lights sat off the tunnel that had been made by the drilling ship. I could just barely see it from my angle. "I'm betting it leads to the communications terminal on the surface," she said. "You hold them off, I'll find the terminal and send a message to the capital."

I wanted to say no. I wanted to demand that she stay with me, but there was no other way. She was right. We couldn't do both. I shook off the memories, the echoes of the past, and refocused on the problem at hand—literally. I was still attached to the transmitter in my metal hand, otherwise I would have used both blasters and taken the *qualat* out faster.

But I kept fighting for Claire, for Tissa. For my father. For everyone trapped in the bay of that ship. I did finally take out the *qualat* with concentrated shots to the exoskeleton's good kneecap. It dropped to its knees and continued to try to fire, but it was unable to move, making it as good as neutralized.

I turned to focus on the behemoth ship in front of me and the Heveians trapped inside. I found a massive steel door with a powerful electronic lock on it. I thanked the stars again that it wasn't made of *yaligian*. My metal hand could break the lock open, but that would mean losing the transmitter, and by extension, losing my control over the mining bots.

It was a calculated risk I had to take. It was only a matter of time before I lost control of the bots anyway. I tugged the

connectors from the ports in my hand, causing sparks to fly and a small fire to erupt from my palm. With a grimace, I snapped the palm plate closed and hoped that took care of the flame. I dropped the transmitter to the ground and wrapped my hand around the door's lever.

My hand was hot, nearly overheated from managing the transmitter and my subsequent crude detachment from it, but it still worked as Wulfrex had designed it. My more powerful skeleton, augmented to hold the weight of cybernetic limbs, braced as I unleashed the full power of my cyborg arm.

I'd never tested it like this before, outside of the strength evaluations Jorok had me do. It was not easy; I used all the power I could muster and slowly, the lever turned, breaking through the locks. More sparks flew, not from my hand, but from the door as the seal broke and the door opened.

I pushed it open and stepped inside. The stark, bare holding bay was crowded with Heveians who had been trapped in the mine. They looked at me in shock and surprise, and more than a few recognized me. I saw a friend I'd explored the Old Village with when we were young ones. A girl who had been friends with Runa.

Pushing through them with determination, was Tissa. She didn't hesitate when she saw me. She launched herself into my arms and held me close in a strangling hug. I held her frail body against me, grateful to find her alive, and amazed at her resilience.

But a brief embrace was all there was time for. Mining bots had stopped their work. The Qualats had no intention of letting us walk out of there. If Claire was successful, she had gotten a message to Gavrox, which meant we needed to hold on until help arrived.

"I'm Craal, sent by Prince Gavrox to assist," I said to the Heveians. "What's your status?"

"Fifty-two of us," said a female. She was younger than me and clearly a leader. "Ten badly wounded. The *vistran* they've been forcing us to mine is in a cargo hold right above us." She had a broken arm, judging by the angle, a livid bruise on half

her face and a burn on her scalp, but managed a grim smile. “They won’t damage this ship to kill us. It would trap them here and destroy their precious *vistran* crystals.”

“We hold this position,” I said. “Help is coming.”

Stars, I hoped so.

CHAPTER 19

Claire

The tunnel behind the giant, drilling ship was smooth as glass. Polished granite on Earth in my day was rough and crude compared to this perfectly cylindrical tunnel. It was lit well enough to see the vertical shaft in green.

I ran for it, well aware of how much of a risk this was. The probabilities of failure ran through my mind like a spreadsheet of doom. This was reckless. I had no way of knowing if the vertical shaft would, in fact, lead to the communications tower. But it was the only chance we had.

I glanced back to see Craal using his immense strength to open the heavy outer door of the holding bay. I could see the Heveians through the glass and a face anxiously watching Craal. It was Tissa. She was alive, at least, held inside with the rest of her people.

I turned away from all of it and ran for the shaft. There were no controls, just a wide, square platform and four, clear plastoid-covered walls revealing the bored-out rock behind them. I ran my hands over the walls, trying to find something to turn on the lift. Then, it abruptly began to shoot upwards. I staggered, regaining my balance at the force of speed. My breath turned shallow as the platform zoomed upwards, turning the rock behind the plastoid wall into a visual smear. I caught flashes of *vistran* shards embedded in the stone. The air got colder and colder the higher I went. I began to fear what I would be faced with on the surface. Would I be forced to walk through one of the Heveian storms?

The answer to that was a no, as I learned when the platform came to a stop inside a small clear dome. It was so small, barely one person could fit in here. Outside, however, was a truly terrifying sight. I was on ground level as sand and ice smashed into the dome repeatedly, driven by the high winds. The dome was beginning to show some signs of wear. Cracks and gouges marred the thick, clear substance.

On the plus side, the equipment was Heveian. The UCP had taken the Heveians' own transmission equipment and just relocated it here, likely to avoid any suspicion. The frequencies and origination codes used to send fake messages to the capital would be identical.

Being that I was already familiar with Heveian equipment like this, I got to work. I quickly switched the interface language to the common galactic tongue and set my transmission signals for the capital. I kept my message quick and dire: *Bakka under UCP attack. Casualties. Send immediate help.*

Off it went. I let out a breath as the message disappeared from the screen, accompanied by a warm ping and a green flash of light to confirm the message had been sent. I stood there in the quiet, listening to the muted sounds of Heveia's surface conditions. It was dark out there. Night had fallen over this region of Heveia. I shivered and rubbed my hands together. I could see my breath and hoped the ice crystals on the equipment didn't affect how it functioned.

I waited impatiently for a reply, but nothing was incoming. With worry, I double-checked that the transmission went out. Sure enough, it had gone *and* was received. Just in case, I sent it again. I was sure I hadn't done it wrong. I had worked with nearly identical equipment on the cruiser.

Suddenly, the platform behind me that had brought me up here, dropped away. It descended back down the shaft.

I gasped and looked down the hole. Being the dome was small, there wasn't a big space to stand. Thankfully, I hadn't been standing on the platform, but now I had no way of

returning to the mine, and worse, something else might be coming up.

I breathed hard, forcing myself to stay calm. I took out my blaster weapon and switched it on. It took a little time to get used to the weight and feel of it in my hand. I wasn't going to look down there again. Something could shoot right back up here with me.

No. I waited and hoped it was Craal coming up that lift and not an enemy. It wouldn't be a *qualat* in an exoskeleton because the platform was way too small to accommodate that bulk.

I didn't have to wait long. The mechanisms worked again and the lights shifted in the shaft as the lift ascended. I braced myself on one side of the tiny space and clutched the blaster in both hands, arms outstretched, aiming at the opening. My stomach dropped as a creature emerged.

This creature was different than any I'd seen in the mine. And my first confusing thought was that it couldn't possibly be dangerous. It looked like a long, slender squid, as tall as I was. It floated upright and somehow defied gravity. The being was beautiful. Translucent pink and shimmering, with a serene expression on its face, it blinked large luminescent purple eyes at me. A tiny mouth opened and closed like a baby looking for a bottle to suckle. Long tendrils floated down below its teardrop-shaped head as it levitated in the air.

"Hello?" I didn't drop my weapon, but I held steady and hoped they could speak to me.

"Hello?" came my own voice echoing back, but garbled, as if projected through water.

Okay, that was strange. "Can you understand me?"

"Can you understand me?" once again came with my own voice. The creature levitated towards me and lifted its translucent tentacles in my direction.

I tensed up. "Stay back," I commanded. "No closer."

Again, maddeningly, the only response was my own watery-sounding words.

The creature blinked at me. One tentacle came up. It touched my arm.

Even through the layers of my coat and shirt, the icy pain was enormous. I screamed and almost dropped my blaster. The cold pain was nearly paralyzing. And through that touch came a clear communication straight into my brain, delivered like a furious scratch into the depths of my mind.

You all will suffer for defying the will of the UCP. Your weak and feeble species will fall before us. We will feast on your agony.

I struggled to pull in a breath. The pain was so intense, but one thing stronger than the pain, was my will. I had made it this far. There was no way I was going to give in to this malicious being. I focused all concentration on my hands, imagining myself shattering the ice that felt like it crystallized my bones.

I pulled the trigger, felt the jolt, the hot zing through my hands. It was numbing, and burned like an electrical shock, but it broke the touch of the creature. It let out a horrible, gurgling sound as the blast tore a hole right through its strange, watery membrane. The clear contents burst, spraying me and spilling to the floor like an exploded water balloon. Tentacles twitched. The huge, luminescent purple eyes bulged as it dissolved onto the floor. “Humans will never let the UCP take over our home planet. You underestimate us,” I said. “The Heveians, too.”

I didn’t even know if the thing could hear me anymore. My own words no longer echoed back at me. It must have thought I wouldn’t be able to move under its touch. It was wrong. I rubbed my arm where it throbbed from the creature’s touch, and put the blaster back on my belt.

Blue light flashed on the console screen. The capital had sent a message back. With a shaky hand, I tapped it and read: *Support incoming.*

I didn’t know what that meant. Were they sending one ship? The cruiser? An armada? They didn’t say when support would be arriving. It could be hours from now. Craal was trying to open that big door. He couldn’t hold the Qualats off

by himself. I had another blaster, at least. I needed to go back down and help Craal and the trapped Heveians.

I stepped back on the terminal and waited. After about ten seconds, it descended to the mine level. I stepped off, holding the blaster. Prepared for anything.

The sight before me did *not* look good. Craal had managed to open the bay doors of the giant ship, but the enemy had surrounded them. He was inside, door cracked open as he shot from the opening with one blaster. Someone else had taken the other blaster, and also shot back, but there wasn't much else they could do. Obviously, the other Heveians were unarmed. Two measly blasters against two dozen guards.

I should have stayed up in the terminal. The thought curled through me sickeningly. Surely, it wouldn't take long for the capital's support to come in. But it wouldn't be before the Qualats saw me standing here. Just one of them had to turn around and they would see me standing pressed against the wall, with no cover. With pain still throbbing in my arm, and terror locking my legs in place, I felt a new level of fear. Craal was not here to help me. I doubted he could even see me from his angle. I only saw flashes of his metal hand as he returned fire.

I edged back toward the lift. If I could sneak back there, I could hide up in the terminal until help arrived. But before I could make it to the shaft, one of the Qualats spotted me.

It turned slowly, on its thick, hulking metal legs, and faced me. I couldn't even raise my weapon. There was nothing my little blaster could do against this massive creature, anyway. I closed my eyes and just waited for it to be over. I knew there would be pain, but it would be fast. The others would be okay. They were safe inside the ship. And I'd done my part. I'd called for help.

Instead of a killing blast, a powerful wind swept through the smooth, polished tunnel behind me, leading into the mine.

Something smelled familiar—spicy, like cinnamon. I opened my eyes to see the shock of a lifetime. Two,

connected, massive blue worms coiled between me and the enemy. Mouths, huge and gaping. Dripping.

The Plin-lars! They'd returned. I felt their minds touch and tap into mine. It was similar to the last time, but they no longer overwhelmed it with their panic. This time, the mental energy that brushed against mine was of reassurance and protection. They were telling me not to worry as they ripped through the *Qualats* in their metal exoskeletons, tearing them apart and devouring the small, soft creatures inside. The exosuits' blaster shots did nothing to them.

My weapon fell from my numb hands. All I could do was watch, mouth agape as these creatures obliterated the attackers. Not all of them were killed. A few managed to scurry away. Without their powerful suits, they were small and in a vulnerable state. Green misshapen creatures, who moved awkwardly and left trails of slime as they scurried away into the dark recesses of the mine. They would not get far, especially when reinforcements arrived.

Smoke curled around me. The smell of blaster fire mingled with burnt machinery and carnage. The mine had gone quiet. I raised my gaze to see the twin Plin-lars undulating before me, always in contact. The blue of their bodies glowed deep indigo.

I wanted to say *thank you*, but I couldn't form words. I just looked up at them, half wondering if they planned to eat me next, but once again, their minds touched mine. I received no words, but a sensation like a gentle touch. Once again, I received a feeling of gratitude, compassion, and the distinct feeling that they considered a debt had been paid. Our bond until now, had not yet severed. They sensed my fear and hopelessness, and had returned to help.

They let out a unique, trilling sound. It echoed through my mind and I felt the bond broken, forcefully, by them. Then, their bodies filled with brilliant light, the shape of them narrowed, like the closing of an eye, and they were gone.

Their mind connection was truly gone. I was alone with my thoughts, which were as chaotic as they'd ever been. As a

scientist, I did *not* like chaotic thoughts. But that's where we were. I dropped to my knees, breathing heavily, shaking everywhere.

A pair of wonderfully familiar arms wrapped around me and lifted me up against a wide chest. "Well done," said the only voice I wanted to hear. My brave, capable, foolish, infuriating, beloved mate.

A gurgle of laughter escaped my lips as I clung to him, held him close. I breathed in the new scent of him—steel and fire.

The sounds of activity swirled around me. Heveians leaving the ship. Voices. Footsteps. But I kept my eyes closed and let myself be held by Craal. My mate. "Let's not do that again," I said.

He pressed a kiss to my forehead, my cheek, capturing my mouth with his. "Let's not."

There was a touch to my arm and I looked up. Tissa stood there, eyes brimming with tears. She signed quickly, fingers flying faster than my eyes could follow.

"Tissa says she's very glad you are okay," said Craal. "She was worried about you when she saw you run to that shaft and the Zati followed you."

I winced at the memory of that creature. "So that's what it's called. Not as harmless as they look," I said. "Learned that the hard way."

Craal frowned and signed back to Tissa what I had said. "It was a remarkable scheme," he said, signing as he spoke. "The Zati is the one responsible for making Heveians obey the Qualats. They have incredible mind-control abilities, but the victim must be weakened. The Qualats used the Plin-lars to weaken the entire village, then the Zati made the mine workers obey and continue their work. Everyone else was just affected by the Plin-lars' distress signal, but too far away to hear them like you did, when we were in the room with them."

"The Plin-lars were the only ones not complicit in this," I said. "That Zati was a vile thing."

“You killed it?” he asked.

I plucked at my wet coat. “Yes. After it told me how the UCP would take over Earth and feast on our agony. Its touch doesn’t feel too good, either.”

“You’ll have to have Jorok look at that. A Zati touch can leave a burn, but don’t worry, it’s not deadly.”

I shrugged. It hurt less now that I was safe in his arms. “The capital is sending help,” I said. It didn’t look as if we needed it, as everything was under control.

“This will change things,” said Craal. His gaze moved to Tissa, and there it stayed. “I remember why I left.” He said it with his voice and with his hands at the same time. There was an expression on her face that told me she knew what he was about to say.

“This was the last piece you were looking for, wasn’t it?” I asked.

He nodded. “Many years ago, Tissa’s mother and I were together. I loved her. We shared blood. I thought she was my mate.” A sad, gentle smile moved over his face. “But she chose another male. Tissa’s father. She chose correctly.”

Tissa replied to him in *farr’ast* and he translated from my benefit. “Her parents loved each other very much. They loved her. Her mother had spoken of me. She thought I was dead and felt responsible.” Craal looked at me. “That was long ago.”

I touched his face. “I’m long past the years of being jealous of past lovers.”

He smiled. “You are the only one for me. My mate.” The smile faded. “But I am heartbroken for Tissa, who has lost her parents and has not yet begun to grieve them.”

I looked at Tissa, whose face dropped as Craal told her his words in *farr’ast*. “You have lost your parents and no one can replace them, but you’re not alone. You have Craal. You have me. And we are here for you.”

Craal hesitated, then told Tissa in *farr’ast* what I’d said. She replied and he turned to me with wide, bright eyes. “She

wants to stay with us.”

“But we’re not staying in Bakka,” I told them. “We’re returning to the capital, and there will be upheaval there for a time.” *And a war that we might not win.*

“Bakka is a place of death for her,” Craal translated with emotion turning his voice gravelly. “She says others would take care of her—there are other orphans—but she wants to leave with us, if we’ll have her, and start anew.”

I reached out a hand. Tissa placed one of hers in mine and looked at me with tears and vulnerability brimming in her brilliant blue eyes.

I knew what my mate wanted to do. It was written on his face that he wanted to give this girl what she asked for and keep her with us. But he worried that I didn’t feel the same. He spoke to me without translating, “It would not be bad for her to stay. She would be lovingly raised by people from the village. We know nothing about being parents. We might make mistakes.”

“We will make mistakes,” I said gently to him. “But you know more than any that sometimes destiny takes us away from the familiar and takes us exactly where we need to be.” I met Tissa’s tense expression and said, “I’m looking forward to learning *farr’ast*.”

Craal’s face smoothed into one of relief and pure love. He translated what I’d said and the smile that bloomed on Tissa’s face sent tears down my own cheeks. She pressed into my arms, hugging me tightly. I looked over her shoulder into Craal’s eyes and whispered, “The family we make.”

“My beloved mate.” He placed a hand over his heart. “For the rest of my days.”

I had never felt so beautiful, loved, and full as I held the girl I would care for and gazed at the brave, wonderful male who had chosen me. “And mine. I love you, Craal.”

EPILOGUE

“Are you sure you don’t want it?”

Wulfrex had asked me this before, and my answer was the same. “No. Just fix the mess. Please.”

He smirked and got to work on my hand. Claire’s hastily attached transmitter and my subsequent brutish removal of it had done some damage to my cybernetic hand. I couldn’t move three of my fingers, and the other two made ominous noises when I flexed them. In addition, I had been hit by blaster fire a few times in my metal limbs but had been unaware of it at the time. Overall, I’d put a lot of wear and tear on my cybernetics.

Wulfrex clearly liked this work better than fighting. He was enjoying repairing me a little too much, in my estimation. “Just curious, why not?” he asked, inserting a new tube into my wrist. My entire hand and forearm were split open. The metal outer covering removed, revealing all of the internal parts that made my limb work. “You haven’t seen the last bit of action, and I don’t mean the fun kind,” Wulfrex said. “Weaponry embedded in your arm would help keep those you love alive in the coming war.”

“I told you before. There’s a possibility that my limbs could be taken over, just like how I took over the mining bots at Bakka.” I glanced down at my deconstructed arm. “I will

engage the enemy the same way you all do. With weapons my body controls, but not my body itself.” I suppressed a shudder. “I am not a killing machine.”

Wulfrex nodded, and I could tell he understood my reply. “I am leaving the ports in place in case something needs to be attached. It won’t be as complicated as last time. You’re very lucky Claire was with you.”

“I am very lucky that Claire is with me,” I said quietly. “She is my heart.”

Wulfrex rolled his eyes. “If I said that to Dani, I’d get smacked in the head.”

I chuckled. “Different affection for different females.”

“Indeed.” Since Wulfrex’s workshop was still on the cruiser, that’s where we were. Until recently, this had been Wulfrex’s bedroom, too. Understandably, Dani did not want to live in a room stuffed with every conceivable mechanism, part, and canister of caustic and explosive material. Now it was just a workshop and that seemed to suit Wulfrex just fine.

Only now, the massive battleship patrolled the space around Heveia. There was no more subterfuge. The UCP was no longer pretending to be at peace with us. They had lost their entire shipment of illegally harvested vistran crystals, thanks to Claire and me, and they were not pleased about it.

The word was that they were in the process of renaming their organization, which would be appropriate, considering peace had nothing to do with their objectives or methods.

Wulfrex’s workshop door opened, and Axlos, as well as a warrior of a different species, entered the tightly packed, but organized space. “How are the repairs going?” Axlos asked with his signature scowl.

Wulfrex, without looking up, nodded. “Craal’s arm held up remarkably well under the circumstances. His exoskeleton took several direct hits and they did minimal damage to his internals. I’m replacing some burned-out connections in his hand, and then he’ll have it back to full function.” Wulfrex flashed me a grin. “He still won’t take built-in weapons.”

“That is probably wise,” said the other warrior. I knew this species only because they had recently become one of our closest allies. The Mitrans had a vested interest in keeping our planet free, mainly because their energy demands were vast, their population was large, and they needed *vistran*. They were willing to trade for it, however, and not kill us for it.

Mitran were also one of the first to see the UCP for what it truly was—would-be overlords of huge swaths of the galaxy. They were siding with us, hoping to defeat the enemy and enjoy a profitable trade relationship with us. The nearly seven-foot-tall horned male nodded his head at me. “I am Ruzak, warlord of the Mitran people. As I hear it, your actions were truly heroic in the Heveians mines.”

“I was protecting my mate and the child I now claim as mine,” I replied. “Nothing extraordinary.”

“You saved your people and kept *vistran* out of the hands of the UCP.” The Mitran gave me an appraising look. “And you have endured the unthinkable. You are a great warrior, and you are a hero.”

Axlos nodded. “That’s what I told him. He has been dubbed the Hero of Bakka by the survivors of his village.”

I shook my head at the moniker. “We would’ve all perished if not for Claire.”

“We’re aware,” said Axlos with a smile. His face softened. “So is Gavrox. The crown prince gave her an impressive title.”

I waved a hand. “Neither of us are interested in those things.”

Ruzak chuckled. “Spoken like a true hero.”

I shut my mouth, finding it pointless to argue such a thing with two males who were, undoubtedly, heroes and fierce warriors. I glanced at Ruzak and met his dark eyes. “We are grateful to you and your people for joining us in this fight.”

He nodded. “I look forward to fighting alongside you,” he said. “You and your mate are welcome on my planet and in the Rilix *thraik*.”

I knew this was no light offering. According to Drave, who had forged the beginnings of this alliance with Ruzak himself, Mitrans were notoriously private and protective of their planet, which was rich with resources and held habitable surface conditions. Their *thraiks* were their independent kingdoms, of which Ruzak was a warlord. He ruled the Rilix *thraik*. The position had to be fought for, not inherited, although his father had been the previous warlord.

“Thank you,” I said. “When this is over, we look forward to visiting your planet.”

Wulfrex shook his head. “You have come so far since you first arrived here, Craal.” He looked pleased as he continued the delicate process of re-assembling my arm’s external plating. “Move your hand, will you?”

I flexed my hand, making a fist and spreading my fingers wide. Without the outer covering, my fingers were skeletal, running with colored tubes and wires. “It functions,” I said. “Thank you, Wulfrex.”

“Very much my pleasure,” he said, then looked at Axlos. “What news do we have, Captain? Surely you didn’t just come here to show off the Hero of Bakka?” He winked at me.

The brief lightness dropped from Axlos’ face, bringing a return of the stern lines and harsh brow that I rarely saw him without. “No, we do have news. Craal, you should be pleased to know that Heveian and Mitran guards and warriors are protecting Bakka and the mines. We won’t be fooled again. We learned that the Qualats landed their drilling ship far from the mine and out of the range of our scanners at the time. They burrowed through rock and soil for several standard galactic months before they reached the mine. That is how they evaded surveillance.”

“Months,” I said. “To think this plan was in motion before you found me in that cell.”

“Yes, and good thing we *did* find you, otherwise the entire mountain community would be dead,” said Axlos. “Drave examined the Qualats’ ship’s data. We learned that the plan had been to harvest a vast quantity of *vistran*, using Heveian

and bot labor, then flood the tunnels with a deadly gas. After escaping with enough crystals to make them invincible, they'd return and obliterate the rest of our civilization and seize the planet. Had anyone other than you been sent, they would have fallen to the distress call of the Plin-lars and subsequent mind control of the Zati and Qualats."

"That's right," said Wulfrex smugly. "I built you an auditory center that filters out sounds and signals that can alter the mind. One less way of hacking into you."

The magnitude of what he said sank in. "I am glad it was me, then. Although I regret the pain Claire endured."

"Claire is a powerful female," said Axlos. "She has told me herself that she is glad she went with you. She has a vested interest in stopping the UCP from gaining power, too."

"I think the UCP would have a harder time conquering Earth than they think," said Ruzak. "That bodes well for the females of their planet. Mitrans need strong mates for breeding."

I also remembered the other part of the deal we'd made with the Mitrans. Drave had learned that the Mitrans needed human females to bolster their breeding population and wanted Heveians, who had successfully taken human mates, to facilitate this on Earth. That part of the deal wasn't implemented, yet. There was no guarantee that human females would comply, either. I knew from experience that they were as stubborn as they were alluring. It would be interesting to see if the Mitrans were successful in their plans for "breeding" with the humans. I suspected they'd need to find new wording, for starters.

"As far as the state of the war, enemies are assembling in various sectors," said Axlos. "No direct attacks yet, but they are organizing."

"So are we," added Ruzak. "We are not without allies."

"The major fighting parties in the galaxy are deciding which side to align themselves with," said Axlos. "We will know more in the coming days."

As it was, the capital was alive with activity. The king, who had been in poor health for some time, had been moved to a safe, remote location. He had bestowed Gavrox with full authority, making him all but king.

Soon, the fate of the Heveian people would be in the balance. Despite my newfound mate, and Tissa, whom I promised to rear as my own, our world felt fragile. Everything I loved could be gone in an instant, but I forced myself to let that feeling slide over me and away.

Piece by piece, my arm became an arm again. Axlos and Ruzak spoke for a little longer, then departed, leaving me alone with Wulfrex. The most lighthearted of the Heveian crew, it was rare to find him without a grin or laugh, or a well-timed joke. But his expression grew more serious as he worked to finish my arm.

“We won’t let them, you know,” said Wulfrex.

“Let who do what?” I asked.

“Let the UCP take what’s most important to us.” His jaw clenched. A muscle jumped. “If anyone touches Dani—“ He bit off the rest of the sentence with bared teeth. “They die.” He closed one of the joints of my thumb with a satisfying click.

My thoughts mirrored his sentiments. “That might be what gets us to victory,” I said. “The need to protect the ones we love outweighs greed.”

His blue eyes met mine. “I hope so, my friend. Because greed has allowed the UCP to come very far.”

He finished up my palm and thumb, and moved on to individual fingers.

“What we are fighting for is stronger than what they fight for,” I said. “That will matter more than you think.”

The younger male nodded. “I hope you’re right,” he said. “I can’t imagine going on without Dani. And if anything happens to me, she said she’d find a way to bring me back to life just so she could kill me again.”

I laughed at that, recognizing the joke for what it was. Wulfrex's mate was a powerful female and a match for him in all ways. "What are our females doing this evening?"

Wulfrex shrugged. "They're gathered for ice cream." He made a face. "Foul substance."

I shook my head. "Have you tried it? It tastes creamy and sweet." I looked to the door, suddenly very eager to leave. "Kiki used to bring it to me," I said.

Wulfrex snorted. "You can get your own now. They have loaded the concoction into every nutrient machine we have on board."

"I haven't tried it yet," I said. But I was eager to.

"Done. Test it out over the next few days. Let me know if you feel any stiffness or pain." He held up his hands and stepped away from me, having finished his work. "The females sit around and enjoy ice cream while we're on the brink of war."

"Yes, as they should. It's one of the ways to remember what we fight for." I spread my arms. "These lives. And the joy we get to experience in them."

Wulfrex gave me a level look and blinked. "Have you suddenly become a philosopher?"

I laughed. "No. I am simply older than you by a good amount." I heaved myself off the table and clapped Wulfrex on the shoulder. "Find your mate," I said to him. "Make love to her. They are all scared."

He raised his brows. "Not my Dani. Nothing scares her."

I closed my eyes, knowing what I had seen in everyone's faces the previous day, when we'd all met and Claire and I had told them what we'd gone through. "She is scared. We are all scared." I moved to the door. "Now that I have use of all my limbs, I intend to find Claire and show her how much I love her."

Wulfrex waved a hand, but I saw him hastily putting his tools away.

I left the workshop, found my way to the exit ramp, and followed the path back to the capital. Claire and I had been moved into new quarters together in the palace when we shared our newly mated status.

She was in the room, reclined on a white sofa with a reading screen. Her long, brilliant hair spilled over her shoulders. A bowl of ice cream sat on the table. “How is your hand?”

I closed the door behind me. “Wulfrex fixed it.” I nodded to the bowl. “Is that what I think it is?”

She smiled. “It is. And I’m happy to say, we finally got the hot fudge exactly right.” I loved seeing the glint of satisfaction in her eyes. “You’ve got to try it.”

“Wulfrex called it brown sludge.”

“Wulfrex’s taste is questionable at best,” she said. “He’s a ridiculously brilliant male who still makes jokes about flatulence.”

Her assessment was accurate. “Is Tissa asleep?”

“Yes. I sat with her before settling her into bed in her chambers across the hall. She’s teaching me the *farr’ast* but I wish I knew more. I might get Hoc to work with me so I can pick it up faster. She needs me. *Us*.” Claire sighed. “She cried tonight. She’s starting to process what happened to her parents. Things will be hard for her now that she has time and space to think.”

“Yes, but she is not alone. We will be there for her.”

I sat beside her. “I will speak with her tomorrow, show her around the palace and listen if she wishes to talk. Claire, I did love her mother, but”—

She placed two fingers over my mouth. “The love you shared with her mother—who never stopped caring for you—is the main reason she chose you. Runa trusted you, worried about you, cared for you, even though she chose another as her mate. Tissa trusts you, now, and by extension, me. Her pain will ease, in time. We just have to survive this war,” she said tightly, then shook off her tension and picked up the bowl.

“This is going to melt. Open up.” She took a big scoop with the hot fudge, and spooned it into my mouth.

I let out a groan. “I don’t know how Wulfrex doesn’t like this. It’s so good.”

“He doesn’t like ice cream, either?” She flattened a hand to her chest. “What is wrong with him?”

“I could make a list,” I murmured with a grin. “But we’d be here all night, and there are other things I want to do with you tonight.”

Since returning to the capital two days ago, Claire had wasted no time in enjoying the use of an actual bed. We’d slept and fucked, despite my injuries. Now, I couldn’t wait to learn every nuance, every curve and sensitive spot. We were only just beginning to get to know one another, and I intended to spend a full lifetime with her, even if a war with the UCP cut it shorter than we’d like. I set the bowl aside.

I gathered her in my arms. “It’s nice to have my hand back.”

She raised one eyebrow. “Um. Are you going to do that thing again?”

“What thing?”

“That thing you did with your fingers,” she replied, then lowered her voice, even though there was no one here to hear us. “You know. The vibrating thing.”

I grinned and slid my hand up her thigh. “I will do as you ask,” I said, nuzzling her neck. “I only wish to bring you pleasure.”

“You bring me pleasure every day,” she murmured against my skin. “You make me feel—oh!”

“Is that what you like?” I murmured, engaging the vibration of my metal fingers and sliding them along her wet slit.

“Do you need to ask?” she said in a husky voice.

Her mouth found mine before I could answer, and swept me into the sensual current that I only found with her. *My mate. My love.* The female I would die for, and the female I would fight to live for.



Hi readers! I hope you enjoyed Craal and Claire's story! Please consider leaving a review. This is the fifth book in the new Craving the Heveian series. For free stories, bonus content, and book news, sign up for my newsletter [here](#).

[The Alien's Fate](#) is next and Axlos, our weary, yet fearsome leader, will not only have his hands full defending Heveia from the UCP, but also with Arria. Yes, these two finally have their story!

[The Alien's Fate, the sixth and final book in the series will release on 12/1/23.](#)

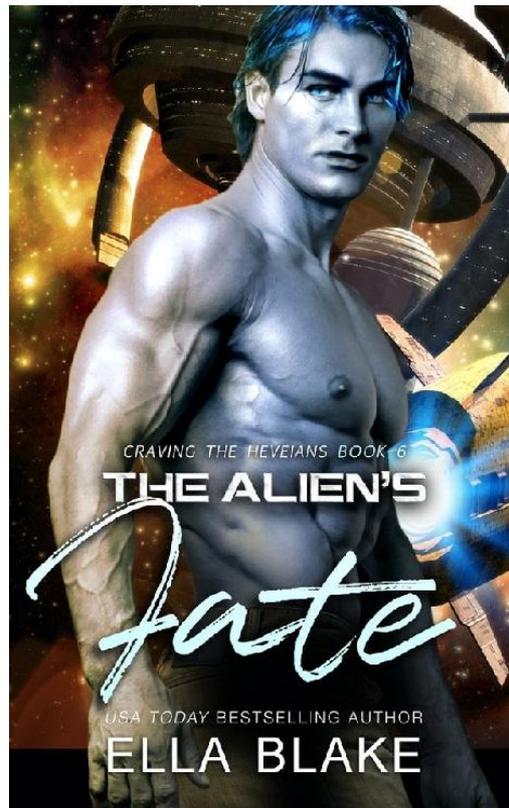
Axlos

My people are fighting for their lives against a power determined to rip our planet apart for a valuable energy source. I am on the front lines, leading our forces. I knew this would be my fate if we went to war, and I don't expect to survive.

My only regret? Not telling Arria, the shy little human we rescued that I loved her. Now it's too late. I've taken my last steps on my home planet of Heveia. I'll fight to the end alongside my warriors to ensure that my people survive. That *she* survives.

Arria

I may be one small, quiet human, but I have a knack for a few things. One of them is seeing patterns that even computers miss. When I unlock an enemy command cipher, I know it can help our forces, but the algorithms disagree and it's deemed too risky to send me out in the middle of battle. Instead, I do the riskiest thing I've ever done and steal a shuttle with the help of a friendly cybot. When we arrive on Axlos' ship, his feelings become crystal clear. Amid a battle that will end the war—one way or another—I learn if I can open my heart, or if the scars of my past will determine my future.



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