

SUSSEX

Space is kind of boring

AMELIA RADEMAKER

Susix

Book One

By Amelia Rademaker

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Dedication

To my favorite ARC reader, Devan, you are awesome. This one was different, so thank you for all of the patience and help.

Chapter One

Cece

“Cecelia, don’t forget that you’re closing tomorrow night,” my manager called out just as I left work.

I resisted the urge to throw up my middle finger. Debbie was known for shouting last-minute demands instead of saying goodbye. The woman was unbearable. Not unbearable enough to quit. Although, I dreamed about it some days.

I parked my old two-door sedan in front of the rambler I was renting. It was small and a little run down. I loved my little house. The rent wasn’t too high because it wasn’t in the nicest part of town. The paint was new, the front yard was tidy, and my neighbors pretended I didn’t exist. I knew their ignorance was intentional because my four dogs could make a lot of noise sometimes.

I heard them scratching at the door as I walked up the path. Sock was whining loud enough that I could hear her from the yard. I smiled because as soon as Sock whined, Maggie would start howling. Sure enough, Maggie started baying.

“Okay, okay, you guys, hold your horses,” I laughed as I unlocked the door.

I held the door open just wide enough to squeeze through. There was barely enough room to shove my way in. I still had to use my frame to physically block the dogs from getting out. Unfortunately, it left me defenseless against being mauled.

I didn’t bother setting my stuff down. I just collapsed on the ground and let the dogs wrestle on top of me. I laughed as wet kisses rained down.

Working at the bank in town wasn’t the most stimulating job. On top of the boredom, the customers were mean. The

plus side was that it wasn't a tough job to leave at the door, especially when I had four furry buddies who loved to cuddle and play.

I managed to get back on my feet and lead the pack to the backyard. That was the other nice thing about my house; it had a bigger backyard than expected. There were three trees and a line of bushes. There were squirrels and sometimes bunnies that kept the dogs busy. I watched as Sock, Maggie, her sister Molly, and Taco raced around, sniffing everything.

I sat on one of the camping chairs and checked my phone. There were some texts from my more tolerable coworkers complaining about work. I didn't bother replying. I didn't want to think about work until I was clocked in. I also saw a text from my friend, June. She was throwing a party that weekend and wanted me to come so I could scope out the guy she was crushing on. That would be a must.

Leaving the dogs, I went inside to get something to eat. During the week, I didn't have the energy to cook. Most of my dinners were from websites with lists with titles like 'Twenty-Minute Meals' or 'Meals With Five or Fewer Ingredients'. When dinner was ready, I called the dogs in and fed them.

I didn't bother doing the dishes. My brain was fried by the time I finished dinner. I got changed and turned on the TV. The dogs eventually meandered over and took up their various spots around the room.

I barely paid attention to what I was watching. My phone startled me when my 'Go to bed!' alarm went off. Utterly exhausted, I unlocked the doggie door and said goodnight to everyone. If the dogs needed to go out during the night, they would have to help themselves because I was ready for a full night's sleep.

I woke up to barking. I groaned, slapping a hand down my face. That was the downside to the doggie door routine. They usually found something to chase in the middle of the night.

Barely awake, I shuffled to the back door. I threw on my cargo jacket and oversized boots to go out and yell at them. I

stood there for a second, just registering that their barking didn't sound normal.

When my dogs found an animal in the yard, they yipped and barked in excitement. The sounds they made were playful. These were not those noises. Now, they sounded angry.

I had only just opened the door when the tone changed. Unexpectedly, it raised an octave and took on that terrifying pitch animals made when they were in pain. I sprinted outside my stomach a lead ball.

The dogs were huddled against the back fence. Molly was crouched in front of the other three with her teeth bared. The floodlights flashed on as I raced towards them.

I couldn't see what had them cornered. All I could see were the dogs' shaking bodies. There was nothing else in the yard. Sock was frantically trying to shove herself through the fence.

Suddenly, there was a flash of light, and Molly screeched. It was a terrible sound. I'd only heard it one other time when I'd seen a dog get hit by a car. The other three dogs scattered.

The bright light didn't go away. It stayed, nearly blinding me. I put my hand up, trying to keep my eyes on Molly.

Molly seemed frozen in the center of the light. Her mouth was open, but no sound was coming out. Her fur was standing on end. As I watched, she started to float off of the ground.

"Molly!" I picked up my speed, racing to reach her.

Her body was already a few feet off of the ground and moving fast. She was getting too high for me to touch. Desperately, I launched myself at her, trying to get as much height as possible. My hand swung wildly over my head, hitting Molly with the inside of my arm hard enough that she flew out of the pillar of light. I heard her whimper as she hit the ground.

Instead of falling back down, my body started to rise. It felt unnatural to go up and not down. I tried to scream, to yell for the dogs, anything. Nothing came out.

I watched in horror as the earth got further and further away. The other houses in my neighborhood got smaller. I begged for something to notice me. For someone to save me. To see me. I didn't want to disappear into the night.

I kept rising. The higher I got, the harder it became to breathe. I couldn't do anything. I just had to watch as the world slipped away.

My body shivered as I passed through something damp. My vision became foggy. As I flew higher, I realized I had passed through a cloud. The thought made me nauseous. I lost consciousness at some point.

I woke up when my body hit something hard. My head bounced, making me hiss in pain. I stopped moving as a massive headache made my entire body throb.

I tried to breathe through my nose to keep the pain at bay. The smell that hit me made me gag. It was a rancid heat that was impossible to get away from. I struggled to lift my arms to cover my nose. It didn't help much.

I opened my eyes. Everything was blurry. I could make out dark shapes moving against a silver background. Blinking didn't clear my vision.

I struggled to sit up. I had to close my eyes and breathe through the nausea. *This must be what a concussion feels like*, I thought.

When I opened my eyes again, the dark shapes started to come into focus. One of the shapes came closer to me. At first, I thought it was a child. It was about as tall as a toddler. It walked with the unmistakable gait of something learning how to move while upright.

There was something strange about its body. It didn't have a neck or definitive legs. It almost looked like it only had one thick leg, not two. I blinked rapidly, trying to clear the last of my fuzzy sight.

Its two arms swung low to the ground. They were strangely long. While I stared, its arms split apart. I shrieked and jolted back. The thing's upper half whipped in my direction. Sunken

holes stared at me. They opened wider. It let loose a high-pitched shriek and hobbled in the opposite direction.

The room exploded into chaos. Suddenly, all of the little bodies that had been standing in my peripheral vision were scattering. They ran around in a flurry of ear-splitting terror.

I scrambled back on my hands and knees until I hit something hard. I twisted around. There was a massive metal wall at my back. Pressing against it, I started to breathe in rapid pants. My vision started getting spotty.

Everywhere I looked, there were strange creatures. They had five arms with gripping fingers at the end of each appendage. The arms were grouped along their sides. Or at least, I thought they were the sides of their bodies. They were covered in rolls of yellow flesh that undulated like a barrel of snakes. At the bottom of their frame was a strange appendage. It was one single mass that moved like two feet, walking in a sack. The only thing that signified where their face might have been were the massive pits near the top of their bodies that I thought might be eyes.

All of them were staring at me as they huddled in small groups giving me a wide berth. None of them tried to get closer.

My heaving breaths drowned out their scared noises. Not knowing where I was and being surrounded by monsters triggered a panic attack. I felt my hands get cold as prickles of heat traveled up my body. I felt like I was about to pass out. I did not want to pass out. I forced myself to focus. I took deep breaths, trying to calm down.

Luckily, everything stayed away from me. After a long time, my vision sharpened. The sweat on my body started to dry. My hands were freezing, but the panic attack was fading. I was just scared out of my mind now.

Not wanting to trigger another one, I ignore the creatures around me. I half turned to see the wall behind me while keeping an eye on the mass of yellow bodies around me. It was ten feet high and metal. I glanced around. The floor looked like it was made of the same material too.

The space I was in was enormous. It had to be the size of a small building. There was only one metal wall behind me. The three other walls were made of glass. Or at least it looked like glass. I could see through them. I could see other enclosed areas past the space I was in. I forced myself to ignore what was beyond the glass walls. I didn't want to see what was out there.

There wasn't much else to look at. The space was nearly bare. There was a small grated hole in one corner of the room. Besides that, there weren't any other furnishings.

By the time I had looked around, the other things in the room had calmed down too. They started to move around cautiously. I watched one walk over to the grate. It stood over it. A stream of liquid came out of it and went down the hole. I put that on the list of things I was putting a pin in until later.

Aliens. I did not want to acknowledge that thought. Instead, I sat where I was. There was a chance my alarm would go off, and I would wake up.

I watched the little creatures as they milled about. They made sure to keep far away. That worked out for me. I didn't want to have to interact with them. Acknowledging them would lead to more alien thoughts. I wasn't ready for more alien thoughts.

They made soft squeaky noises to one another. Sometimes, they would touch each other. I watched their arms pat down the upper parts of their bodies.

After what felt like hours of watching the little things, my shoulders started to relax. They didn't care about me. It seemed we had all come to the same conclusion; I'll ignore you, and you ignore me.

My legs started to cramp from being clenched so tightly. That forced me to accept that something *had* happened. This wasn't a dream. My body didn't ache like this in dreams. It only felt like this in real life.

I had been taken. Something had taken me from my backyard. I had saved Molly and been vacuumed into the sky.

Molly. My dogs. They were alone.

I started to cry—soft, quiet sobs.

Wherever I was, I wasn't getting home anytime soon. If I was ever going home. It was a pessimistic thought, but what were the chances I would get to see my dogs again?

Based on the creatures around me, I was either in a twisted laboratory or aliens had abducted me. That thought from before, which I had desperately tried to ignore, grew and grew.

Nothing bugged me while I had another breakdown. I cried until my face was hot, and a headache bloomed. As soon as I felt it, I tried to get ahold of myself.

I was a captive. I had to take care of myself. Keep strong. I couldn't afford to get dehydrated. I carefully straightened my legs, trying to shake the weak feeling in my limbs.

I looked around the cell again. There was nothing besides the bathroom hole. I couldn't see any spigots or vents. There were no seams in the metal wall.

Carefully, I stood up. The aliens in the room tensed. I ignored them and walked to the front of the room with the glass wall. I wanted to see what else was in here with us.

There was an aisle separating two rows of cells. Most of the cells were smaller than mine. There were a few that were bigger. They all had three transparent walls with a metal one at the back.

I didn't recognize any of the creatures in the cells surrounding mine. Most of them were bigger than me. They huddled in too-small areas, curled up to keep from hitting the ceiling. Nothing would consent to be crammed into a space that small. It made me realize that every creature I could see was a captive like me.

I saw something that looked like a spider with a dozen legs. I looked around at the various knee-high aliens in my room. There were a lot of them. They weren't as scary as I first thought. I could have worse cellmates.

I went back to the spot I had left earlier. The aliens in my cell made room to let me through. I sat down and waited.

There is a lot of time to wait in space. I stayed where I was for a long time. Every so often, I stood up and made a point to move around. It bothered my cellmates every time. No one reacted violently, so I kept doing it.

A happy-sounding ding startled me as I began to get tired. All of the aliens in my holding area started to move when they heard the noise. There was an anxious feeling building. They shuffled towards the metal wall. I scooted further away.

A panel in the wall opened with a hiss. A metal trough pushed out of the opening. Inside, a clear liquid sloshed around. There was a rainbow sheen to it. The aliens dunked their bodies into the trough. I looked around and saw that all other cells had similar troughs. The other aliens were dipping body parts into the liquid.

Turning back towards the trough in my cell, I watched one group after another take a turn at it. Everyone was tense. I kept expecting a fight to break out. Nothing happened. Every alien took a turn until the trough was empty. Then they went back to their respective areas. The panel opened, and the trough disappeared.

The bell didn't go off for a long time. It was long enough that I managed to catch some sleep before I heard it again. This time, I felt confident enough to take a turn at the trough. If it was something similar to water, I needed it.

The tiny aliens in my cell scattered when I stepped in line to take a turn. They made all types of noises as they went in every direction. I felt bad about scaring them. There wasn't anything I could do to communicate that I wasn't a threat, so I quickly threw out my guilt.

I bent down to the trough. The shimmer on the surface made me nervous. I cupped my hands and took a small drink. It had a strange flavor. It left my mouth feeling dry. I was worried about dehydrating, so I kept drinking until my stomach felt full.

Once I sat down again, the aliens in my cell went back to lining up at the trough. They tentatively started drinking again. Some of them glanced in my direction.

That was the most exciting part of my days. The trough would appear once a day. That was it. Nothing else happened. I got to know my little cell very well. While mine was one of the bigger cells, it had more occupants than any of the other ones I could see.

Having that many creatures in one space was not comfortable. The other aliens smelled awful. They were quiet, though, even if they were everywhere.

At least I had space to move. The spider thing across from us could only shuffle around its tiny area. I felt bad for it.

My days became very monotonous. I tried to exercise as much as I could. It helped keep me from losing my brain. There wasn't much to do besides run around the small space.

The other aliens didn't bother me. They didn't interact with me in any capacity. They chattered with one another. They had their own routines. They avoided me.

When the trough appeared, I drank as much of the strange liquid as possible. After a few days, I realized it couldn't just be some kind of alien water. So long as I drank until my stomach was full, I never got hungry. I lost weight in the first few days. However, I never became emaciated like I would have if I'd been starving.

There was no way to keep track of time accurately. The lights in the holding area never went out. There was no display hanging in the aisle. I started marking days by the trough schedule. There were long periods between appearances, I assumed it was coming once a day, but I was guessing.

After countless times lining up at the trough, there was a loud noise. I scrambled towards my corner at the sudden sound. Lights in the center aisle snapped on. I screamed and slapped my hands over my eyes. They were so bright.

It sounded like every other creature in the holding bay was panicking. Things screamed in odd tones. There was a

gasping, screeching noise that made my heart pound. The sound was unbearable. I covered my ears and tried to avoid everyone while they rang.

When my eyes adjusted, a pair of massive six-legged bugs were walking the aisle. They paused at one cell and tapped something onto the front glass. There was a rumbling sound then whatever was in the cell started screaming.

My heart rate skyrocketed.

The pair didn't pause. They walked to the next cell and did the same thing. The inhabitant let out a startled noise but nothing else. As they got closer, the rumbling noise got clearer. It sounded like water traveling through pipes.

By the time the two bugs made it to my cell, the chubby aliens were vibrating with anxiety. They skittered back and forth, trying to climb our cell walls. They were bumping into each other in their panic. It made them more frightened.

The pair of aliens stopped in front of us. This was the first time I had seen an alien walking outside of a cage. I assumed they were the ones in charge.

Up close, they were unsettling. They had six segmented legs. The top two moved like arms. The bottom four tapped across the metal floor.

Their legs may have looked insectoid, but the rest of their body was hairy. Their arms, legs, and bodies were covered in short dark hair. It had the same stiff, creepy texture I had seen on tarantulas at the zoo. I watched the tip of one of their long arms touch a metal plate next to the front of our cell.

Before I could brace, freezing liquid rained down from the ceiling. I screamed. The aliens in my cell began panicking. Something knocked into me, shoving me to my knees. Scrambling, I tried to wipe the liquid from my eyes and stand simultaneously.

Water filled the cell to my ankles. Every living thing inside the cell was mindless with fear. They were knocking each other over, screaming, and clawing at the walls.

A slimy mass started clawing up my body, desperate to get out of the water. I screamed and tried to shove it off. It dug in deeper. I felt something else leap onto my back. I spun around, dislodging whatever it was. A body swung around, knocking me off balance. My boots bent, rolling my ankle. I hit the ground hard. The thing on my back shrieked.

Head reeling, I scrambled to get up. Crawling on the floor, the water battered my body. Under my fingers, the ground rumbled. I looked up, expecting to see something barreling toward me. There were a lot of aliens. Thankfully, none of them were running at me.

A loud, sucking noise started behind me. The ground began to shake violently. My knees slide out from under me. My hands clawed the ground, trying to stop. Nothing kept the water from dragging me toward the sucking noise.

I started screaming. My hands and legs kicked desperately. I did not want to be sucked down a drain. One of my hands touched dry ground. My palm burned from the friction of dragging along the metal floor. My toe caught something. Every part of me flailed as I tried to stand up.

The water was receding quickly. I glanced around, seeing the liquid being sucked down the bathroom drain. I could barely feel it pulling me now. Realizing that I wasn't in danger of drowning or being trampled, I bent at the waist, heaving deep breaths.

The other occupants of the cell were trying to get their bearings. My clothing was sopping wet. I had managed to hang on to my boots. There were rips in my leggings and jacket from being dragged across the metal floor. I poked my finger through a hole in the pocket over my breast. One of the little aliens must have sliced it with their claws. *Better the pocket than me.*

I looked towards the aisle. The insect aliens were gone. They weren't in the room anymore, either. The cells on the other side of us were wet. I guessed they had finished their job and gone while I was trying not to drown.

I stood still in my wet clothes. I didn't bother taking off my jacket. I would rather keep it on and shiver while it was drying than lose it if I took it off.

The aliens in my cells went back to their segregated groups to recover. I thought things would settle down, but the room got tenser. Nothing was acting normal. Creatures that generally laid around their enclosures were huddled in the corners. Others were getting into defensible positions.

Across the aisle and down a few cells, I could see some aliens stringing materials across the front glass panel, trying to make a barrier.

An alien with three arms was ripping out handfuls of feathers from their body. They weren't doing it frantically either; it was a methodical action. They just kept staring at the aisle while they repeated the motion.

That scared me. Seeing aliens barricading cell doors was alarming. Watching a creature systematically tear out its own feathers was terrifying. Sweat prickled my neck. *What is happening?*

The air blowing into our enclosure heated from chilly to balmy. A shiver went up my spine at the change. It only made me more uncomfortable and alert. The quick sound of clicking across the metal floor had everything in the cargo bay either whipping its head around or hunkering further into their hiding spots.

A group of insectoid aliens marched down the aisle. Every few feet, one would peel off and take up a guard position near a cell. Once every guard was in their place, a happy little chime went off.

Before too long, the space started to fill with small clusters of aliens. Each held two or three aliens that looked similar. They entered from the far side of the holding bay.

All of the groups were different species. There were things with fur, feathers, and scales, along with stuff I didn't recognize. I saw blobs with no features that floated across the floor. A few creatures had two legs. Most of the bodies were

nonhumanoid. Two aliens looked like plants. Their thin frames swayed gently as they “walked” up and down the aisle.

The groups spoke to each other as they passed by each cell. They pointed with fingers, claws, and slime. Some groups went straight towards a particular cell, while most meandered through the space.

Welcome to the zoo, I thought. That was exactly what it felt like. The aliens were strolling the aisle, chatting while they did. There was a casual atmosphere to the whole experience.

It made me angry. I wasn't something to be caged and gawked at. I had a life on Earth. I made choices. I impacted things. Just because these aliens had never bothered to learn that didn't change the fact that they were true. The longer I thought about it, the madder I got.

One of the tree creatures raised an extended limb. It caused one of the guards to peel off the wall and walk over. The tree pointed to one of the creatures in the cell it was standing in front of.

There was a pair of tiny white things in the cell. They were far away from me. I couldn't see many details with all of the aliens milling around.

I watched the guard, and the tree thing have some sort of conversation. I couldn't tell how the tree was talking, but the insect was making clicking noises in response.

The pair bowed. The insect pulled a piece of glass out of a pouch at their side. It was just large enough for their claw to pinch it. The tree creature didn't hesitate to put its limb on the glass. The insect tucked the glass back into the pouch.

The insect walked over to the cell's door and touched the panel that activated the shower. This time, the door opened. I expected the aliens inside the cell to make a run for it. Instead, the guard calmly entered the cell, picked up the pair, and handed them to the tree creature.

The two trees swayed back and forth. The one holding the white aliens passed one to the other tree. They quickly turned and left.

Not a zoo. A pet store. My anger popped like a balloon. This was terrifying.

Just then, a large group entered the space. They made their way down the aisle slowly. I couldn't help but watch them. Anyone could be a potential threat now.

Their bodies were covered in thick matted hair. Their entire frame was shrouded by it. There was no way to tell what they looked like exactly. I could see their two legs, two arms, and their general shape. That was it. I couldn't see eyes or a mouth.

While most of the group was grey in color, they each had unique undertones. There were greens, purples, and muted blues mixed in their grey hair. It helped to tell them apart as they jostled and moved amongst the other customers.

One with green-grey mats stopped right in front of my enclosure. The rest of its friends paused when they noticed it wasn't with them. They hurried back to where the green-grey one was staring.

Most of them pointed at the chubby aliens around me. The green one didn't bother. It kept looking at whatever had caught its attention. I couldn't tell where it was looking because of the curtain of hair. My pounding heart had a suspicion.

The alien turned its head, causing the mats to fly outward. It was looking for something. Suddenly, its body froze, and it waved an arm.

One insect guard stepped off the wall and began walking over. The two beings started to talk. Then they started to point. Then things got heated.

The guard kept pointing further down the aisle, away from my cell. The hairy bath mat wasn't having it. The guard finally threw up a claw and bowed.

The guard walked around the front of the enclosure. *Keep walking, keep walking,* I chanted as I watched it get closer to the panel. The other aliens in the cell knew what was up. They began running around, making awful noises. When the guard

stopped in front of the control panel at our cell door, the noise ratcheted up.

The guard smacked his hand against the glass. Immediately, all of the little aliens dove for the floor. They were leaving me out in the open. The hairy alien's body tensed as they zeroed in on me.

Hidden amongst the heavy, frizzy ropes was the glint of pupils reflecting light. The instant our eyes met, I knew I was screwed. The alien lifted its arm and pointed at me.

The rest of the hairy group stepped up to the glass. Their heads bobbed between one another. Their hands jerked in my direction.

Out of nowhere, a new alien strode next to the green-grey one. The new alien looked similar to the guards but not exactly the same. If the guards were fuzzy praying mantises, this thing looked like a walking stick.

Its arms hung down the entire length of its body, which was impressive, considering how tall it was. Everything from its thin antennae to its four legs was the same color and tone. There were no variations. It looked like a toy before any details had been painted on.

The thin insectoid held up a square of glass. The green furry alien and the insect spoke before they both nodded. The insect shook the glass again. The furry alien swiped a limb over it. The strange pair bowed before turning towards me.

This time, two guards touched the panel at the front of the cell. My body unfroze, then shot up, ready to run. A loud click echoed through the open space. I flinched at the sound.

My eyes looked up as cold air began blowing down on my head. It was strong enough to ruffle my hair. My brain started to feel strange, my thoughts becoming tangled. My body sagged as panic set in.

"They're drugging me," the word slurred together as my head got heavy.

I tried to move, but my legs felt like rubber. Thuds sounded around me as the rest of my cellmates went limp. I was

unconscious before they opened the door.

Chapter Two

Cece

My eyes blinked open. Everything looked blurry. I closed them again. My whole body hurt. It felt like I had worked out, gotten drunk, and slept on the beach.

My hand slapped the ground. Metal. Metal was worse than sleeping on the hard, wet sand. With effort, I managed to sit up. I rubbed my eyes until things started to come into focus.

I was in a new cell. This one was much smaller than the first. It was much more ornate than the old cell too. Instead of glass walls, there were thin bars. It made the cell feel like a birdcage. Unfortunately for me, they were spaced very close together. There was no way I could fit through them.

Feeling exhausted, I swung my head around to look at my new home. There was a pile of blankets in one corner. They looked fuzzy. Next to the blankets was a structure I recognized: a toilet. After peeing in a hole for so long, I nearly sagged at the sight.

I couldn't help but sigh at the size of the space. I wouldn't be able to move around properly in here. Using the bars, I managed to stand up. I started at one end of the cell and began walking. *One, two, three, four, five.* Bars. I make a left turn. *One, two, three, four, five.* Bars. This was going to be fun.

I leaned in to inspect the bars. They felt cold, like metal. My hands ran up and down their length. There were no indents or marks on them. I pushed against them. There wasn't any give either. They never budged, no matter how hard I shoved, pulled, kicked, or shook them.

Giving up, I sat down on the blankets. At least they were as fuzzy as they looked. The other cell hadn't had blankets. That was a slight improvement.

My new cage was in the middle of a massive room. It was nearly the size of a basketball court. It had raised ceilings with an ornate lighting structure hanging low. The walls were lined with decorative tapestries and empty display cases. There was nothing else in the space.

The whole area made me feel like I was in an unfinished museum. It looked like it was created to show things off. The fact that it was empty gave the room an uncomfortable air.

Glancing around, I realized I was sitting on the room's centerpiece. The cage sat on a raised platform in the back of the area. I wasn't in the center of the stage. Next to me, in the middle of the platform, was a throne. It was covered in plush cushions and thick furs. The throne itself was on a jewel-tone stone. Thankfully, the seat was empty.

The massive doors on the other side of the room swung open. A group of aliens walked in with quick, sure steps. They looked like the alien who had bought me. They were smaller. Their mats were thinner and were purple instead of green.

They didn't glance my way. They were focused on their task. They stopped at the center of the room facing the throne. The tallest one directed a shorter one towards the left side of the platform. The shorter one didn't move. The taller one jerked their hands towards the platform again. The shorter one pointed at me. The taller one glanced back as if just realizing I was there. It bobbed its head back and forth. The pair argued in a series of chirps before the shorter one stomped towards my cage. It pointed a remote at me.

I had no chance to tense. A beam of blue light engulfed the cage. I froze in place. The cage lifted off the ground and floated until it rested a few feet to the right side of the throne. The taller alien screeched, causing the small one to flinch. The taller one yelled at the shorter alien. The shorter alien screeched back but moved the cage to the right and *behind* the throne.

The rest of the aliens began moving things around the room. A pair put a few new display cases on the platform. Some aliens removed the tapestries and stacked them in a corner. It looked like they were making space.

Before they left, the larger alien came over to my cage. They dug under their thick mats before pulling out six clear balloons. They tossed them into the cage.

I didn't move. The alien seemed put out by my reaction. They mimed lifting a balloon to their face and tipping it back. I had a sinking feeling that these things were filled with that liquid from the ship. When I didn't move, the alien shrugged and left.

After such an intense day, the silence hit me hard. I didn't trust it at first. I waited for something else to enter the room for a long time. Nothing did. Then the lights dimmed, and I heard the distinct click of a door locking.

That's when I realized that no one was coming back. At least not with the door locked. Even if they did, I would hear them first.

I palmed one of the balloons. The material was soft. It felt like I could puncture it if I wasn't careful. Using my teeth, I bit it open. I groaned. The balloons were filled with the gross liquid from before. I choked it down. I used my blankets to prop the balloon up to save the remaining liquid.

I didn't sleep that first night.

The lights came back on hours later. The lock disengaged afterward. I finished the rest of my balloon. Rationing seemed like the most prudent thing since I had no idea when I would see anyone else.

No one came that first day. The lights turned off. The lock engaged again. I managed to get a few naps that night. It helped that the blankets in my cell were luxurious.

On the third day, someone came in.

I almost stopped breathing when I heard the big double doors groan open. They parted in the middle, letting me see a

long corridor of white walls leading up to this room. There weren't any windows or doors, only light fixtures on the walls.

A large, green-matted alien hurried into the room. It gestured for someone to follow it in. A group came in carrying a statue.

The group carried it to the podium's base and set it down. The leader made a low chittering sound and turned to leave. One of the aliens pointed to me and said something. The leader stopped, turned around, and stared at me. After a second, it glanced around the cage.

I had kept it clean. The blankets were folded. My used balloons were in a neat stack. While my cell was clean, I stunk. I self-consciously combed down my matted hair with a hand.

The alien tapped its leg and said something. The other alien, who had pointed me out, did a full-body shimmy. Whatever that meant made the leader exhale. He pulled out a metal rod, said something into it, and turned to leave.

Once they left, I went to check out the new feature. I couldn't get a good look at the statue. The throne blocked it. It was also facing in the opposite direction. Whatever it was made of shone under the lights. I was trying to contort my body to see it better when someone came in.

This time, I didn't jump. A small alien with purple mats walked quickly toward me. They stepped onto the platform while digging through a bucket at their side. I backed to the opposite corner of my cell. The alien didn't pay any attention to me. They pulled out a mesh bag filled with water balloons. They set it on the ground and rolled it through the cage bars. I rushed forward, worried they might pop on the rough surface.

Next, the alien entered a code into the cell's door. A window swung in. When I saw it, I stopped moving. The opening was two feet wide and over one foot high. It was large enough for me to squeeze through with enough motivation. I was very motivated, so I knew I could fit through that window.

Something dropped onto the ground. I ignored it. My eyes were zeroed in on the window. I watched it close automatically. The alien entered another code into the cell door. There was a clicking sound.

They didn't stick around once the cell locked. They turned around and left. I waited until they were gone before moving.

I carefully dumped the water balloons onto my bed. I went back and picked up what the alien had pushed through the window.

It was a bundle of dark cloth. The instant I lifted it off the floor, I knew something was inside. Setting it on my bed, I unwrapped the cloth. It ended up being a shift dress. The fabric was coarse. It looked like it would cover all of my important parts. Wrapped inside the dress was a jar with some goop inside. I opened it and sniffed. It didn't smell like anything, and I had no idea what it was, so I set it aside.

The last thing in the bundle looked like a toothbrush made of driftwood. The handle fit in my hand comfortably. The bristles were thick and spaced very far apart.

After counting my water balloons, I used a few to wash my clothes and take a circus bath. Wetting the cleanest square of my disgusting leggings, I started wiping myself down. I only managed to smear dirt around. It still made me feel better.

I put on the new dress. Then I started wetting my clothes, rubbing them together, and rinsing them. It was the best I could do without soap. Then I left my clothes out to dry.

Life fell into a pattern. Once a day, the same alien would come in and throw me some water balloons and leave. I washed more thoroughly when I realized they would be bringing water frequently. I broke down and used the strange toothbrush thing to work out the tangles in my hair.

Aliens were constantly coming in to drop things off. The room was filling up with lots of pretty stuff. There were brightly colored fabrics, shiny objects, and beautifully decorated containers.

One day, a group of aliens came in and hung a massive tapestry. The threads lit up at night. I got excited when stuff like that came in because it broke up the monotony of having statues brought in. There were so many statues.

In total, there were eleven, including the massive one they brought in that third day. I'm embarrassed to say I had been in that cage for weeks, staring at nearly a dozen of these statues before I realized they were all of the same alien. In my defense, the aliens with mats and no facial features were hard to tell apart. Besides the color of their hair, they were nearly identical.

Whomever the alien was, they were either important enough to have people making statues in their honor, or they were conceited enough to have commissioned a dozen sculptures of themselves. Either way, I started to call the room I was stuck in the treasure room.

The gifts only came every few days. Not often enough to keep me from getting bored. I started to miss the chaos of the pet store. At least there, I didn't go mad with boredom. I kept wishing they would bring in another cage with something alive in it. They never did. I would have done terrible things for a goldfish to look at—anything to pass the time.

Space was turning out to be very boring.

None of the aliens bringing in treasures stayed. A few stared at me. They never got close, though. The alien that brought me food only stayed long enough to ensure the cage was locked behind them.

That was the most exciting part of my day. After that first delivery, I started paying very close attention to the alien who would bring me water in the mornings. That little window was going to be my ticket out. Every morning, I was in a position to observe how the glass panel worked. It was camouflaged to look like a series of bars along the right wall. I knew where it was hidden because it had become my obsession, and I had nothing better to do.

The alien would use the glass panel to type in a code. The code unlocked the window. It was only open for twenty

seconds, which made me sweat to think about it. Currently, I was workshopping a way to keep it open.

My other problem was the code that opened the window. I had casually watched the alien put the code in a few times. I did not recognize a single sign on the glass screen, but I had memorized most of the pattern. There was one section at the end I could never see. No matter where I sat, I couldn't tell what the last two symbols were. I knew where the alien's hands went on the screen, so I could guess if I needed to.

None of it mattered if I couldn't touch the screen. When I was alone, I tried to touch the glass panel. I climbed the bars. I tried coming from above and below. I couldn't reach it. I broke one of the jars I kept being given and used the pieces like sticks. I had managed to touch the glass. It hadn't done anything. Which made me think it might need skin contact to work.

One morning, I was playing with a new hammock-style footstool. I had tied one of the dresses between two bars. I couldn't hang off the cell bars long enough to try putting in the code. If I had something taller to stand on, I might be able to angle my hands enough to touch the panel.

I was busy trying to keep the fabric from sliding down the bar, so I didn't look up when I heard the big doors open. My water delivery was usually around this time, so it wasn't unexpected. I just kept fiddling with my hammock thing.

I heard the alien walk up to the cage. I waited for the water balloons hit the floor near me. Nothing happened. Usually, the little purple alien went quickly. They only lingered when they collected the little packet of dirty clothes that I threw into a pile outside the cage. Today was not laundry day.

I set my project down and looked up. A new alien was standing outside my cage. I stood up and slid away from them. They didn't look like anyone who had ever visited my room. Apprehension had me standing straighter.

They wore a heavy cloak that covered them from head to foot. It did nothing to hide that they were not the same species

as the aliens who worked here. The draped fabric only accentuated how different they looked.

First off, they were shorter than the other aliens. The hairy aliens were heads taller than me. At best, this creature was my height.

Then, there was the tail. Hard to ignore the four-foot-long appendage flickering behind the creature. It was very reptilian looking. Long, thin, and covered in scales. It waved back and forth just off of the ground.

I couldn't see inside the dark cowl of the cloak. I could tell that the alien was staring at the large pile of egg-sized stones sitting on a cushion by the throne. They stepped towards the tiny mound. I heard the distinct sound of claws clicking on the tile.

Sure enough, the alien had claws on their feet. There were curved talons at the end of each of their three flexing toes. I couldn't turn away as I watched each toe arch like a big cat's would.

We both jumped when the doors started to open. I dove towards my bed. I was hidden before I even formed a coherent thought. I tried to force my body to relax. To look natural.

As they made their way to my cage, the purple alien didn't miss a step. They fiddled with the carrier strapped to their body. They didn't bother looking up.

I snuck a glance toward the alien with the snake tail. My heart stopped. They were gone.

My handler tossed the water balloons through the bars as usual. Hiding it behind a yawn, I looked for the alien in the cloak. I didn't see them behind any of the larger items near my cage. I looked around the room. I couldn't see them at all.

The window opened, and new clothes dropped to the floor just as the cell locked again. The purple alien had their back turned on their way out the door before the lock's echo ended.

Once again, I was alone. Well, kind of alone. I waited a few minutes, expecting the new alien to leave its hiding spot. Nothing happened.

“They’re gone for the day. Unless someone drops off new goods.” I glanced around the ceiling. “I haven’t seen any cameras. I’m human, so I probably wouldn’t recognize whatever passes for alien surveillance equipment.” I shrugged. “You’re the one who snuck in here, not me. You probably know better than I do.” There was no reply. “Great. I imagined them. This whole experience has finally driven me crazy.”

That thought broke the dam. The lack of physical harm had kept my hopes up. I was diluting myself. I was someone’s pet. I was going to spend the rest of my life alone in this cage with only a hazy figment of my imagination to keep me company. That thought was the final straw. I started to ramble, unable to stop myself.

“Since I’m not sane and there’s no one here to judge me, I think we should get to know each other. My name is Cecelia. I can’t stand it. Everyone calls me Cece. I was born in a small town. I’ve got to say, if I get home, I owe Mr. Jenkins an apology. I thought he was crazy when he said aliens had abducted him. Now, I think he was telling the truth.”

Once my mouth opened, it felt like it wouldn’t close. Suddenly, the silence made me anxious. So, I kept talking until the lights went out. My throat was croaky by then, so I took it as a sign and shut up. I grabbed a water balloon and leaned back on the bars.

My mind was wandering when something moved in the corner of my vision. I stopped drinking and turned my head. A shadow emerged from a black mass on the platform. I blinked a few times.

The shadow crept around the platform. Occasionally, it would stop. Its head would move from side to side before changing directions and moving again. After an agonizing few minutes, the shape came within reach of my cage. Up this close, I could see the outline of a tail sweeping across the floor.

“Oh, thank god,” I gasped. Tears filled my eyes. “I thought I made you up.” I wiped away the wetness falling down my cheeks.

I stood up and walked over to where the figure was searching. The figure would pick through a treasure trove for a few minutes before moving on. They never took anything. They were looking for something specific.

“Not to brag, but I’m kind of the curator of this little museum. If you tell me what you’re looking for, I can point you in the right direction.” I don’t know why I expected a response. Ignoring the twinge of disappointment, I went on. It didn’t matter that they couldn’t understand me. I kept talking. “If you get me out of my cage, I know I can find whatever you’re looking for. I’ve seen everything they’ve brought it. Help me out, and I’ll help you.”

I told them about the code and the window in the cell door. The alien didn’t look my way once. It kept combing through the pieces that had been stored in here.

I knew the instant they found what they were looking for. Their entire frame froze. Their shadow vibrated with energy.

They pulled a delicate circlet out from a mountain of heavy wooden boxes. The darkness made it impossible to see. Whatever it was, there had to be metal on it. It glinted in the soft glow from the iridescent tapestry. By the way they were holding the piece, it was very delicate.

The alien’s tail snapped back and forth in jerky motions. The creature brought its prize close to its face. In the silence, I heard a hissing exhale of air. The tail whipped more wildly. As it curved back around, it caught the corner of a jewelry box.

I watched in horror as the box tipped sideways. It hit a set of precariously placed vases. The jewelry box cracked one of them on impact. The sound rang through the chamber. I recognized it from a childhood incident involving a porcelain plate and a metal ladle. Before I could gasp, the second vase hit the floor. The sound of it breaking was impossibly loud.

Small metal items hit the ground like rain. The jewelry box must have spilled open. Finally, the box hit the tile with a sickening thud. That had to have left a dent.

There was no way that racket went unnoticed. The alien whipped off the cloak and took off for a dark mound in the corner of the platform. I blinked and lost them in the darkness. I couldn't see anything moving against the shadows.

I don't know why I did it. I didn't process my actions until the balloon left my hand. By then, it was too late to stop it. The balloon sailed through the bars and smashed into the broken vase on the ground. I stared, stunned at the mess.

Why am I covering for this alien?

I didn't have time to ponder the reasoning. The sound of feet pounding down the hall filtered into the room.

In for a penny.

I grabbed two more balloons and aimed for the table to make it look like I had knocked the jewelry box off the table too. At least, I hoped that's what it would look like.

I didn't have time to do anything else. The lock on the door clicked just as the lights were thrown on. I flinched at the brightness. When my vision cleared, the room was swarming with big and small matted aliens.

Some carried weapons. Others had glass tablets. They spread out to every corner of the room.

The big green aliens with weapons wove through everything. They moved statues. They lifted stacks of rugs. None of them were gentle about it either.

I started to sweat. I kept waiting for someone to find the thief. No one shouted. I didn't hear any weapons fire. Everyone kept searching.

Behind the big guys, the purple aliens rushed around. They took inventory. I watched as they did a much more thorough job of combing through the room.

One of the workers found the broken vases and spilled jewelry. When they saw the water balloons, they shot me a nasty look. I saw teeth behind the curtain of hair.

The discovery caused a big uproar. Purple workers growled at each other. The green aliens snarled. The tension left the

room once everyone realized I was the one who had caused the fuss.

Half of the security left the room. Three purple workers started cataloging the damage. They found a new jewelry box and replaced everything. The broken vases were vacuumed with the same controller used to move my cage.

Just as they were wrapping up, there was a commotion by the doors. A huge alien swept into the room. They were much taller than the security guards. Their hair flared out along their neck and down their back. Everyone in the room hit the floor regardless of what they were doing. The newcomer didn't pause in their stride. They walked directly to the group kneeling by where the mess was.

I recognized the alien once they got closer. I had been staring at their visage for weeks. Every statue in the room was a depiction of this alien. Which meant the big boss had come to see what had happened. That could not be good.

The giant alien barked out a single word. One of the purple aliens answered in a quiet tone. They lifted their glass tablet for the big guy to read. No one breathed while this alien looked over whatever was on the screen. Finally, they said a few words. The purple aliens nodded. The giant said something else. One alien's hand shot out like a spring, pointing right at me. The others reluctantly pointed at me too.

I felt my stomach drop. The giant alien turned to look at me. They looked like every other individual of their species that I had seen, except they were massive. They took two steps and were at my cage door. They looked down at me from the top of the cell.

They grunted, and one of the purple workers rushed forward. They read something from their glass. When they were done, the leader held out a hand. One of the guards put a metal stick in it.

"Hey," I shouted, pressing against the back bars. Whatever that stick was, I didn't want it anywhere near me. "I won't do it again. Please don't kill me."

The stick tried to stab me. I dove away from its blunt tip. The giant growled and jabbed again. I grabbed the middle of the stick and pulled. Nothing happened. The alien was comically stronger than me. They pulled the stick back, lifting me off of the ground. My grip slipped. My ass hit the floor. The alien saw their chance. They struck me with the stick's tip.

The world lit up. My muscles seized. Lights exploded behind my eyes. It felt like my teeth were being pulled out of my head. Then, it was over.

My body went lax. I lay on the ground, trying to breathe through the pain. I could taste copper on my tongue.

Once when I was a kid, my neighbor dared me to touch an electric fence. Luckily, I hadn't grabbed the wire because my muscles had seized up until I managed to throw myself back. Whatever that stick was, it made the electric fence look like a joke. My eyes felt sunburnt. My head pounded.

I slapped a hand on the floor. I put pressure on it and heaved myself up. My nose wrinkled. I'd peed myself, which felt like the grand finale of this circus show.

When the ringing in my head stopped, I saw only a couple of aliens left. The giant was gone, along with most of the security detail. It looked like a few of the purple aliens were putting things away.

At that point, I didn't give a flying duck. I stripped out of my gross dress. I threw it in the pile of dirty clothing. Snatching two dresses from my clean pile, I walked to the alien toilet area.

There was a drain on the floor there. I used it to take mini showers. I had the whole area set up. There were a few water balloons here. I hung one of the dresses from the top of the cage. I bit open a balloon and wet the other dress. I wiped my body down. I opened a second balloon to rinse off. Then I put on a new dress, my cargo jacket, my cleanish leggings, and my socks.

By the time I was done, only one alien was rushing around. They shut off the overhead lights and sprinted out of the room.

The door slammed shut with a bang. I didn't hear the lock click into place.

Exhausted, I sat down on my bed. The luxurious blanket felt cool against my fried skin. I drank a balloon of water to get the copper taste out of my mouth. My eyes were closed when I felt a presence.

"You're back." I sat up to talk to the little thief. "As a thank you for saving your ass, how about you tell me where you keep hiding?"

They stood in front of my cage without the cloak. I had forgotten that they had thrown it away. I had a much better view of them now.

This alien species was bipedal. I could tell that they were wearing pants of some kind. Their feet were huge and oddly shaped. I knew they only had three toes, but it was hard to see that in the dark.

They were lean to the point of being delicate. Their limbs were slender. Their arms hung down much longer than human arms would. The slim body combined with the tail reminded me of a snake.

Their face was completely shadowed. I could see hair on their head. I couldn't see any details. They stood there staring at me for a few seconds.

I gestured towards the door with my chin. "You better go before they remember to lock it."

The snake alien took a step forward. They put a thin finger on the glass panel. I was up in an instant. I pressed against the bars pointing at the panel.

"I know the code. I can squeeze through the clothing slot if you punch it in." The words came out in one rushed breath. I was so excited that it didn't register at first that they wouldn't know what I was saying.

I looked around frantically for something I could write with. If I could draw the pad, I could show them the pattern to unlock the door.

A bright light flashed next to me. I yelped, flinching away from it. The snake alien lifted their odd foot and kicked in the door. My jaw dropped.

“Damn, you are one cool alien.” A smile stretched across my face. I giggled.

I quickly stuffed as many water balloons into my jacket as I could hold. Then I tied the blanket around my neck like a cape. I didn’t bother with the strange jars.

When I turned around, the snake alien was gone. I rushed out of my cage and saw their dark shadow heading towards the door. I ran to catch up.

They stopped at the doors. I watched their head rock side to side. They turned to look back at me. I could barely make out plump, round cheeks and a square nose. Scales stood out along the bridge of their nose and brow ridge. There was no denying their *otherness*. The thing that shocked me, though, was how human they looked.

My rescuer didn’t bother trying to talk to me. They cracked the door open and rushed through. I jumped up and raced to follow. I tried not to trip as they hurried down the corridor.

The snake alien slowed down just enough to check around a corner. It must have been clear because they picked up the pace. I kept my eyes out for guards, but the building was empty.

The alien took a sharp left into an open doorway. A light flickered on. We were in some kind of laundry room. There were containers of white cloth lined up next to a machine that looked like an industrial dishwasher.

The alien made a hissing noise. It was the first thing I had heard from them. I looked towards them expectantly. My jaw dropped.

This creature was beautiful. I had never seen anything like it. I couldn’t help but stare.

Their skin was the flawless texture of fine sand. They had the coloring of a lemon tree. Those two features made them look striking.

At the center of their face was a yellow so warm that it was borderline orange. Blooming outwards, the yellow brightened. Somewhere down their neck, the color became green. The transition was subtle enough that I was having difficulty telling where the yellow stopped and the green began.

They had snake eyes. Slits ran vertically through perfectly round eyes. The irises were a spring green color that seemed dark against their yellow skin. Matching lines of brown scales curled above each bright eye. It made them look like they had eyelashes.

They had full, round cheeks. Paired with the exotic coloring, it made them look cherubic. Their lips were thin along a mouth wider than a human's. Their nasal bridge was broad and pronounced. It ended with an adorable button nose.

Their skin texture and bone structure made it hard to tell the shape of their features. Unlike humans, where the shape of the face was defined by things like where your nose or eyebrows were, this alien's face was different.

Scale patterns defined what they looked like. They arched along each brow, accenting their eyes. The coloring changed under each cheek, giving them their plump appearance. The scales worked as a natural contour, softening some areas while drawing the eye to others.

There was a lot more variety between the scales than I expected. Along the eyes and mouth, the scales were infrequent and soft looking. The scales were thin but raised on their nose, over the brow ridge, and under the jaw.

Mostly, the scales were the same color as the skin under them. Out of nowhere, a scale would be a completely different color than the skin surrounding it. There was a Key lime green scale along their yellow nose. It reminded me of a beauty mark.

I was surprised to see the alien's hair. It looked like silk draped over their shoulders. The color was what made my eyes bug out. Like the scales, the hair was multicolored. It was a yellow-themed rainbow with green and orange accents. A random strand of a unique color would pop up unexpectedly.

As their hair shifted, the pane of silken strands would move, revealing more colors. Back home, someone would have to spend hundreds of dollars to dye their hair like that.

On the crown of their head were rows of scales going back. Or at least they looked like scales. I squinted my eyes. The coloring made me think they might be intricately braided hair imitating scales. I couldn't tell from this far away.

Something waved in front of my face. I startled. In the light, the alien's tail looked longer. It was also orange. Yellow scales dotted the thickest part. The yellow increased as they traveled down to the pointed tip. Unlike the rest of the alien, their tail was completely covered in smooth scales. They interlocked tightly even as they slid with the tail's movement.

The alien had a beige vest over its lean body. Their skin brightened to a soft white along their chest, disappearing under the fabric. I could see their biceps flex due to the lack of sleeves.

Their pants were baggy, hiding what their legs looked like. They had brown feet that ended in delicately pointed talons. The three toes moved independently.

The end of the tail smacked the ground. I looked up. The alien was staring at me. Their head weaved to the side. I think it was supposed to be the snake version of a chin bob. I followed the direction of their strange motion.

In the corner of the room, hidden behind a massive set of laundry baskets, was a drain. It was a larger version of the one in my cage. It was also old as hell. A series of pipes crossed above it. A single drop of liquid dripped down onto the grate. Or where the grate had been years ago. Years of rust had left a body-sized hole in the metal.

"So that's how you got in," I muttered.

I walked over and looked down. The lights didn't fully light the room, let alone illuminate the spooky hole. All I could see was darkness.

The air coming up from it was cold. It carried a choking, musty smell too. The whole thing reminded me of forgotten

ocean caves. The smell was similar. It was strange that a moldy sewer reminded me of the ocean.

Something nudged my shoulder. The snake bobbed their head toward the hole. I stepped back. “If you’re so eager, you can go first,” I said.

Their upper body undulated. Their face made me think they were shrugging. They sat on the ground, grabbed the grate, and hopped down. Their clawed hands let go just as their body disappeared. I heard them hit the ground. There were no agonized screams.

Considering they were shorter than me, I didn’t have an excuse to chicken out. Besides, I really wanted to get out of this place. If that meant dropping down a dark hole, I would do it.

I followed the alien’s example. My hands were clammy as I leaned over the edge to grab the grate. A breeze shifted through my hair. That made me a little sick. With a prayer, I scooted off the laundry room floor and into the darkness.

My arms snapped taut as my body bounced in the open air. I swung my toes. Nothing brushed up against them. Sweat started to prickle along my lip—no sense in drawing it out.

“Watch out,” I called down.

I let go.

My heart hit my throat. Then I hit the ground. Pain shot up my legs. I fell to my side with a thump. I stayed on the floor, catching my breath, trying not to groan too loudly. Nothing felt broken. That did not mean I did not hurt. I hurt like I had dropped down fifteen feet onto hard ground.

I was also wet. That was not surprising, considering this is where all of the drains led. I felt the wetness seep through my clothes. I didn’t bother moving.

Short hissing noises broke through my pain. The alien was silhouetted above me. I didn’t need to speak alien to know that I was being laughed at. I staggered to my feet. My knee creaked uncomfortably. Besides that, I felt okay. No doubt I would be sore tomorrow.

I looked around. The only light was from the drains overhead. There wasn't much difference between tunnels on alien worlds and Earth. Made of smooth material, the pipe was big enough that the snake person and I could stretch our arms out and walk side by side without touching anything.

I heard a double hiss. It was an angry sound, more like a bark than any sound I had heard a snake make. I turned to see my rescuer searching a metal support arch. Their hands pat the structure as high as they could reach. Then they dropped to the floor and started searching. After a second, they slapped the ground.

The sound made me jump.

Whatever they were looking for wasn't there. With a long exhale, they stood. They went to move, and their feet slipped. Their hand shot out, catching the archway before they fell. Their eyes were blown wide, the bright green making it easy to see their surprise.

Whatever the tunnel was made of was smooth. The water made the ground slippery. The thin layer of slime made it very slippery. I could feel my toes slide as I flexed them inside my socks.

The alien let go of the archway and took a step. Both feet lost purchase. The alien flailed their arms. Their tail tried to wrap around the archway. Every time it got close to grabbing onto the metal support, the alien's body swung in the opposite direction leaving its tail grasping air.

It was like watching someone tap dance on ice. They would have been silent, too, if not for the panicked wheezing noises coming from their nose. The panting got faster and faster.

I didn't laugh at first. It was too strange to see an alien do something so mundane. It just kept going on. Forever. Their arms windmilled out of control. The little wheezes got louder. Their tail looked like a live wire. I couldn't help it. I started laughing.

All it took was one stray giggle, and the floodgates opened. I shouted out a laugh. Before long, I was bent over, ribs

burning, as tears ran down my face. The laughter may have sounded manic, but it felt good.

Finally, their tail slapped around a pole. It quickly curled around the structure until there was no give. The alien stood ramrod straight, arms out wide. They didn't move an inch.

Wiping my eyes, I let out a happy sigh. "Hold on. I'll come help."

I took one step forgetting about my wet socks. The instant I put weight on my foot, it shot out from under me. My ass hit the floor with a boom.

Pain shot up my spine. I pushed air out of my clenched teeth. I heard a sympathetic hiss.

"That's what I get for laughing," I croaked.

Before I stood up, I took off my socks. This time I was okay. My bare feet had no problem with the wet ground. I walked over to my rescuer. Luckily, the alien was smaller than me. Not by much, but the two inches would help.

The instant their skin touched mine, they flinched. Their skin was cold. It felt like touching someone who had been in the snow while you had been sitting by a fire. I must have felt like a furnace to them.

Going slow, I wrapped their arm around my waist. Then I put my arm around their shoulder. They didn't flinch this time. I felt them lean closer. It was strange to feel cool skin pressed against me. I eyed the tail before deciding to let it take care of itself.

The alien gave me an unsure look. I smiled at them. Their eyes darted down.

"So, which way? I don't want to be here when they find that cage empty." They didn't move. Of course, they didn't. Why would they suddenly speak English? I inclined my head in the direction they were trying to go earlier. "That way?"

After a second, the alien started walking down the tunnel. They started slowly. Their feet kept slipping. If not for me, they would have had to crawl out.

The tunnel began to brighten the further we walked. At first, I thought there was more light coming in from overhead. Then, I saw a pinpoint of light in front of us. I grew more and more anxious as the light got bigger. The alien directed me to one side of the tunnel as the exit came into view.

The big round exit for the pipe was covered in wire netting. The individual openings were small. The holes looked barely big enough to fit a hand through. There was no way either of us would fit.

The alien pulled me over to the far side of the entrance. Carefully, they let go of me and crouched down. They pulled a piece of metal from a pocket. It was six inches long. Shaped like a knife, it fit in their hand perfectly.

One of their hands began tracing the edge of the netting where it connected to the sewer pipe. I didn't know what they were looking for. They kept going over one spot. Back and forth. Then, their finger stuttered over something.

They brought their tool to where their finger had stopped. A beam of yellow light shot out of the end. I gasped. The alien didn't react. They dragged the light along the edge of the netting. I heard a popping noise. A section of the wiring separated from the wall like a switch had been triggered.

The alien quickly put the tool away. They grabbed the section that had come off the wall and pulled. The metal bent back with a screech. I rushed forward to help. We pulled the wire grate back far enough to squeeze through.

The alien held the grate back. They did the head bob thing gesturing to the opening. I didn't need to be told twice. I slid through. The alien hurried behind me. The opening snapped closed with a bang.

I turned around and realized that we were in the middle of a dense forest. The trees towered over us, making the air dark. They reminded me of weeping willows. Only they were the size of redwoods. Their trunks were a grey-green color. Their branches intertwined in some places creating a dense canopy. Each long limb had strange moss hanging down in a curtain.

The moss looked exactly like the mats that covered my captors. Sure enough, some moss strands were green while others were purple. The aliens would be able to blend in perfectly with the forest.

The ground was a red color that rose and fell in endless mounds. Nearly every single inch of open space was covered in vegetation of some kind. It would be hard trekking through such dense undergrowth. It would be slow going, at the very least.

I glanced around, suddenly feeling the urge to start putting distance between me and this building. The clearing was empty. The snake alien was gone. I whipped around, looking for them. My body sagged when I saw a flash of yellow amongst the grey tree trunks.

“Hey!” I whisper shouted. They didn’t react. I raced after them. “Ow, ow, ow.” My bare feet found every rock between them and me. They only turned around when I got close. “Way to just leave me,” I panted.

The alien stopped. They turned around until we were facing each other. They tilted their head back. I had no idea what that meant.

“I don’t know where to go,” I explained. “I was hoping I could follow you until we got out of the jungle.”

The alien didn’t understand me. They did that head tilt again. I looked behind me, where they were indicating. There was nothing but forest. When I turned back around, the alien was walking in the opposite direction.

“What the hell?” I called, chasing after them.

They stopped. Their body expanded with a deep breath. They turned around. They waved their arms in exaggerated swings. Now I was really confused. I kept walking towards them. The scales along their brow flattened into a line. They started hissing at me. I saw a flash of tiny, thin fangs.

I gasped. “You’re trying to get rid of me!” I shook my head. “Not happening, buddy! My options are very limited. I can either wander an alien planet alone or follow you. Guess

which one I'm picking? You just caught a level ten clinger, my friend."

They snorted when they realized I wasn't going anywhere and started walking away. I followed right behind. When they noticed me, they stopped and made a big show of trying to scare me away. I just stood where I was. Finally, they gave up and turned with a huff. I followed behind closely enough that they wouldn't lose me.

We did that for a long time. They would stop and make a big show of trying to scare me off. I would roll my eyes and wait. They would give up and try and ditch me again. They never caught on to the fact that I wouldn't be scared away.

The entire time, the snake alien led us further into the forest. Their patience lasted until the moss strands were so thick that I couldn't see far ahead. I was keeping extra close. It would be too easy to lose them. That must have been the last straw.

They whirled around, teeth bared. I jerked back. There were so many sharp points in that mouth. They hissed loudly, advancing on me. I took a step back. They saw my move and eased back. It was like they had made their point. I waited, expecting them to lunge at me. Instead, they did a heel spin and sprinted away in the opposite direction.

My mouth dropped open. I stood there in shock as they ran away from me. Their brightly colored hair bobbed and weaved through the foliage.

They glanced at me for just a second. Which is why I saw the panic in their eyes as they dropped out of view. A splash cut off their terrified scream.

I shot across the distance, sprinting to where they had vanished. Thick, strange branches whipped across my body. I ignored the pain as I skidded to a halt.

Out of nowhere, there was a hole in the ground. It was almost impossible to see it through the undergrowth. At the bottom of the hole, a river of water rushed by. My knees hit the ground as I frantically searched the surface.

A flash of yellow popped above the water. I looked around. There was no way to tell if the water was safe. The yellow went back under.

“Screw it.”

I stood up and jumped off the ledge. Air rushed past me as my stomach shot into my chest. My feet hit the water like a ton of bricks. The pain made me gasp. Freezing cold liquid stole my breath as it flooded my lungs. Wildly, I kicked upwards.

I broke the surface with a gasp. Then a scream. My eyes burned like I had poured lime juice into them. I rubbed them, desperate for relief. It only made it worse. Water rushed over my head, dragging me down.

I fought past the pain, needing air. My lungs burned. The river threw me against a wall of rocks. My fingers clawed into the surface. My body bounced as I found a handhold. My feet and knees scrambled up the rocks as I climbed towards the air. This time I was ready for the burn. I still screamed but kept climbing until I was on a wide ledge next to the river.

I didn't give myself time to catch my breath. I rolled onto my stomach and started working my way to standing. My eyes burned. Tears were spilling out of my eyelids, making it impossible to see. I still ran to the edge and looked around the river.

“Hey!” I coughed. My throat felt raw from whatever the hell was in the water. I still had to try to find this person, though, “Hey!”

I saw a flash of yellow out of the corner of my eye. I stopped so fast that I felt the soles of my feet rip on the gravel. The alien was clinging to the river bank. On the opposite side of the river. I rubbed my eyes, trying to get them to stop burning. It looked like they were holding on well enough. I noticed their other hand was carefully feeling around for a higher handhold. They were conscious, at least. I wasn't sure how long they would be able to hold on. I needed to be quick.

I ran upstream. I toed right up to the ledge, took a deep breath, and dove in. This time, I didn't gasp for breath. I pulled myself across the river with powerful forward strokes. The river tossed me around. I was too stubborn to stop swimming. My head bumped into a rock wall. I burst up, gasping for air.

My eyes burned when I opened them. I couldn't see anything. Luckily, the alien's neon hair was easy to spot. Using clawed fingers, I shimmied towards them.

When I reached them, I quickly assessed them to see if they were seriously hurt. There was an odd-colored liquid running down their closed eyes. There were patches of scraped scales. I didn't bother checking them out anymore than that.

Instead, I dipped under the water, put my shoulder under their hip, and shoved them up. Their body flailed out of the water. I felt them slap against the rock before they pulled themselves onto the cave floor. My arms shook. I lifted my body out of the water. That was all I had energy for. I flopped onto the hard rocks, half in the water, half on the wide ledge.

I just lay there trying to breathe for a long time. The burning in my eyes was what had me moving finally. I'd never been sprayed with pepper spray, but this is what I imagined it felt like. My throat and nose burned too.

I rolled myself into a sitting position. Luckily, my jacket had survived the journey through the river. I almost collapsed when I felt the water balloons in my pockets. The pockets hadn't ripped. Taking them out, I saw three had popped, leaving me with six. I didn't even think about rationing as I bit one open and poured it over my eyes.

It felt amazing. The burning died down to a manageable pulsing. Careful not to rub my eyes, I blinked until they were clear. Then I bit into another balloon and drank the whole thing.

Dragging myself across the ground, I checked on my escape buddy. They looked unconscious. Their eyes were closed. Cream-colored liquid poured down their cheeks from under their eyelids. Quickly, I bit open a balloon. I gently

pried back the delicate scales covering their eyes and cleaned the river water out. They didn't move.

Worried, I started looking them over. A few parts of their body looked like the scales had been ripped off. It had to be painful. I double-checked their head. I didn't feel any lumps. I couldn't tell if there were bruises. They never flinched. I poked them really hard too. They didn't wake up. Freaking out, I put my ear to their chest, hoping to hear a heartbeat.

I shivered as I pressed up against their bare chest. "You are freezing!" Granted, the river had been cold, but they shouldn't be this cold. I gasp. "Unless you're a big old snake!"

Snakes on Earth needed to be warm. If they got cold, they slowed down and sometimes fell asleep. I started to take off their cold, wet clothes. Then I took off my jacket and shirt. I did my best to cover their cold body with my warm one. I tried not to pay too much attention to what was below their waist.

I felt their skin slowly warm. Their body was taking some of my body's heat. Eventually, the excitement caught up to me, and I dozed off.

Muscles under my hand flexed. That woke me up immediately. I gently unwrapped myself as my alien buddy stirred.

I put on my shirt as I checked them over. They looked different. They seemed duller. If they were a human, I would probably say they looked grey. It wasn't exactly that. Their colors weren't as vibrant. The areas that had been shockingly white looked like dirty dishwater now. They shifted with a groaning hiss. That's when I noticed that their scales did not shine in the light. They were matte.

I hadn't even thought to rinse the river water off of their body. The water had only burned my face. I hadn't noticed it on my skin. Alien skin must be way more sensitive than human skin. I felt awful.

The alien blinked. I shuffled over to their side. Their head turned towards me with an aggressive puff. I inhaled. Their eyes were completely milky. *They're blind.*

“Oh my god,” I cried as I hugged them. They stiffened until they took a few deep breaths. Then their hand began awkwardly patting around my body. It was such a confusing reaction to my tearful hug that I stopped crying. They touched my hair and started petting it. I rolled my eyes.

Great, now I'm their pet.

My desperate hug had pulled the alien into a sitting position. They hissed as we pulled apart. I recognized that sound. I had made the exact same noise when I sat up ten minutes ago. Being beat up by a river made you sore.

They pat their thighs, then froze. They ran their hands up and down their legs. It took me a second to realize that they were looking for their pants. I stretched out, grabbing them from where I had thrown them. I set them on their lap. They snorted. They searched the pockets before pulling out the weird knife-shaped thing from before.

They fiddled with it. A laser shot out. I dove out of the way with a yelp. The alien bobbed their head sheepishly. They pushed a different button. It didn't do anything. That must have been what they expected because they put the device back into their pocket.

They stretched their arms out and then stood up. The strange hissing noises they made fascinated me. It was like trying to decipher an angry teapot. Once they were steady, they stuck out one foot and gently tapped the ground. Once they were sure it was safe, they set their foot down. They kept inching forward toward the river's edge. I jumped up to keep them from falling in, but they stopped.

Their hand went to their crotch, and my eyes followed. They dropped their pants in a familiar gesture despite their unique body. They had to pee.

I almost sagged when I saw their “downstairs.” It was as bare as a Ken doll. There were just smooth scales—nothing else. My relief was short-lived. The alien began carefully running two fingers over the scales down there. They lifted a wide scale. An obscenely hot pink cock sprang out. I might have squealed.

It did not look human. It was so *alien* that I couldn't stop staring. Everywhere I looked, I saw something new. The pink was shocking against the dulled pistachio-colored scales that ran from their stomach to their thighs. The color almost made it difficult to focus on anything else.

Then, I noticed it had two heads. There was hardly any space between them. From the side, they looked like one giant tip. Well, they weren't so much tips as they were fiery red suckers. Yeah, I passed by that trait quickly. I did not want to think about that one. Luckily, the soft white spikes lining each head provided ample distraction. Surprisingly, the thing was not monstrously large. Just monstrous looking.

The alien started peeing. I slapped a hand over my eyes. "All right, so standing up to pee is universal for boys. Well, that's good to know, I guess. I'm kind of jealous. That would have made the cargo ship so much easier. One time, one of the chubby aliens bumped into me, and it was a nightmare." I was babbling. I knew it. I just couldn't stop. My mind was still stuck on the image of his...bits.

"I feel like I should give you a name. Now that I've seen your...whatever you call that." I hummed, hands still over my eyes. "Sunshine seems like a cruel name for a snake alien. You are very sunny. Although with the green, you look like a lemon tree. Your snout is too orange for a normal lemon. You're more like a Meyer lemon." I sat up. "That's what I'll call you. Meyer. That seems like a good name for a snake man."

I heard him shuffle around. I peeked one eye open. He was struggling to put his pants back on. It looked like he was about to topple back into the river. I rushed over to help.

His movements were sluggish. I grabbed the cloth and started pulling it up his body. His skin was freezing again. His species must not retain heat very well.

Between his slow speed and lack of sight, it took us a while to get his pants on. I was half tempted to carry him back to where the rest of our clothes were. I didn't want to risk

dropping him, so we went at a snail's pace. He plopped onto his butt the second we stopped.

I checked out my jacket. It was still damp but not soaked like it had been. I shrugged it on. The heaviness of the pockets reassured me. I pulled out one of the balloons and drank it. I grabbed another one to give to the alien, but he was asleep. I put it back and zipped up all of the pockets.

I gently lifted the alien until he was lying half on me. I wrapped as much of myself around him as I could. If his body needed the heat, I could help. The steady rise and fall of his chest lulled me into a deep sleep.

Chapter Three

Vesex

I was the first hatched of my Fathers' first clutch. I was the Prime of my own nest. I was a contender for Sovereign of my planet. I was not unaccustomed to hard work. That did not mean I wanted to trek through dense, foreign woods in search of my most wayward nestmate.

Huzzar's idea of what constituted the need for an emergency retrieval was very different from what the rest of us thought defined an emergency. There was a good chance that Seethur and I would stomp through this sun-forsaken place only to find that Huzzar had gotten tired and didn't want to walk the rest of the way to the ship.

"The tracking says that you're right on top of him," Hix Theespur, our pilot and nestmate, said via our neuro-comms.

I glanced around the foliage. Then up into the trees. My tongue flicked out. I couldn't taste any trace of him in the air. I looked at Seethur Hurthus, my hulking Security Officer, and another of my nestmates. He shook his head. I hadn't expected a verbal response. Seethur was a Susix of few words.

"When was the last time our comms were calibrated?" I asked.

"I do it weekly," Hix hissed angrily. "With our luck, I expect one of us to get kidnapped that often."

My hood flexed in irritation. "Don't blow air at me, pup!" I bit back. "We can't scent Huzzar anywhere. So, unless he is vecking with us, he is hidden."

The braids curling down on either side of my head pulled tight as my hood expanded. Usually, the flexible scales lay invisible against my head and neck. They only expanded when

I was fighting or getting pissed off. Then, the two flaps swelled into a massive hood.

It was the only Royal Susix attribute that I was proud of. My hood was impressive when fully displayed. It was part of the reason I didn't use it as often as the rest of my breed. Flaring your hood in the heat of the moment worked better when other Susix weren't used to seeing it.

I rarely used my other Royal Susix trait because it was morally dubious. All Royal Susix were able to hypnotize. As a breed, they abused it constantly. It was a gift meant to be used for good. In contrast, it was used continuously to subvert other Susix's will.

Although, I was veckling tempted to use it on Hix. He was starting to piss me off. It would be much easier to poke around his head to force him to stop giving us the runaround. I took a deep breath and tried to let go of my anger. We were all tense. We had been for a long time, long before Huzzar sent the emergency beacon.

For the last three hundred rotations, our planet, Susurex, had been ruled by a single nest. The Sovereign Nest was beloved by the people. Each generation had reigned honorably and with compassion.

Tragically, our current leaders lost their clutch at an early age. They were never blessed with another.

With the passing of each Sovereign member, the planet grieved while worrying about the future. Now, the last remaining Sovereign was dying. With no hatchling to pass the mantle to, his line would be lost forever.

A new Sovereign Nest needed to be chosen.

The Sovereign's Council had decided to use a quest to determine which nest should take up the ruling mantle. Any nest that wanted a chance at becoming the next reigning family would be able to participate.

The quest was simple enough. Whoever could locate the lost Crown of Versetti, who had been the first Sovereign of

Susurex, and present it to the Council would become Susurex's next ruling nest.

The only problem was that the Crown had been lost to raiders eons ago. Long before our people began keeping accurate records. No one knew where it was. There were only myths about where it might have been taken. The Council only had one depiction of it written in an ancient scroll. I had seen it. It was so old that the lines of the drawing weren't entirely visible.

It was an impossible task. It was meant to be. The Council had reasoned that the gods would aid whomever they wanted to rule.

I didn't put that much faith in the gods. Not when so many greedy Susix were looking to take over ruling Susurex. So, I had gotten to work following every frozen lead my nest could hunt down. We'd been hounding vague legends for six rotations. We were closer than we had ever been to finding the Crown. We were all on edge.

I heard Hix inhale. No doubt to take a chunk out of me.

"I smell water," Seethur interrupted. He jerked his head left.

Trust the water dweller to scent it out. It was just one of the many advantages of being a Kithhari Susix. On top of being massive and able to withstand cold temperatures, the male could smell water from an amazing distance. I didn't question him. I followed as he circled a spot on the ground.

"It's right here," he indicated under our feet.

My nostrils flared as my long tongue slipped out. I couldn't sense any water. "Maybe it's an underground spring?"

Seeth scanned the area. He zeroed in on something beyond a patch of dense trees. He marched toward it.

"We should try to comm Huzzar, Seethur," I called. He didn't stop. My hood shivered. None of my nest listened to me.

I quickly caught up to him. He was ripping down ropes of hanging vines. Behind the curtain of multi-colored plants was the opening to a cave. We both had to crouch as we followed the steep path inside. As we moved forward, the tunnel shrank. Seeth lowered himself to the ground and used his large tail to propel himself through the narrow tunnel. While taller than Seethur by a fist, I lacked his broad shoulders. Luckily for me, that meant I could crawl through the tunnel. I only ran into a few tight spots.

On the other side was an underground river. The river was about fifteen arms wide. Steep rock walls banked the water. There were wide ledges on both sides. Seethur stood on the edge of the river, looking into the water.

“It stings my nose,” he said as he ran a hand across his heat pits.

I tried to comm Hix hoping to get directions to Huzzar. The frozen thing just buzzed in my head. I couldn’t see anything to point us in the right direction. I looked at the ceiling and tried to pinpoint where we had been standing when Hix had commed to tell us that we were right on top of Huzzar. Then I headed in that direction.

Huzzar was easy to spot. He was practically lying in the middle of the path. I thought he was getting up as we got near, but Huzzar’s body settled back on the ground, and a strange creature jumped in front of him.

I’d never seen the species before. It was about as tall as Huzzar. Its bone structure appeared fragile. I would be inclined to guess that they were a small species. However, the green skin around their torso was bulky, suggesting a larger frame. Its body had dark coloring with pale appendages. Brown velvet hair swung wildly as it threw its hands wide. I saw a flash of teeth as it started chattering at us.

“Hissy, be quiet. I’m trying to sleep,” Huzzar groaned. He didn’t bother opening his eyes. He just rolled over.

“Huzzar Fethix, if you used an emergency beacon so we could pick you up from a hook-up, I will pluck the scales from

your body,” I hissed out the last words. My hood started to open.

Huzzar shot up. “Prime?” He sounded hesitantly hopeful.

That’s when I noticed it. Huzzar’s eyes were molting. They were already completely white. He was blind. He wasn’t due for a molt until the next rotation. Which meant he must have damaged them. All of my anger escaped in a sympathetic sigh. Hopefully, the molting eyes weren’t an indication of permanent damage. Susix had advanced healing abilities, but it didn’t mean we were invincible. My gut soured at the thought. Hopefully, he would regain his sight.

“Huzzar, youngest of my nest,” I breathed, “tell me you are unhurt.”

He winced. “Not unhurt. However, I won’t expire. This river is acidic. I fell in, and the water burned me. My eyes capped over almost immediately.”

We all knew there would be risks when we decided to try and earn the right to lead our people. Traveling through the deepest reaches of space was dangerous. Add to the fact that we were literally chasing pirates and the odds that we would be hurt went up.

We had walked into this quest with eyes wide open, accepting that something might happen to any one of us. That did nothing to stop me from worrying constantly. I was their Prime. I wanted to keep them safe. I had managed fairly well, too, until now. Looking into Huzzar’s white-capped eyes, guilt threatened to swamp me.

I went to help him, but the strange creature between us made a sharp noise. I glared at it. It was standing between me and one of mine.

“Huzzar,” I teased, my voice warm with affection, “only you could manage to gain a follower when you’re breaking into a palace. Could you tell your groupie to move before I throw them out of the way?”

“I’m very likable,” Huzzar agreed happily. “This is a first for me. Hissy isn’t a hook-up. She’s a pet. I set her free from a

cage in the King's throne room. She's been following me since then." He didn't even bat an eye when he told me.

My hood twitched. "Tell me you got the Crown before you went on a rescue mission."

He huffed an angry breath, folding his arms across his chest. "I'm a professional. I am offended you would suggest that I would do something so reckless."

Such emotion in this one, I hissed internally. "Huzzar," I warned.

His shoulders sagged. "Of course, I got it. The whole thing went off without any surprises."

"Obviously not," my tail whipped towards the creature standing between my nestmate and me. Not that he could see it.

Huzzar laughed. The huffing chuckle had me relaxing. As much of a pest as Huzzar could be, his happy nature was a gift. I was glad it was still intact. He tried to stand. He was noticeably unsteady.

As I went to help him, the little creature raced back. It saddled against him, allowing Huzzar to rest his weight on them. They made a quiet noise.

"Hissy is pretty surprising, in the best way," he flicked his tongue happily.

"Stop calling it that," I grumbled as he walked toward us.

"Hissy? Don't you like the name I picked?" He seemed genuinely confused.

"Only female hatchlings call pets that," I replied.

"My sister had a doll named Hissy," Seethur cut in under his breath.

"My point exactly," I nodded smugly.

"Look at her," he purred, nudging the animal softly. "She's adorable. She makes the cutest sounds. Hissy is the perfect name for her." He flicked his tongue out at it in that distinct way mothers did to their hatchlings.

She flinched back, obviously not wanting to touch his tongue. Seethur made an amused noise. Huzzar pouted.

“She’s not a pet,” I argued.

“Yes, she is,” he shot back without hesitation. “She was the Petriole King’s pet. Now, she is my pet.”

“You’re not keeping her.”

He held up one claw. “That’s where you’re wrong. This pretty little pet saved my life. Twice. You don’t ignore loyalty like that. You reward it. I plan to keep this sweet girl fed and warm for the rest of her life. I also plan on keeping her very close on the off chance she needs to save me again.”

There it was. Huzzar had to have Royal Susix blood in him because he could be as self-serving and pompous as a Royal. If the pet could make his life easier, he would try to keep it. To avoid wasting any more time, I chose to ignore his behavior this time.

“I will need to hear that story once we are back on the ship.” I looked him over.

He looked like thix. The river had damaged his scales. They were already preparing to shed. The poor little Vispur had to be in pain. Once we were back on the ship Seph, our doctor and the final member of our nest could check him out. Hopefully, the acid had only done surface-level damage.

“I will carry you home.” I planned on leaving Huzzar’s new pet behind in the jungle. There was no way it could keep up with us once we got moving.

“Seethie?” Huzzar hissed coyly. “Would you carry Hissy for me? I don’t want her to get lost. Please?” He drew out the last sound like a hatchling would.

There would be no getting rid of the animal now. Seethur could not say no to our youngest nestmate. Especially not when Huzzar pretended to plead. Seethur stepped forward to pick up “Hissy.”

Huzzar gently pushed the poor thing towards Seethur. “There you go, little Hissy. Let Seethie carry you, my

pampered pet.”

She balked. Seethur didn't pay her any mind. He picked her up with one arm. His long tail wrapped around her, keeping her secure. He nodded to me. I picked up Huzzar. We started towards the tunnel we came in from.

As we got to the narrow passage that led out, I softly set Huzzar onto his feet. Then I slithered through. Huzzar crept through the small space easily. He went slowly. I pulled him to me when he got within arm's reach. He waved off my concerned hiss and went to sit down.

Huzzar's pet went next. This was the first trouble we had with the thing. The creature did not want to go through the passage. Seethur finally boxed her in and started wriggling in after her. That got her moving.

I left the three of them to check the forest for enemies. In the time that we had been underground, the sun had set. The temperature would be dropping soon, which was a problem. We would start to slow down as it got colder. The other side of that coin was that the darkness would be the perfect cover.

I felt the neuro-comm reconnect. “Hix, let Seph know that Huzzar has taken an acid bath. He has also managed to pick up a pet. We'll need to go through a full decontamination procedure.” I told him.

“Was it accidental, or was he pushed in?” I heard the telltale rattle of Hix's tail shaking.

“I haven't heard the story yet. Could you have everything ready for us?”

“Yes, Prime.” For once, he managed to keep the sass out of his tone.

“Any warm bodies I should be aware of?” I asked.

His rattle tapped against something. “There has been a lot of movement in the palace. They're upset about something. I can't be sure if it's because they just noticed that Huzzar stole the Crown or if it's something else.”

They were definitely mad about Huzzar stealing something, but whether it was the Crown or the pet, I do not know.

“Are they searching the surrounding jungle?” I couldn’t sense them.

“They’re preparing to enter the trees,” Hix confirmed.

“Veck.” We were fairly close to the palace. They would be on us in minutes. “Alright, take my orders and make them to-go because we are going to try and beat the palace guard to the ship.”

“I’ll get the engines hot.” He signed off.

I rushed back to my nestmates. “We’re going to have to be fast. The palace guards are headed this way.”

Seethur put Hissy on his back, getting ready to run. I picked up Huzzar. He wrapped himself around my torso. He tried to keep his tail out of my way. I wrapped my tail around him, hoping to break up his bright coloring. Seethur and I were dark in Susix. We blended in with the jungle at night. Huzzar would attract attention if someone found us.

Seethur and I waited at the entrance of the tunnel. None of us said anything while we waited. Even the pet must have felt our tension because they went still.

In the dark, we were essentially blind. No amount of technology could make up for genetics. Our species didn’t have good eyesight at the best of times. If we were left on our own, we wouldn’t make it to the ship. It would take too long. Luckily, we had developed a strategy for situations like this.

Off in the distance, a tiny heat source bloomed. It was far enough away that I felt like I was imagining it at first. As we stood there, it expanded, getting hotter.

When the ship’s engines ran planet-side, they put off immense heat. Our heat pits honed in on the high temperature. With our nearly silent engines and superior camouflage technology, it was like our own natural homing beacon.

I gave Seethur the signal. We shot out toward the heat of our ship. The curtains of vines slowed us down. Hissy

shrieked about something. Our pace picked up when we saw the lights of the docking bay.

Standing at the top of the docking ramp was Seph. There was a lazy smile on his face. He raised his steaming mug when he saw us. He looked completely unfazed that we were running for our lives.

Every single one of my nestmates is insane, I thought. And you aren't? I hissed at my brain.

I blasted past Seph without a word. He just smiled wider, his black lips spreading across white scales.

“Hix, we’re on. Go ahead and initiate the launch sequence,” I called as I continued to the med bay.

“Tell me when everyone is strapped in,” he replied.

The med bay doors opened automatically. I strode to one of the heated beds and set Huzzar in it. I started to buckle him in for take-off. He batted my hands away.

“I can do it. I’m not helpless.” He complained.

“No, but you are shedding your eye scales. We are also on a timeline. I can’t wait for you to find the buckles.” I snapped the last one in and covered him with the large warming blanket.

“I wish you had put him into the tank. We should rinse off the acid before anything else.” Seph softly complained. He was already headed towards one of the many secure chairs to strap himself down.

“There’s nothing we can do about it right now. Once we are safe, and out of orbit, we can sort everything out.” I checked to make sure that Seethur and Hissy were buckled in. Seeth tightened one of her chest straps before taking his seat.

“All clear, Hix.”

The ship rose slowly. There was no reason to alert the Petriole of our location if they weren’t already aware of it. We picked up speed as we rose. There was a hard jolt before the ship settled into open space.

“We’re in hyperdrive. Can I put this thing on autopilot and join the party?” Hix asked.

Seph unbuckled and walked over to Huzzar. Seph was not the tallest of our nest. Nor was he particularly large like Seethur. Yet, he drew as much attention as Huzzar due to his striking coloring.

Most of his scales lacked color completely. They were almost translucent because of it. In areas where his scales were softer, you could see the purple of his blood running through his veins.

Which made his black hair and mouth startling. The claws tipping his white hands were also black. He would have had matching black eyes if not for the massive scar bisecting his left one. The damage was permanent. The milky scale fell off during every annual shedding. I always secretly hoped it would regrow to its original black. It never did. It always hardened back to white. Somehow, it added to his stunning appearance. He did not lack admirers when we went out for drinks. It never ceased to rile us up.

At first, I thought Seph’s good looks might cause a rivalry between him and Huzzar. Huzzar could be vain and had a short fuse. I was positive he would throw a tantrum. There was no jealousy, surprisingly. They became very close, very quickly instead.

Seph carefully cupped Huzzar’s face. He managed to assess Huzzar’s health while expressing his affection. He made a sad hissing noise. “Little snakelet, you burned your whole body. Does it hurt?”

Huzzar shook his head, “Not that much anymore. Now it just stings.”

The pair went back and forth a few times before Seph sent Seethur and Huzzar to wash off the acid. Seethur was on strict orders to keep Huzzar from falling. Hix came in as Seph and Seethur were helping Huzzar into a healing tub a few minutes later.

“Please tell me I haven’t missed anything,” his rattle shook with barely hidden excitement.

Seph rolled his eyes. “No, you haven’t heard the good news. Huzzar, most of the damage is superficial. You will be healed once this layer of scales sheds. I feel confident your eyesight will return. We will have to wait and see if your coloring changes.”

Huzzar went limp in their arms. Everyone dove for him. Seethur managed to keep him from cracking his head on the tub. “My scales?” The words came out as a breathy question. “What’s wrong with my scales?” Suddenly, he was frantic.

“Let’s get you settled into the healing water. Then I can continue telling you *all* about your progress,” Seph said with as much bite as his soft voice could manage.

Despite his distress, Huzzar visibly relaxed as the water went up his neck. His tail went limp at the bottom of the clear tub.

“As I was saying, your scales were damaged. The pigment is dull. We will have to see how they look once they are healed. I am glad more harm was not done, even if that means you are a different hue for the rest of time.” Huzzar grumbled but didn’t argue. “Now, your eyes are the surprise of the night. While the acid burned them, it did not burn them to the extent that the rest of your body was. You should be blind. You’re not, but you should be.” The statement hung heavy in the room. “As it were, you should recover very well. We can reassess once this shed finishes. I am feeling very grateful you are this well.”

Huzzar murmured his thanks.

“Now that we know you will recover,” I began, “where is the Crown?”

He gestured for his pants. He grabbed them from Seethur’s hands. Immediately, he had them turned inside out. With a tearing sound, he dug through the hole he had just made. With a smug flourish, he pulled out the Crown of Versetti.

Unlike other crowns, this one was designed to drape over the head of a Royal Susix. A series of clear jewels were connected in a woven pattern. Between each jewel, threaded with brilliant gold wiring, was a bone from Versetti's tail. The delicate white bones added just enough structure to the piece that, when worn, it would enhance the natural curve of a Royal Susix's hood.

Huzzar held it out to me. "I made a pocket out of blast-proof fabric. Just in case I got tossed around while escaping." He smiled widely, showing his long fangs. "It worked like a charm. This thing is in pristine condition."

I took it from him. I couldn't help but stare at it. We had it. We had the Crown. All we needed was to get it to the Council. Then we could start changing our people's lives.

"Seethur, would you please secure the Crown in the safe?" I held it out to him. He left to put it in the secret compartment we had specifically built for the Crown. It would keep it protected even if we got boarded or blown up.

"Now, would you care to tell us what happened?" I asked. "Please don't forget to explain how I am now responsible for a pet."

"Getting to the throne room was easy," Huzzar started as he relaxed into the tub. "The laundry room grate was rotted, so I didn't need to cut anything. There were no guards or security measures. Their King is so cocky. I managed to find the Crown without a hitch." He paused. He looked hesitant to continue.

"What did you do?" Hix interrupted, obviously guessing why Huzzar was pausing.

Huzzar flashed him a fang but continued. "I got excited. We finally found it. After rotations of roughing it, we did it. So, I was excited, veck you very much. My tail hit a vase. It broke, and half of the castle's guards showed up to investigate, which had the King running to investigate. It worked out!" He quickly defended as we started yelling.

"What happened?" I boom over the noise.

“It felt like the entire palace staff came to check things out. They started going through every single scale of the throne room. I thought they were going to find me. They were being very thorough. Until they found the broken vase, that’s when the King came in. He asked what had happened. The steward said the pet had knocked the vase over with one of its nutrispheres. They had found a few nutrisphere skins near the vase. Hissy-”

“Hissy?” Hix interrupted.

“My pet,” Huzzar pointed to where the animal was still locked in their chair.

“Veck. I didn’t even notice it. It’s quiet.” Hix stared at it. Now, he looked way more interested in the new pet than in Huzzar’s story.

I was surprised that Hissy hadn’t tried to get out of her chair. She didn’t seem bothered by the arrangement either. I turned back to Huzzar.

“Hissy must have thrown the nutrispheres after I had hidden from the guards. They weren’t there when I was searching. Anyways, so the King wanted to punish Hissy. His guards brought in a stun stick. Hissy was quick. He did manage to get her once.” Huzzar undulated his body, agitated by the memory. “My mother always said it’s okay to be thieves so long as you’re thick as thieves. Since Hissy had diverted everyone’s attention, no one found me. She did me a solid. I decided to set her free. That was all I was going to do,” he threw his hands up in defense. “Then, when we got to the jungle, she would not leave me alone. While trying to escape her, I fell into that river of death. Hissy jumped in after me and pulled me to safety. I got the hint at that point. She isn’t getting rid of me now.” He sent the pet a wink.

The creature changed color. Her cheeks went pink. We all made appreciative noises. No Susix could resist another creature who could change color. It was a rare and admired trait amongst our kind.

“You wanting to keep her has nothing to do with the fact that she’s saved your ass twice and might do it again?” Hix

asked.

I burst into loud, chuffing laughter. “No need to guess on that one, Hix. When we found him, Huzzar basically said that was why he wanted to keep her.”

“Or could it be that your pet is a heat source?” Seethur asked.

We all perked up at that revelation. A heat source was vital to any Susix. Heat kept us moving and living. Having a portable heat source was not only necessary. It was also the height of luxurious convenience. If Huzzar’s little pet put off heat, then he had hit the jackpot.

While Huzzar recapped what happened after Seethur and I found him, Seph began scanning Hissy.

The animal kept Seph in her eyesight as he circled her. She went stiff when he pulled out the hand-held scanner. It wouldn’t do any invasive scans. The device gathered all of its data remotely. She relaxed slightly when it didn’t bite her. Huzzar finished talking before the doctor was done.

“Well?” Huzzar asked impatiently.

“I don’t know,” Seph finally said.

“What do you mean you don’t know?” Hix asked, confused.

Seph waved his tail back and forth in a shrug. “I don’t know what your pet is. It is not a categorized species.” He glanced at his data pad. “I know she was inoculated with the vaccines the Trade Commission requires. Nothing beyond that. They probably only did the bare minimum to keep the King from getting sick.”

“I have the best luck,” Huzzar sang. “My pet comes with all her shots but tell me, good doctor, how is her health?”

“There are a few nutritional deficiencies from an inadequate diet. Her muscles have atrophied. Nothing some exercise won’t cure. Besides that, she is healthier than you are right now,” he teased.

“Did your scan alert you to any physical traits we should know about? Does she produce any poison?” Seethur asked. As our Security Officer, he usually focused on things like that.

Seph shook his head. “Unless her species produces a poison seasonally or as a hormonal response, I would say no. She doesn’t have claws or sharp teeth. She might be a transformative species, and her other form is dangerous.” He let out a tired sigh. “Nothing I can tell from the minimal data I have.”

“Would you please check her chest for an abrasive patch of fur? It might be a set of small teeth.” Seethur pinched his fingers together, giving Seph a rough measurement for whatever he was supposed to be looking for.

“Why are you asking?” Huzzar asked, rising out of the water slightly.

Seethur ran a single claw down the center of his back. “When I carried her to the ship, something kept biting my scales.”

Hix walked around Seethur. He hissed in sympathy. “Something got you. You’ve got a red mark about the length of my arm. Veck, some of your scales are bent.”

Seph folded at the hip, staring at the center of Hissy’s chest. He made a curious sound. “Something is catching the light...” he tailed off.

He reached out and snagged something. There was a loud tearing noise. Hissy shrieked, smacking Seph’s hands away.

The room erupted in chaos.

Seethur pulled Seph across the med bay before anyone could move. Huzzar tried to jump out of the tub, screaming about Seph hurting his pet. Hix pulled a wicked knife, ready to step in front of Hissy if he needed to. Seph started yelling at Seethur to put him down.

Everyone froze, waiting for something to happen. Hissy watched us all with wide eyes. She did not move, let alone lunge at anyone.

“See,” Huzzar panted, still trying to get out of the tub, “she only freaked out because you were hurting her. It’s okay, Hissy. Papa is coming.” If he could manage to get out of the slippery tub first.

Seph blew out an irritated breath. He wagged his tongue at Huzzar. “I wasn’t hurting her. She has something on her. I want to know what it is.”

I strode forward before anyone could protest. I saw what Seph was talking about. There was a strip of something running down her center.

Striking lightning fast, my claws snagged a cold dangling piece of something hard, and I pulled. It made that same strange ripping noise as it traveled down her body. I stepped out of hitting range before Hissy could retaliate.

The force of my motion pulled her green hide away from her frame. It fell off her shoulder, revealing pale flesh with a dark stripe covering her torso. Her hand practically teleported as she pulled the hide back against herself.

“That’s what I thought,” Seph sounded smug. “She’s-let me go.” There was a struggle as Seethur reluctantly put Seph down. “We weren’t hurting her. The green thing is a piece of clothing. The ‘teeth’ you felt were some metal contraption holding the clothing together.”

“Who would put clothing on an animal?” Seethur sounded genuinely perplexed.

Huzzar snorted. “Why else would you own a pet? Just you wait, Seethie. The millisecond we hit a port, I am buying matching outfits for Hissy and me.” It felt like he was warning us.

“She’s so tiny!” Hix cried. “All of her bulk came from that clothing! They probably needed to layer her with it, so she didn’t freeze to death!” His rattle rose behind him as he got worked up.

Hix’s tail was very expressive. It did not help that it was attached to an overly emotional Susix. He took in Hissy’s thin frame, and the rattle shook.

Hissy lost it at the sound. She tried to hide inside the chair. Her body jerked against the restraints. Her chest heaved in panicked gasps. Hix had terrified her.

“I think you have all harassed my pet enough for one night,” Huzzar hissed angrily. Hix dropped his head embarrassed. “Now, if you will excuse me, I want to bathe my pet before I stuff us full of warm food.”

“You will do no such thing,” Seph barked, finally freeing himself from Seethur’s tail. “You will have those eye caps for days at least. Then, you’re going to start the very itchy process of shedding. All you will be doing is resting. I will not be happy if I hear that you even thought about getting out of bed tonight.” He lifted his lip. His ink-black mouth showcased the threat of his white fangs. Huzzar started to argue. “I will bathe and feed your pet. You get to *direct* me while I do it. As a reward for getting the Crown for us.” He smiled sweetly. “Thank you, Huzzie.”

Huzzar ducked his head, suddenly embarrassed.

“Yes, thank you, Huzzar. You have made your nest proud,” I flared my hood to bow. The rest of the crew expressed their gratitude also. I turned to Hix and Seethur. “We need to plan our route home. We still have to get the Crown to the Council. I have a feeling that our competitors will start making their presence known.”

Chapter Four

Cece

relaxing once they were gone. Things had gotten intense with so many large, loud creatures in the same room. Fewer people meant fewer big bodies hissing and pulling out knives. The fact that they had left me with Meyer and the monochromatic one helped me relax more.

The black and white one *had* tried to take my jacket off. However, he had only yelled once, and it was not at me, which put him in the running for the most trustworthy alien in the room.

The two aliens ignored me as they returned to what they were doing. I took the opportunity to stare at them in good lighting.

They looked like reptile people. All of them had elongated features, scales, and tails. They even hissed like snakes.

I shut off the scared part of my brain for a few seconds to indulge my curiosity. Between the five aliens, there was a lot of variety. Meyer was bright and delicate. He had unique structures on his face that differed from the other snake aliens. They may have been useful structures. I didn't know. I just knew that they were pretty.

The three who had left lacked his bright coloring. They had other distinct traits that made each unique.

The one who asked a lot of questions, who had led the way to the spaceship, was brown. They had darker scales that formed circles going down their chest. Their black hair was braided along either side of their head. I thought it was just a fashion statement until the hair had moved. The scales on either side of their neck and head expanded into a hood. It looked just like a King Cobra.

I didn't notice anything about the other alien who had been in the tunnel with us besides how big they were. They were massive. They towered over everyone. I half expected them to need to duck when they entered a room. It wasn't just their height that was impressive. They were thick. That was the only way I could describe it. Their neck was thick. Their tail was thick. Everything was thick. The only other defining trait was their lack of hair. They had a sleek head of scales.

Then, there was the rattlesnake guy. I was born and raised in Montana. I couldn't recall the first time I heard a rattler shake its tail. That sound has always been a part of my psyche. Hearing it come from a six-and-a-half-foot bipedal snake alien did things to my brain. Namely, it shut off. I went complete cave person and tried to run away from the big scary predator.

The black and white one was different from everyone else. Nearly all of their body was a single snow-white color. There was almost no variation in tone either. That made it hard to differentiate individual scales like in the other aliens. It made them look human. A curtain of messy black hair provided a massive contrast to their pale skin.

The most striking thing about them were the scales surrounding their mouth. They were obsidian-colored. When they opened their mouth, I could not stop staring. The black extended inside too.

I kept going back to their mismatched eyes. One was pitch black. The other was the same milky color as Meyer's.

I got the feeling that they were the ship's doctor. They poked my rescuer in the way only trained professionals did. They had that clinical feeling around them too.

The doctor's lingering side eye was my first indication that they hadn't forgotten about me. After the zipper incident, they hadn't openly acknowledged me.

Slowly, they started to invade my space. They kept getting closer an inch at a time. They were treating me like a dog at the shelter. Like they expected me to bite them.

I didn't do anything to reassure them that I wasn't going to either. Depending on what they were going to do, I might try and smack them again. It wasn't off the table.

They never pushed me. They patiently pretended to clean the counter next to me. Meyer chatted from his bath. He was completely oblivious to the dance happening around him.

I was ready for it when the doctor sat uncomfortably close to me. I had seen enough dog rescue videos to know that this came before they tried to "pet" me. I went along with it because, honestly, I wanted to see what they were up to. I also wanted them lulled into complacency if I needed to fight my way out.

The doctor hissed excitedly when the "petting" stage started. They really liked the feel of my hair. I was grossed out that they were touching it. I had washed it with the water balloons, but it wasn't like I had any soap. At this point, greasy dreads were forming at the base of my neck. If they minded, I couldn't tell.

I tensed when their hand inched towards my stomach. They ran a thick digit along the fabric that was securing me to the chair. The belt loosened. The doctor pulled their hand back immediately. Once I had taken my arms out of the restraints, the doctor backed off. They went to mess with something closer to Meyer. When I heard a quiet whooshing sound, I stood up.

I'll be honest. The entire time I had been there, I had only casually glanced at my surroundings. There had been more important things to focus on. The first thing I noticed now was how warm it was. I'm glad I didn't bother zipping up my jacket. The air wasn't just warm, it was also muggy. If they all got cold the same way Meyer had after the river, they would need to keep their ship's temperature pretty balmy.

The medical area felt familiar. The walls were lined with steel cabinets. There were various instruments sitting along countertops. I could see a closed doorway in the back. The rest of the space was pretty open. It had the feel of a laboratory.

On my side of the room were half a dozen captain's chairs. Across the open space were four beds. They were tricked out with shiny machines, bright buttons, and clean sheets.

Next to the beds were two clear tubs. They were big enough for Meyer to be almost entirely submerged with only half of the tub filled. The doctor was filling the second bath.

I watched them touch a white sticker on the side of the tub. The liquid stopped. The doctor's head popped up. They zeroed in on me with an expectant look. I knew right then and there that the bath was for me. They averted their eyes when they saw me looking. Slowly, the doctor stood. They started coming towards me from the side. Like they were preparing to bum-rush me.

This guy was being cautious for no reason. I wanted in that bath. Preferably after I had washed off the caked-on mud from my run through the jungle. At this point, I would take a bath in any form; beggars couldn't be choosers. I didn't want to scare the doctor by sprinting toward the tub. So, I let them herd me through the room.

Instead of going to the bath, they led me to the closed door. As we got within touching distance, the door slid open. On the other side was a smaller room. The far wall was curved like the hull of a boat. It made me wonder just where we were on the ship. Spaced evenly around the room were four different structures.

I recognized the one closest to me. It was a fancier version of the toilet in my cage. This one was behind a privacy screen. Beside the toilet was a larger privacy screen. I couldn't see what was behind it. Along the curved wall was a wide, shallow sink. The last thing in the room was a big mirror. It was embedded in the wall next to the sink.

Once we were inside, the door shut. It startled me. The doctor didn't react to it closing, so I tried to calm down. He glided to the large privacy shield. After some maneuvering, the flimsy screen was put away. On the ground, was a hip-tall metal box without a lid. There was a handle on one side that

allowed you to open it. There were no other parts to help decipher what it was.

The doctor opened the side. They motioned for me to step in. I took a deep breath before squaring my shoulders. Things had been fine so far. This would be fine. Besides, if this got me into the tub, I would do it.

There were tiny indentations on the floor. They rubbed my feet as I stepped inside. I braced my hand against the metal. It was warm.

The doctor leaned in. They were at eye level with my chest. They reached out and pinched my stained shirt. Suddenly, the fabric was over my head.

“Hey!” I yelled.

They ignored me as they reached into the metal tub. Their hand inched out to pinch my thigh. I smacked it. They inhaled sharply. With both hands raised, they slowly backed away. At least I knew what that meant. They wouldn't be grabbing my pants anytime soon.

I held very still, waiting for them to react because I hit them. They didn't seem upset about being smacked. Almost immediately, they dropped their hands and started touching something on the outside of the box.

A sharp noise at my feet had me looking down. Something started pouring out of the holes in the floor. It was tan and warm. It kept filling the box until it began to cover my feet. It didn't feel warm anymore; it was getting hot. I bounced on my feet to keep them from getting burned. It reminded me of summers at the beach. You'd have to run from your towel to the water to keep your feet from burning.

I heard the telltale hissing of alien laughter. The doctor was panting at my antics. I just glared at him but kept shuffling from side to side.

Finally, when the weird sand was to my calves, the doctor pushed a button, and it stopped. Then they bent down and grabbed a handful of the stuff. I had no idea what they were

planning. As such, I didn't even brace when the doctor poured his handful into my hair.

"What the heck, dude?" I sputtered, trying to keep sand from getting in my eyes.

I tried to duck away from them. They just stepped closer. They began digging their hands into my hair, scrubbing the tan stuff into my hair. They were being very careful with their claws. It still isn't very comfortable.

The whole experience was very abrasive. I could feel the sand scrubbing away the caked-on nastiness. I almost melted when the doctor dug their fingers into my greasy scalp. After that, I let the good doctor do their thing. If they wanted to give me a sand scrub, they could have at it.

Whatever the tan stuff was, it felt like I was getting an intense exfoliating scrub. It got rid of the weeks' worth of sweat that the water balloons had left behind. It was nearly relaxing.

After a few minutes, the doctor began to huff softly. The sound was oddly mesmerizing. It wasn't like any singing I had heard from humans. Eventually, I could hear the cadence and rhythm the little huffs created. As I closed my eyes, I found myself swaying along to the sound. They kept singing as they led me out of the bathroom towards the tub of water.

My brain was in a happy place. I stopped in front of the steaming liquid. I was still wearing some clothing. There wasn't a chance I was getting naked in front of these aliens. I didn't want to risk having them take away what little clothing I did have.

Luckily, the doctor wasn't concerned about my clothing anymore. They picked me up and set me inside, clothing and all. The warmth of the liquid had me sinking into the tub as far as it would let me.

Everything but my head was underwater. The warm water lapped my face as I relaxed. My head was just starting to nod back when I felt something prick my finger.

I bolted upright. I checked out my finger. There was a small bead of blood welling at the very tip.

The doctor was standing beside me, looking unrepentant as they focused on the device in their hands. The device was small and black. At the tip, I saw a tiny glass tube filled with red. The damned snake had taken my blood.

I sent the doctor a dirty glare as I stuck my finger in my mouth. They smiled and handed me a water balloon. It didn't make me feel better, but I drank the whole thing anyway.

When the doctor moved away, I started to relax again. I watched them help Meyer out of his bath. The mismatched pair slowly made their way toward the row of cots in the room. It was easy to see that the doctor had feelings for the bright alien. I could see it in the way they fussed. Meyer let it go on for a bit before he lost his patience.

He made a sharp noise that had the taller alien freezing. Meyer leaned forward to touch his friend. It took him a few tries before his hand grabbed the doctor, not just air. He eventually gripped his friend's arm. He said something very softly. I could only hear the extended hissing sounds at the end of his words.

The doctor bent their head forward. They rested their forehead against Meyer's. They both flicked their tongues out, tasting the air. The gesture felt intimate. The doctor shifted their head, allowing their tongues to entwine.

"Oh," I drawled quietly, "you're more than friends." My cheeks flared as their hands began exploring each other. My hands slapped over my eyes. "Oh no, I'm right here." I peeked out from behind my fingers. Things were heating up. "Come on!" I cried quietly. The last thing I wanted was to draw attention to myself.

They thought I was a pet. Some humans ignored pets during intimate moments. I didn't. I would die from embarrassment if one of my dogs had a front-row seat when I brought a boyfriend home. These aliens did not share my shame.

I peeked through my fingers again. I couldn't help it. There were noises I couldn't explain!

Meyer had managed to pull the doctor out of their coat. They weren't wearing anything else. Meyer dragged his hands down the doctor's pale chest. His fingers went straight to the wide set of scales between the doctor's legs.

My hands dropped. My breathing started to pick up. I didn't know what to do. I wiped the steam gathering on my face.

Meyer teased the area, never dipping between the scales. The doctor's body twitched. High-pitched gasps echoed in the room. I could see the flesh of the doctor's scales give under Meyer's touch. The doctor's hips jerked desperately. With an explosive cry, a pink cock shot out. Meyer caught it with a chuckle.

"I guess you've got a penis, too," I whispered stupidly.

It was similar to Meyer's, except it was larger. I was spellbound, watching Meyer's lime hands work up and down the doctor's hot pink heads. The barbs that lined each one moved easily in whatever direction Meyer manipulated them. They were much more malleable than they looked.

The doctor growled. He pushed Meyer onto the cot. That made Meyer smirk. His fangs caught on his lip. The doctor moved over Meyer's body in a hypnotizing dance until their face hovered over Meyer's pelvic scales.

A flirty hint of hot pink spread the creamy scales as Meyer's cock grew. The doctor flicked his long tongue around the base. Meyer's breath hitched. So did mine.

I slapped my hands over my eyes. *Being abducted by aliens did not transform you into a peeping tom!* These... individuals thought I was a pet. They didn't know I was sentient. It's not like we had discussed this before things started heating up. I wasn't comfortable being an interloper, so I closed my eyes.

It didn't help. At all. The noises were obscene. I kept my hands firmly over my eyes. I still had a pretty good idea of what was happening. The sounds were surprisingly recognizable. Until suddenly, they weren't. The doctor made

some rattling, growling sound. Whatever it was, it set Meyer off. He screamed.

I peeked just enough to see the doctor smirk. Meyer dropped back onto the cot like a sack of potatoes. The doctor sat back with a chuckle. He flicked his tongue out to lick his lips.

The doctor left Meyer panting in bed as he went back to business as usual. I tried to go back to pretending I was a pet. I wasn't sure what a pet would be doing, so I flicked the water until someone noticed me.

Eventually, the doctor drained the bath. He toweled me off. Whatever the material was, it worked great. It even managed to pull the water out of my bra and leggings.

The doctor set Meyer up with a blanket and a pillow. I got a towel on the floor and a water balloon. The doctor stayed to make sure Meyer was comfortable. Then he shut off most of the lights and left.

Meyer had already fallen asleep. He kept making little hissing noises. I waited until I was sure he wouldn't wake up. Then I stood and grabbed my towel. It wasn't as nice as the blankets in my cage. I got onto the cot furthest away from Meyer. It was much softer than I expected. *Life is looking up, even if it's just a little bit.*

I tried to go to sleep. A shuffling sound kept waking me up. Every time I started to relax, the weird noise had me opening my eyes. After the third time, I kept my eyes open. A wriggle of movement caught my attention.

Meyer squirmed under his blanket. I watched him shift, pause, then shift again. The sound was from his dry scales sliding under the blanket. A shiver wracked his body. I sighed.

Throwing my feet over the side of my cot, I grabbed my towel and went to his cot. I pulled back his blanket and dove in. I made a happy noise. His cot was heated. The inside of his blanket felt like a fireplace. Meyer's scales were chilled though. I pressed myself against him. He immediately settled. After that, it was easy to fall asleep.

Chapter Five

Seph

I found Huzzar's pet in bed with him the next morning. Huzzar had wrapped himself around Hissy like a Kithhari. Although, I doubted that Seethur would like the comparison. Huzzar was shamelessly using the animal as a heat source. Seethur had called it.

I just shook my head and started my day. I headed right to my computer. I took a blood sample from Hissy last night during her bath. I had set the computer to run a complete baseline analysis while we were sleeping. At least between her previous inoculations and the sanitizing bath, I knew she wouldn't get us sick. Although it did not give us the information we needed to take proper care of her.

One of the things I was anxious to know was whether or not she was allergic to the food we had on board. The last thing I wanted to do was poison the poor thing. Huzzar would never forgive us if we killed his pet.

The program hadn't finished yet. I glanced at her. Huzzar had said that her cage was filled with nutrispheres. She hadn't reacted to the one I had given her last night. We would have to give her those until the computer was finished. They wouldn't be the best thing to consume, but they would keep her alive until we figured something out.

I heard rustling from the cot. Huzzar was still fast asleep. Hissy was trying to free herself from his clingy tail. *Good luck with that.* Huzzar was a cuddler. It was nearly impossible to sleep comfortably in the same bed as him. I sat back to watch what she would do. Slowly, she picked up the end of his tail between two fingers and unwrapped it from around her ankle.

Huzzar's tail coiled around his body, trying to stay warm. He pulled the blanket over his head, trapping Hissy again.

I sighed at the move. I wished I could say that Huzzar's injuries were making him temperamental. That would be a lie. He acted like a bratty hatchling in the mornings. The only difference was that today he had an excuse. He would probably get away with it for a few days before we all got sick of it.

Hissy managed to untangle herself. She reached her arms above her head. She made a low groan from her throat. *Every being loves a good stretch in the morning.*

I didn't move. I wasn't trying to hide. I didn't want to startle her. If Hissy noticed me, she didn't acknowledge me. She padded into the bathroom. I heard her flush the toilet. Then I heard the sanitizer run.

I almost sighed. She was housetrained. I hadn't even thought about that. I said a silent thank you to whoever had taught her. Most Susix pets were trained to use the toilet. All toilets had automated systems that did not require fingers or a higher understanding to use.

Hissy walked back into the main room. She walked right to me. She croaked out a small sound.

She looked adorably ruffled. The hair on her head was fluffed on one side and flat on the other. There were puffy lines under her eyes. While she stood in front of me, her mouth opened wide with a squeaky yawn. I would never have gone out and bought a pet for the nest. However, I was enjoying having Hissy around. She was fun to watch.

"Hi, Hissy. How are you, sweet girl? You hungry?" She didn't answer. She stood there expectantly. "I can't give you solid food. The computer doesn't know if it is safe yet." I dug into the pockets of my practice coat. The pockets were deep enough that I struggled to find what I was searching for. My claw touched it. "I found it!" I pulled out my prize and handed it to her.

Her curious expression disappeared the instant she saw that I was holding a nutrisphere. She didn't move. I jiggled it. She didn't try to grab it.

"Come on, Hissy. Take the food." My soothing hiss did not entice her.

"Hissy," I warned, "this is what you're getting." She made a mean noise. "Hissy, don't be difficult. You will drink this or nothing else." I held it close to her. She stepped back.

She was a stubborn little thing. I felt the poison pouches in my mouth twitch. I just wanted to bite her until she drank it all.

I calmly set the nutrisphere on the countertop. I would get her to drink it. I had hoped she would drink it willingly. It didn't matter. This way, we could get two things done at once.

"Alright, stubborn Hissy," I said in an overly sweet tone, "you don't have to drink right now. We can do something else."

I led her toward the running mat in the corner of the room. I gestured for Hissy to follow me. I tried to keep my expression happy. My muscles were loose. She followed after a little hesitation.

She has no clue. My tail flicked in excitement. Luckily, she didn't notice it. Hissy was an arm's length behind me. As soon as I cleared the running mat, I touched a button on the wall, dropping the patient security measures. A transparent green curtain fell from the ceiling, encasing the running mat and Hissy inside.

She panicked, rushing towards the security shield. She hit the wall and its safety feature activated. A warm puff of air blew off of the translucent wall. It gently insulated Hissy. She couldn't hit any of the barriers very hard. It was designed to keep wobbly patients from being injured if they fell. It also kept snappy pets in place.

"Your medical scan showed atrophied muscles. I imagine you weren't taken out for exercise. I figured we could work on

increasing your stamina.” I typed instructions into the running mat’s system.

The floor jerked forward as it started at a slow pace. Hissy jumped. Her body went backward. The safety system nudged her forward. Her eyes flew to the ground. She kept being forced forward by the stream of air.

Her head snapped back up. Her mouth hung open. It shut with a click. It was only closed for a second before it opened again. She started chattering angrily. Her arms flapped. Her face got red. I turned up the speed. She squawked. I laughed.

“What is that vecking sound?” Huzzar groaned from where he was waking up.

“That is your pet. It seems she does not like exercise.” I chuckled as Hissy snarled at me. It was adorable.

“So do I,” he stretched. He still had the blanket in both of his hands. He should have looked like a rumbled mess. Instead, he looked like a halo video star. I couldn’t stop the satisfied hiss that escaped my body, remembering the night before.

“How are you feeling?” I set the controls for the running mat down before going to Huzzar.

“I am itchy as veck.” His claws dragged across his scales with a dry crackle. I shivered. It was a disgusting sound.

“Stop that!” I hissed. “You shed every rotation like the rest of us. You know if you itch, you will shed in pieces.” *That I would have to pick up.*

He threw his hands up. “Fine, Doctor Veersur, I won’t scratch my scales.” He lifted his lip in a mock sneer. “Is this what the rest of the week will be like? Are you my prison guard?”

“Not the whole week,” I assured him. “You’ll be in solitary confinement for one day while we do an inventory for our trip home.” I snickered when he groaned.

“I can’t even watch halo vids! This is cruel, Sephie!” His voice took on that high-pitched whine he used right before he

started trying to get out of something. “I’ll keep the tally. I don’t need eyes to do that. I can sit and do it. Please don’t lock me in my room. I’ll go crazy if I don’t have something to do.” He flung an arm over his eyes.

I huffed at his antics. “You will have something to do. Hix needs to fly the ship. I will be making sure we have enough medicine to stay alive. Seethur will be going through our weapons. Vesex is planning on going through the food stores. Then he will do as much as he can with the rest of the stock. We will be too busy to watch your pet. So, you will have something to do; watching Hissy. Consider it your first official day as a pet owner.”

His attitude deflated as he heard what we would be doing. Inventory was critical, hard work. Without him helping, we would be down a set of hands. He really would need to help us by watching Hissy. Luckily, she could feed herself and go to the bathroom, so it was mostly for show.

“We should go to my room and make it safe for Hissy. That will keep Seethur from checking on us every two seconds.”

I swooped down to him and nuzzled his cheek. “What a considerate Vispur you are.” He rubbed his cheek against me. “Seethur already did it.”

He chuckled. “I should have guessed.”

There was a loud chime. I went to let Hissy out of her trap. On the way, I pick up the nutrisphere.

Hissy was red from her walk. Her little frame heaved in deep breaths. I would have to tell Seethur that the little thing wasn’t dangerous. She would have killed me right then and there if she could have.

Instead, she walked over to where I was standing with the nutrisphere held out. She took it and drank the whole thing. I went and grabbed another one for her. She took that one too.

“You did very well,” I sang, patting her head. “You will regain your muscle mass in no time. I bet tomorrow you drink your morning nutrisphere too.” I leaned in to flick my tongue

over her. “Gods, I always forget how much hot-blooded creatures can stink. Off to the sand bath with you.”

Huzzar chuckled. “You’ll never be free now, Hissy. Once the nest mama takes you in, you are blood.”

I rolled my eyes. “Don’t get too comfortable on that bed. You’re getting a bath too. The more we soak those scales, the easier they will come off.”

I hustled Hissy into the sand bath. I even got her to scrub her hair. She was still wearing the fabric across her chest and the skin coverings along her legs. After getting slapped around the last time I had tried to take them off, I just left them alone.

When we left the bathroom, Huzzar’s soaking tub had finished filling. I left Hissy playing with a towel while I got Huzzar into the tub. Things were quiet for a few minutes.

I wanted to see what Hissy would do if she were left alone. I sat at my computer with some files open. I was only half paying attention to the data while I watched Hissy wander around the med bay. She tried to open the cabinets and drawers. Thankfully, she didn’t know how to use the finger release mechanism.

Every so often, she would find something very interesting. The hairs over her eyes would drop. She would lean in really close. Sometimes, she would determine it was safe to touch and poke whatever had caught her eye. Other times, she would turn around to look at something else.

“Huzzie, I think your pet is smart.” I watched her circle the running mat looking for something. “Were there more of her species in the cage with her?”

Huzzar made a negative noise. “No, she was the only one in the whole room. Maybe there were more in other parts of the castle.” His tail undulated in a shrug.

“I’ve never seen her exact species. Maybe she is a hybrid?” There were a few exotic non-sentient aliens that had similar traits.

“The pet trade is a strange business with lots of money and almost no regulations. I wouldn’t be surprised if some odd

mixes are hitting the markets.” Huzzar didn’t sound very interested in the idea.

The main door to the med bay opened. No one walked in for a moment. The panel started to shut before Hix poked his head in. He looked around but didn’t step into the space.

“Who’s there?” Huzzar asked me impatiently.

I leaned toward him. I didn’t take my eyes off Hix because he was acting odd. “It’s Hix, but he’s just waiting by the door.

Hix snorted at me. “Where is the pet?” He tasted the air trying to find Hissy.

“She’s by the running mat,” I answered.

Hix walked into the room slowly. He was carrying a tray of food. It didn’t look heavy enough to slow his walk. He kept his head ducked, trying to seem smaller. It wasn’t until he was fully in the room that I saw a band of fabric wrapped around his torso.

“What is that? Did you hurt yourself, Hix?” I briskly walked toward him, ready to help.

“No,” he said between his teeth. His shoulders hit his jawline as he tried to shy away from my inspection. I heard a muffled rattle. My head cocked at the noise.

“What was that?” Huzzar asked. “Is someone rolling dice inside a sock?”

Hix sunk into himself even more. He stopped when he got to the one open table in the room. He set the tray of food down.

He let out a resigned puff through his nostrils and did a half-turn. His tail was tied to his body with a length of clothing. It might have been a pant leg. A complex set of twists and knots was preventing his tail from swinging. Hix didn’t stop there. He wrapped the other pant leg around his rattle. The cream mass twitched as I took it all in. The fabric muffled the rattle significantly.

“Hissy is scared of my rattle. I have no control over the thing, so I thought this might help,” Hix fidgeted, clearly

uncomfortable.

“What is it? What did he do, Sephie?”

I walked over to the big Fesureth and kissed him on the cheek. “Hix is being a very thoughtful nestmate. He covered his rattle, so Hissy wouldn’t be scared by its sound.”

“Aw, Hix, that is so sweet. Thank you.” Huzzar swung up out of the water. “Now, is that thurx I smell?”

Hix laughed. “Your sense of smell must be better. You smelled it through the tray.”

He pulled off the covering. There were four steaming bowls of thurx. Luckily, the dish was easy to digest and one of Huzzar’s favorites. The liquid was made from boiling mature fesiks with spices until the entire mixture was soft enough to liquefy. The liquid was fatty and rich. With all of the fesiks’ bones left in, it was the perfect food for shedding.

“I brought an extra bowl for Hissy,” Hix said, explaining the fourth bowl. “She’s so skinny I figured this would help. My mam always swore it helped hatchlings grow big.”

“I would love to give Hissy some thurx. I still don’t know if she is allergic to our foods. Until the computer finishes running her blood sample, we should stick to nutrispheres for now.”

Hix helped Huzzar get out of the tub while I explained. The pair sat down at the table. Hix set a bowl in front of Huzzar.

Hissy did not wander to our side of the med bay. She had stayed near the running mat since Hix came in. His instincts were not wrong. She was still wary of him. I noticed Hix dart a glance her way before pretending he didn’t see her.

“How long will that take for the computer to run its program?” He asked, only half paying attention.

“Let me see where it is right now.” I gathered the data sheet and sat down with them.

For a few minutes, no one spoke. Hix and Huzzar drank their thurx. I read the small report.

“This is taking a long time. The computer has only made it partially through her baseline physiological analysis.” It was still stuck on the first area of analysis. Usually, it would have finished the physiological analysis and the comparison data by now. I had expected it to have a list of possible allergens much more quickly than this. I would need to check with the program to see why it was going so slowly. I hoped there wasn't something wrong with our computer system.

“So, what do you know?” Hix asked.

“I haven't gotten any data on her diet yet.” I scanned the information. “We know for certain that Hissy is a girl. She has hormones marking that she is within a breeding cycle. So, we know she has hormones the computer recognizes. That is something, I guess. The computer cannot determine her exact age. She has one heart, two compact lungs, and no poison-producing organs.”

“Seethur will be glad to hear that,” Huzzar joked.

I rolled my eyes. It was lost on Huzzar. Hix just smirked. “Her brain is big. We're not dealing with a pet flyer here. This one is smart. We will have to watch her extra carefully until we know if we can trust her not to get into trouble.”

“I had a flyer who ate so many rocks it died,” Hix shared. Huzzar blinked his unseeing eyes at Hix. “My mam might have lied about that one so that she could get it out of the house. I wasn't the best owner.”

As we talked, Hissy made her way over. She stuck to the sides of the room. Slowly, she got closer. She stretched her neck, trying to see into the bowls.

“Are you sure we can't feed her some?” Hix whispered, seeing what I was.

“No,” I hissed back quietly, “it could kill her.”

“But she's interested,” his eyes shot to where Hissy was inching forward. “I could get her to eat it out of my hands. Animals always like the people who feed them.”

There would be no arguing with Hix. I snatched the bowl off of the table and drank it all. When I set it down, Hix

slumped.

Hissy's body lost its tension as she lost interest. One thing did change after that. She stayed closer to us. She didn't seem bothered by Hix as much.

"We're still planning on doing inventory tomorrow?" I ask, distracted.

Hix nodded. "We're just inside the range of a solar flare that is messing with the sensory equipment. I have to stay in the control room. The rest of you are set up to do inventory."

"You weren't much of a help last time," Huzzar teased. "I found you asleep in the freezer."

Hix's tail rattled in its soft cage. He and I froze, waiting to see how Hissy would react. When she didn't, we relaxed. Hix turned to Huzzar, "I got locked in there and went into hibernation. There is a difference."

Huzzar opened his mouth to start an argument. He did it when he got bored sometimes. I cut in before he could start, "We're not going over this again. Huzzar, I've got stuff to do. Which means you get to rest now. Hix, thank you for the food." He nodded and got up to leave.

Huzzar argued the entire time I got him settled in bed. I turned up the heat on his cot. He was asleep after a few halfhearted jabs. I set the med bay to its night setting. It dimmed the lights and turned down the volume on all of the instruments. I locked the front door to keep the nest from coming in and out while Huzzar was sleeping.

"It's just you and me now, girl," I turned around to give Hissy a wink, but she wasn't there. I glanced around the room.

Hissy was crouched next to the cooler cabinet. It was built to keep temperature-sensitive medicines cold. It looked like every other cabinet in the room. There was nothing on the outside to indicate that it was different. While I watched, she put the side of her head against the front of it.

"What is it, girl? Do you want to see what is inside?" I walked over to the cabinet. Hissy moved back, letting me reach forward to open the door.

Inside were a few brightly lit shelves. They had small vials organized in rows. It wasn't an exciting space besides the fact that it was colder. Hissy moved to look inside. I put my arm up to keep her from getting into the medicine. She sent me a look but didn't try to move past me. She put a hand out, felt the cold air coming out of it, nodded, then walked away.

After that, I went back to my computer. I started finding all of my records for the inventory check tomorrow. I was lost in numbers and dates when I felt a warm touch on my arm.

I startled, causing Hissy to jump. "Sorry, girl, you scared me." She relaxed when I settled into my chair. "You've never touched me. I wasn't expecting it. You're warm."

She didn't respond but waited for me to finish speaking. Then, she jerked her chin up. I didn't move. She did it again. I had no idea what that meant. She did it again. By the fourth time, she got mad. Her face screwed up. I watched her little body coil in on itself. She looked ready to strike. I leaned away from her slightly. She jerked her chin sharply.

"What? What does that mean? What do you want?" I asked, fully expecting her to lunge at me.

Hissy's eyes circled around her head. She pointed a rounded finger behind me. I angled my body to keep Hissy in my line of sight while I looked behind me. The light above the door flashed, indicating someone was on the other side.

"I forgot. I turned off the alarm for the door, and the vecking light is on my bad side," I explained as I jogged towards it. I knew Hissy couldn't understand me, but it felt natural to talk to her, especially since she was smart enough to communicate some basic concepts. Like alerting me to a new stimulus in her environment.

I tapped the manual door opener. Vesex stood outside. I curved my neck in apology. "Sorry for the wait. I locked the med bay's doors. Then I put everything on night mode while Huzzar went to sleep. I didn't even see the door flashing."

When Vesex stepped inside, his tail brushed against mine as he accepted my apology. "Ssss," he exhaled in comprehension.

Vesex was as quick as any Royal. It took him no time to understand what I wasn't saying. "I have been remiss in caring for you, Sephie." He put an arm around my shoulders. The cool slide of his scales against mine made me shudder. I burrowed deeper into his side. "You have adapted so well to your circumstances that sometimes I forget that your eye gives you a different field of vision." He nuzzled my hair. His hood flared, scent marking me. "I'm sorry, my second. I will take better care of you."

I stepped out of his arm with a laugh. "You might not need to do anything. Hissy noticed the light and came over to alert me."

The look Vesex gave me said he knew I was changing the subject. He also knew how much I hated talking about my injury. He gave me a subtle nod letting me know that he was dropping the subject. That didn't mean he would drop it entirely. Knowing Vesex, he would install more alarm lights around the ship once he had the parts. However, he wouldn't pressure me about it anymore. It was a system that satisfied us both.

He looked around the med bay for Hissy. "How *is* Huzzar's new pet? Do we know what it is yet?"

"The computer doesn't know what species she is."

Vesex crouched low. "Where the heck is it?"

"Her," I corrected just as the washroom door slid open, revealing Hissy.

Vesex popped up at the sound. His shoulders sagged, "Oh, thank the scales, she's waste trained." He watched as she skirted the room's edges until she was further away from Vesex. Vesex tried to make his body relax. "She seems cautious."

I hissed in agreement. "She is. She eventually relaxes. New Susix makes her nervous. She came over to investigate Hix when he dropped off food this morning." I pointed to the table and chairs. "Do you have time for a drink?"

Vesex let out a long breath. “Yes, we have a few things to discuss. A hot drink would make the time pass better, thank you.”

I set about making a pot of bortu marrow. We had been traveling through space for a long time now. I had seen many different species and partaken in many new customs. I still did not understand how some beings drank flower water. Susix were carnivores. Plants were not a big part of our diet. I had tried to drink plant water once. Much too bland for my taste. The bortu marrow was thick and gave me the buzz I needed to deal with Huzzar all day.

“You never did answer me. How is Huzzar’s pet behaving?” He held up a clawed finger. “Don’t try to sweeten the truth so you can keep her. I will check the security feeds if I have to.”

I flicked my tongue in annoyance as I set a cup in front of Vesex and took the chair across from him. “Then you will be checking the security feed because you’ll never believe me when I say that she has been perfect. There have been no messes. She hasn’t chewed on anything. She hasn’t been aggressive or defensive. Huzzar must be the luckiest Susix in the galaxy because he found the perfect pet.”

Vesex sipped his drink. “Why is the computer taking so long to run her metrics?”

“I don’t know. She might be something very rare, or she might be a new species.” I shrugged my shoulders. “It won’t make much of a difference what she is. It looks like we’re keeping her.”

He sighed. “I guess you’re right. Please will you create a list of items she needs? We can add it to our list once we finish taking stock tomorrow.”

“And is this where we discuss why you actually came to see me?” I teased.

He shot me a look. “Not one of you respects me. Yes, I am here to talk about tomorrow. Please plan for a catastrophe when you start making a list of items we need to restock. I

want to make sure we have the medical supplies to deal with whatever may happen on this trip home.”

The severe turn in tone had me taking a drink to buy time. “What do you know?” This was more than just Vesex being overly cautious.

“I got word that the Serex Nest is headed in this direction.”

The name had my fangs tingling. Thasues Serex was a cruel beast. His nest was full of pure-blooded Royal Susix; each of them was the worst example of their breed. They were a vicious lot.

Vesex had known Thasues and his second, Vessur since they were young. They grew up in the same den. From the stories Vesex tells, that was where Thasues learned what an effective instrument cruelty could be. As they grew, he honed his methods as his greed expanded. He attracted like-minded Royals to his nest.

The only reason they had not become a bigger problem was that their nest’s influence had been negligible until recently. The Serex Nest never got much traction outside of Royal Susix land. Thasues was very easy to avoid and interfere with when needed. At least for a few rotations.

Then, the Royal Susix’s den Chieftains were killed. We were living in the southern part of the planet at the time. Vesex’s fathers told us to come home as soon as they heard the news. By the time we got home, Thasues’ nest had already ascended as the new Chieftains.

The scheming serpents had used the panic to convince the entire den to elect them as the new ruling nest. Most were “persuaded” to vote for Thasues’ nest. Unfortunately, when a Royal Susix hypnotized someone, they left no evidence. We only had our gut instinct that Thasues had used his powers to get elected. There wasn’t anything we could take to the Sovereign.

The more we discussed the entire situation, the more suspect it seemed. Things had happened too quickly at just the right time. The den security had determined that the original

Chieftains had been slain while hunting in the jungle. When we tried to investigate, security refused to give us any information.

We started to believe that the Serex Nest had killed the previous Chieftains. When we tried to ask the other den mates about what had happened, we were intercepted every time. Thasues would find out whom we were talking to and send someone to harass us until we left. The one time Vesex had managed to speak with someone, they had been hypnotized to forget what had happened to the previous Chieftains.

While we were trying to get them ousted, the Serex expanded their influence. They traveled to other dens to secure alliances. They made deals and traded valuable resources to gain power.

All the while, they stopped managing the den. The borders weren't maintained. The lands were left to rot. The situation became dire during their first winter as Chieftains. There wasn't enough food to feed everyone. The fesik harvest had been abysmal. There also weren't any goods to trade for food either.

We had decided to stay there at that point. Between our nest, Vesex's birth nest, and a few younger ones, we were able to ration resources to ensure that everyone made it through hibernation. It had been a close thing. Our nest moved Vesex's parents to Seethur's familial den once spring thawed the ground. It had been for our peace of mind, if nothing else.

It was at this point that the Sovereign announced that he was stepping down. While it was a big announcement, it wouldn't have been anything of note if I hadn't run into Thasues at the market the next day.

The dirty little fesik had bragged about being the only natural contender for the next Sovereign. He started talking about his "plans" for the future right there in broad daylight like he was already leading.

The worst part was that he was right. Anyone in leadership would be preferred over an untried nest. And all of the other Chieftains were too old to be considered. While there were

other possible choices amongst all of the breeds and their dens, only a few had leadership experience.

I returned to our den and told them about Thasues' plan. We all wanted to stop the Serex Nest from corrupting our people. When the Sovereign's Council had proclaimed that there would be a quest to decide who the next leading nest would be, we threw our names in before we knew what the quest was.

I took a deep breath. Nothing riled me up faster than hearing their names.

"We expected this," I reminded him. "Since the challenge was set, they have attempted to steal the victory. They have been threatening competitors and stealing leads for the last six rotations. They're not smart enough to do the work themselves. I doubt that has changed. They've spent a lifetime bullying other Susix to get what they want. This will be no different." I hissed out furious breaths at the end of my little tirade. Speaking about their nest always made my skin hot.

Vesex did not join me in my anger. If anything, my rant made him tenser. He stared at nothing, saying nothing. My hot air chilled. "Vesex?"

"That *was* their strategy. It's changed. They're getting desperate." He sighed deeply enough that his hood shifted. "The Serex ship flew into Susurex airspace recently. They didn't dock at any of the ports. They were seen landing in the abandoned region of the Susurex jungle. They were cloaked the entire time." He ran a hand over his braids, dispelling nervous energy. "They were planet side for less than a day before they flew out. Mathie saw the whole thing. She keeps her radar keyed to cloaked ships. Otherwise, they would have come and gone unnoticed." Huzzar's sister was the family lookout. Since his den's business was less than legal, she didn't want any surprises dropping in on them. "She kept an eye on them until they left," Vesex whispered to keep Huzzar from hearing.

I barely kept from hissing in exasperation. Mathie might be the youngest of the Fethix den, but she was a potently

concentrated version of the entire lot.: devious, cunning, and willing to break any law if needed. I doubted she had kept an eye on the Serex Nest out of concern. She had probably wanted a piece of the action. She had a bad habit of finding the worst places to be at the worst times.

That wasn't what had my scales twitching with anxiety. Mathie could take care of herself. I was much more worried about the fact that only one person lived in that part of the jungle. He lived there because his clientele wanted off-the-grid discretion. It was hard to make illegal modifications to ships within dens. My nerves compounded because he had done some particular alternations to our ship.

“Did she follow them?” The question was little more than a breath.

“They headed right for Sel's. They stayed for a few hours, restocked their fuel, and took off. Mathie waited for them to come back, and when they didn't, she checked on Sel.” Vesex sighed. “He was dead. His shop was ransacked. Mathie called me before she had started sorting things out. But...”

“...we should operate like the Serex Nest has our ship's blueprints and know all of our upgrades,” I said with an exhausted breath.

“They know about the secret safe we had Sel install for the Crown.” He finished. “They know we modified our ship to travel through the most dangerous routes.”

“Those vecking frozen slugs are probably celebrating as we speak,” Huzzar growled from his bed. Vesex didn't react to hearing that Huzzar had been listening in. I flicked my tail at him. He was such a Vispur. He couldn't stop being sneaky if he tried. “What?” He cried as if he could sense my exasperation even if he couldn't see it. “It's bad enough that they're coming here to try and steal the Crown and most likely kill us.” He held up a finger. “What makes it worse is that those veckers somehow found out about Sel. No one betrays Sel. His clients are vecking loyal. They had to do their own legwork to get that information. It's probably the first time in their frozen lives that they've had to work for something.

They're probably so proud of themselves. I'm mad that they're feeling smug right now. And that I just lost the best black market mechanic on Susurex. Who is going to mod our thix now?"

Huzzar's tongue punched in and out of his mouth in angry hisses. His hands were curved, ready to claw someone's eyes out. His little body was trying to puff itself up to appear larger. Considering he was smaller than Hissy, it was adorable. He knew it too. He rarely let himself get this worked up but losing Sel was a big blow. The Serex Nest was in trouble now. Most of Huzzar's large den used Sel. They would not be happy that he had been killed.

Movement from my bad side had me turning. Hissy was standing at the back of the med bay staring at us from behind a cabinet. I had forgotten about her in all the stress and high emotion. It looked like Huzzar's passionate speech had frightened her. He did tend to get loud when he got worked up.

Hissy ducked behind the cabinet when she noticed my stare. "There goes all of the goodwill I've built," I sighed.

Vesex pat my arm, "Huzzar is the one who was yelling. You're the nice doctor who feeds her. If anyone should be worried about their goodwill dying up, it should be Huzzar. She'll be *your* pet before we get home." He gave me a wink to let me know that he was needling Huzzar.

Huzzar gasped when he realized we were talking about Hissy. "She will not! She is my pet. Hissy? Come here, girl!"

"Huzzar, leave the thing be," Vesex cut in. "I have an assignment for you." At that, Huzzar stopped calling for Hissy and turned to our Prime.

"Yes?" Huzzar hissed with interest.

"We can still catch them unaware," Vesex stated.

Huzzar nodded shrewdly, "There's no way in frozen Thesius that Mathie was spotted. They don't realize that we're on to them."

Vesex hissed in agreement. "I'm moving the Crown. I would hate for our safe to be sitting empty. Would you please

think of something to put in it?”

Huzzar’s smile turned devious, “You know I love surprises.”

“You’re very good at them,” Vesex complimented. He stood, “I’m excited to see what you think of.”

Vesex and I left Huzzar while he tried to coax Hissy over to him. I walked Vesex to the door. Luckily, Huzzar was making too much noise to hear us as we whispered.

“How are we planning on deflecting an ambush?” The idea seemed impossible. There was so much we didn’t know. They could be hiding anywhere between here and Susurex. That was a lot of space.

Vesex wrapped his tail around mine, trying to ease my worry. “Hix is planning a new path that should keep us away from the usual trade routes. We’re hoping that Serex hasn’t pinpointed where we are and is waiting to catch us at a port. If that is not the case, then it is a good thing that I just gave Seethur free access to our accounts. He will restock our weapons and buy anything else at the market on Katotic 5 that catches his eye.”

I hissed, whipping my head up to look Vesex in the eye. “You two aren’t planning on taking us through the Graveyard again, are you?”

The Graveyard was an expanse of three planets that were about to collide. They were still a few million rotations from impacting. Their differing gravitational pulls made the area challenging for most ships to traverse. The real problem was that the planets themselves were volatile. There were rings of debris and surface storms so violent that they affected anything around them. One of the planets had a pair of moons that had crashed into each other. The only way to get past them was to go through the broken satellites.

We had traveled through it once, and it had nearly killed Hix. To pilot, Hix needed to be directly connected to the ship’s computer via his neuro-comm. Being plugged into the navigational system put an immense strain on his body. We

had been in better shape when we had made the trip before. Now our ship had traveled through lots of space. Our bodies had gone through so much. It would be more difficult now.

The Graveyard was a risky bet people made when they were desperate. Were we that desperate? I looked at Huzzar with his damaged eyes. My body drooped. Yeah, we were that desperate. We had more to lose now that we had the Crown.

I made a quiet purring sound, “So we will be armed to the scales. That is reassuring.” I looked up at him, “What is my job?”

He smiled at me sweetly, “Be prepared to take care of us, no matter what happens. Feel free to drain our coffers until you feel comfortable achieving that goal. I will give you the same lecture I gave Seethur. Our money will mean nothing if the Serex Nest becomes the next Sovereign. So, if you want to buy new equipment, do it. If you think we need an upgrade for our neuro-comms, get it. That is your job.”

I nodded with a sigh. He squeezed my tail before disengaging, “We have come this far.”

“We can make it the rest of the way,” I assured him.

Chapter Six

Cece

Life was not boring living with giant snake men. It was a drastic change from the life I had been living for the last few months. The throne room had been quiet. The aliens had ignored me as much as they possibly could. This place was much more active. People came and went all day long. They talked all day. At one point, the doctor, Meyer, and the big boss snake man had gotten into a heated argument that ended up being pretty loud.

Back in my cage, I had been desperate for stimulation. For someone to talk to. At one point, I would have done horrible things for ambient noise. The sound of people working, a busy street, anything. The ship was too much, too fast. I went from being in solitary confinement for weeks to being surrounded by loud, touchy-feely snake aliens. I was feeling overwhelmed.

It did not help that Meyer was suddenly very clingy. Something had upset him yesterday, and he had been my shadow ever since. For the first time in my life, I sympathized with cats. Owners who wanted to pet you all the time were the worst.

He would rub his hands together and then hold them out to me. It took me a few times to figure out what he was doing. I finally caught on that it was the snake man version of saying, "Here, kitty, kitty!"

"Hsse," he breathed. My shoulders slumped. "Hssssee," he whined again. I hunched over. "Hsse." That was the name the aliens had given me. I did not know what it meant. I did know that if I ignored it, Meyer would only get louder. "Hsse!"

I stomped over to where he was lying on the cot. Meyer's tongue flicked out as I got closer. His arm moved, trying to sense where I was. I bent my head. His claws began running through my hair. He started to talk. Whatever he was, it sounded happy.

I just let him pet me. It seemed to keep him busy. If he wasn't annoying me, he was annoying the doctor, which usually ended in loud hissing. So, I threw the doctor a bone and stood by Meyer for a bit.

I sensed the doctor walk toward us. I liked the doctor. He was kind. He stopped next to me and began petting my head in tandem with Meyer. I tried not to sigh.

After a few pets, the doctor stood back and started talking to Meyer. Whatever he said had Meyer untangling himself from my hair and sitting up. The doctor stepped forward to grab him. The smaller male batted the doctor's hands away. He shimmied to the edge of the bed and held out his hand.

He is not about to-

"Hsse." He said like a command. When I didn't come, he shook his hand, "Hsse."

The lemon tree-looking jerk wanted me to be his seeing-eye human. He wasn't even being nice about it. He was expecting me to just do it. My head dropped back, "Why me?"

The doctor laughed at my groan. I shot him a nasty look. His tongue bounced up and down in amusement. With a sigh, I stepped up to Meyer and let him wrap an arm around my shoulder. I practically fell over when he used his entire body weight to stand up.

Meyer made some baby noises at me. His lips pursed like he was making the snake version of a kissy face. He pet my head. He gestured for the doctor to lead the way.

My heart rate picked up when I realized we were leaving the hospital area. Meyer and I had been in the little clinic since arriving on the ship. He hadn't seemed to mind being stuck there. Most of the time, he slept, which probably helped the time pass.

I, on the other hand, was getting antsy. Suddenly, I had a lot more freedom than I'd had in a long time. I wanted to explore my surroundings.

The doctor touched the panel beside the main entrance and the door opened with a swish. The doctor and Meyer talked while we walked into a narrow tunnel-shaped hall. It was brighter out here. The soft white light brought out the gleaming silver of the paneled walls. I noticed some of the panels had bright yellow markings on them.

My socks snagged on something. I looked down as we kept moving. The floors were matte black with a textured finish. It almost felt like walking across sandpaper. No matter where I stepped, my socks kept getting caught on them.

The hallway felt almost chilly compared to the balmy clinic. It was still warm, but it wasn't a moist heat like before. It felt like I had just walked out of a rainforest exhibit on a dry summer day. After sweating for the last two days straight, the hallways felt like heaven. There was even a slight breeze.

The doctor stopped in front of another door. He reached for the keypad next to it. My eyes were glued to his black claws as he punched in a code—top left-bottom left-center-bottom center. The door slid open.

I started chanting the sequence in my head over and over again. If I memorized it, I could open this door. And who knows, maybe the code was universal and worked on the other doors? *See, you're getting smarter*, I thought with a chuckle.

A woosh of hot air hit me in the face. The smell was so pungent that I coughed. The two aliens startled at the sound. I didn't bother reassuring them that I wasn't about to attack. I couldn't breathe. I let go of Meyer and covered my mouth and nose with both arms. The smell of my skin and musty clothes cut through the stench.

It did not get rid of it. I kept trying to bury my nose further into my mildewy jacket. Anything was better than being assaulted by a smell I have only encountered at state fairs in the hot tents filled with exotic animals. It was potent enough to knock me back.

Meyer said something to the doctor. Whatever the doctor said back had Meyer puffing up like an offended bird. He made a sharp noise and stomped into the room. The doctor used his arm to gently force me to follow Meyer. I almost sprinted in the other direction. Whatever was in this room stank. I did not want to see what it was. I did not have a choice as the doctor pushed me in.

It turned out to be a room. A very messy room.

Meyer kept stomping until he reached a bed with crumpled sheets. I was surprised that he was able to make it to the bed without tripping. Especially considering he was blind right now. There were piles of fabric all over the floor. I had to watch where I stepped to keep from getting tangled. As I glanced around the room, I realized it was probably because this was his room. I had only known Meyer for a few days, but this room had him written all over it.

There were no overhead lights. A strip of yellow lighting ran along the ceiling, barely keeping the shadows away. The walls were grey-green. It made the space feel smaller. The scattered mounds of clothing and shoes added to the feeling.

The room had strange dimensions. It was long but not very deep. I could touch the front door and back wall if I stretched my arms as far as they would go. There was enough space at the foot of the bed for a strange curved chair. The other side of the room had a doorway. I didn't see any drawers or cabinets.

The doctor spoke with Meyer while I looked around. He fiddled with something by the front door. I felt the air start to circulate. Immediately, the smell of dirty reptiles lessened. I couldn't help sagging in relief. Meyer huffed from the bed.

"Hsse," the doctor called. When I looked at him, he said something and made a sharp hand gesture. I had no idea what he was telling me. He did the whole thing over again. I couldn't watch him pantomime whatever he was trying to communicate one more time. So, I copied his hand motion hoping he would stop.

With my palm facing the floor, I rotated my wrist gently. The doctor bobbed his head from side to side excitedly. He

repeated the same word as he made the motion. It was obvious that he was trying to get me to do something. Or maybe he was telling me something. Too bad I had no idea what a twisty wrist meant.

He seemed satisfied with my copying skills because he turned back toward Meyer. After a quick conversation between the two, the doctor left. Meyer covered his whole body with the blanket. It looked like he was going back to sleep.

I stood there for a minute, waiting for something to happen. The doctor didn't come back. Meyer didn't move. Nothing happened.

I had no idea where the doctor went but based on the sounds coming from the bed, Meyer had fallen asleep. Whatever was going on with his skin was making him tired. He had slept during most of our time on the ship. I would have thought that was just a trait of his species. However, the other snake people didn't need nearly as much rest—poor guy.

Once I was doubly sure that Meyer was asleep, I tip-toed to the main door. If I could get to the digital screen, I knew I could type in the code the doctor had used to open it. All of the piles did not make it easy. I had to jump from clean spot to clean spot. Once I got to the door, I waited. Meyer kept making hissing little exhales.

Standing on my toes and keeping one eye on the snake in the bed, I typed in the sequence I saw the doctor put in. The screen flashed red. Unperturbed, I typed it in again. Red flash. I tried a different sequence just in case I had remembered it wrong. Red flash. I tried a different pattern. Red flash. At some point, I gave up trying to remember the sequences of symbols. I just started punching in random symbols hoping the damn door would open. By the time I threw in the towel, I was frustrated and had to pee.

With a huff, I stomped to the only other door in the room. That had to be the bathroom, right? When I touched the pad that opened the interior doors, nothing happened. That was the last straw. I slapped my hand on the panel over and over again. The door didn't budge.

Heaving in a frustrated breath, I dropped my head. I was going to have to wake up Meyer. Then I would have to play charades to let him know that I needed to use the bathroom. I was terrible at charades, and he was currently blind. This wasn't going to end well.

It might be less embarrassing to find a corner to pee in. I mean, I was their pet. Pets had accidents. *They* wouldn't be embarrassed. I thought about it for longer than I probably should have. Ultimately, I could do it if I needed to. I wanted to try and get Meyer to open the bathroom door first.

Meyer had curled himself into a lumpy mass at the center of the bed. I couldn't tell where his head was. His blanket was too fluffy. Everything looked about head size.

I'd woken up enough roommates to know that ripping the blanket off would not work out in my favor. Instead, I picked the safest looking mass and gave him a shake.

The blanket exploded in action. Meyer shot up, screaming. I scrambled back, falling on my ass. A green hand shot out, hitting something on the wall.

The bed dropped into the floor. It was so quick. I barely had time to open my mouth before it disappeared into a black hole. I shrieked when the floor closed, trapping Meyer inside.

Scrambling over clothes, I clawed my way to where the bed used to be. Frantically, I ran my fingers over the metal floor. I couldn't feel a seam in the pieces. They fit together perfectly. I couldn't even tell if this was the right place anymore. Maybe it was two inches to the left? I started pounding on the floor.

"Meyer! Are you there? Can you hear me?" I put my ear to the floor, hoping I would hear something.

Nothing.

"I'm here, Meyer! I'm right here. I'm going to break that stupid digital panel thing. Hopefully, that will set off an alarm."

Seethur

I opened the last drawer despite knowing what I would find. I took my job very seriously, and that meant being thorough. Even when it literally stunk.

I activated my neuro-comm. Vesex answered immediately. “What happened?”

I didn’t bother asking how he knew it was bad news. Why else would I be contacting him? “One of the freeze cabinets malfunctioned. All of the fesik’s meal in it has rotted.”

“Lovely,” Vesex said with false excitement. “How are the air filters handling the smell?”

Fesiks were small, furry creatures that we bred for food. They reproduced quickly and in large numbers. They were easy to care for.

The food they ate was vile. We kept it frozen to limit the smell. Having an entire freeze cabinet full of rotten fesik food was almost unbearable.

“They’re not.” The bastard laughed. The smell was strong enough to clog up the top of my mouth, making it impossible to scent anything else. I had the most sensitive sense of smell out of our whole nest. This was a frozen nightmare. I would need to clear my scent passages if I wanted to smell anything again. I might need to flush my heat pits at this point. The stench was sticking to everything.

Vesex finally stopped laughing. “Do you know why it malfunctioned?”

I pulled out one of the drawers, careful not to spill the gelatinous mass of rotten meal. At the back of the cabinet was a panel of metallic connectors. I didn’t see any scorch marks.

It didn't look wet. That was as far as my electric diagnostics skills went. "I can't tell."

Vesex sighed. "I'll get Hix down there to help. We need to know what part we have to replace before we reach Katotic 5. He'll be thrilled."

My tail flickered slowly in amusement. Hix was not happy about being assigned to the cockpit during our inventory. He had brought it up every chance he could. He would be excited to hear that he was being let out of his hole. His rattle would be insufferable for the first little bit.

The safety pod alarm blared overhead. I tensed at the sudden noise.

"Roll call," Vesex barked through our comms.

"Seethur, here."

"Seph, here."

"Hix, here."

Everyone waited for Huzzar to sound off. When he didn't, Vesex swore.

"I knew that frozen pet was a bad idea," he muttered.

I began jogging to Huzzar's room.

"I pulled up the video feed in his room," Hix said. "I can't see Huzzar. Hissy is trying to tear apart the floor above the emergency pod's escape hatch. I'm guessing that means Huzzar is in the pod." His voice rose slightly at the end, revealing his uncertainty.

I turned the corner near Huzzar's room just as Vesex and Seph converged on his door. Vesex punched in the code hard enough that I could hear it.

Seph was muttering a frantic prayer as the door audibly disengaged. Vesex didn't bother waiting for it to open all the way. He grabbed the frame and shoved it open. I rushed in behind them.

Hissy had jumped up at the loud sound. She looked ready to run until she saw who it was. Then she became frantic. She

rushed towards Seph. Vesex stepped in front of our nestmate. His hood opened partially as he sent out a warning hiss.

Hissy flinched, trying to look smaller. The fur above her eyes dipped down. Her body trembled for a second as the smell of urine broke through the rotten fesik meal.

“You’ve scared her,” Seph whined deep in his chest. He was not happy that the little thing was terrified.

“We don’t know what happened,” Vesex reminded him. “She could have harmed Huzzar. I won’t let her harm you.”

Seph rested his hand on Vesex’s back for an instant. “I know. I’m sorry.”

In the time it took for the two to converse, Hissy had gathered some courage. She was still trembling, but she stood a little straighter. She quickly went back to where Huzzar’s pod was hidden below deck. She pointed her finger down over and over again. She kept making these rapid noises that sounded so desperate. When none of us moved, she dropped to her knees and tried tearing the deck apart.

“She’s worried about Huzzar,” Seph cried. “She didn’t hurt him, Vesex. She wants our help.”

“Sephie,” Vesex sighed, audibly frustrated, “she’s a wild animal. Don’t start assuming she thinks like you think.”

“Actually, he’s right.” Hix cut in. “I’m watching the security feed from when the alarm went off, and it looks like Hissy grabbed Huzzar while he was asleep. Huzzar slapped a hand on the emergency button without even looking.” He went silent for a second. “Huzzar drops into the escape pod, and Hissy starts going vecking crazy. No!” The loud shout made all of us jump. Hix groaned like he was in pain. “Why did you destroy the lock? What did it ever do to you?” He started complaining about needing to replace it.

We all looked at the lock next to the main door. There was a scale comb through the center of it. A few wires were poking out.

“See, Vesex, she isn’t dangerous.” Seph stepped around Vesex. He opened his arms to the little creature. Vesex

sounded like he wanted to protest, but Hissy had already shot toward Seph. She nearly knocked the Thusi off his feet. Seph wrapped an arm around her more petite frame. Her sounds were muffled against his chest.

Vesex ran his hands down either side of his hood. A clear sign that he was frustrated. “Why am I Prime when no one listens to me?”

“Because none of us like going to the rotational meetings,” Hix answered.

“The poor thing is crying,” Seph exclaimed. “They are honest to Versetti liquid tears!” He snuggled the pet closer. “She must be so frightened.”

Vesex marched over to the emergency activation button. It was next to Huzzar’s bed. They were in the same place in everyone’s room. When activated, our beds doubled as secure capsules that dropped into an escape pod. In the case of a disaster, the pods released automatically once activated. In cases like this, they proved safe spaces to hide out.

Vesex snagged his thumb against one of his fangs. Just enough to draw blood. He stabbed his thumb into the button. Once the computer verified his biometrics, the seal on the floor broke, allowing Huzzar’s bed to rise.

Seph had to hold on to Hissy to keep her from leaping into the open hole.

Huzzar emerged unharmed and looking panicked. His tongue shot out. He turned his head and scented the air again. “Where’s Hix?” He asked in a whisper.

“Sitting at the helm wanting to know what happened,” Hix answered over the ship’s speakers.

Huzzar and Hissy jumped at the sudden noise. Vesex hissed in annoyance. He ignored Hix’s dramatics and sat next to Huzzar. Vesex wrapped Huzzar in his arm and tail.

“What happened, Huzzar?” Vesex asked quietly. “Why were you in the escape pod?”

The Vispur's body finally lost its tension. He nestled closer to our Prime. After a slight reprieve, he answered.

"I was sleeping when something grabbed my tail. I couldn't see, and my blanket only smelled like me. I thought something was pulling me out of bed, so I hit the emergency button. I panicked." His shoulders sagged with a sad exhale. "Not being able to see is making me jumpy."

The admission had Seph flying across the room. He gathered up the smaller male in a tight hug. He started apologizing for leaving Huzzar alone. He completely forgot about Hissy in his rush to comfort Huzzar.

The poor thing looked lost. She was watching Huzzar but wasn't approaching the bed. That was probably a good idea on her part. Vesex had scared her when he thought she was attacking Seph. She probably wasn't sure if Vesex would hurt her if she got close.

I walked towards the tiny creature. I kept my movements slow and made sure my tail wasn't swinging around. Hissy picked up on my progress immediately. Clear brown eyes nearly had me freezing mid-step. I was determined to help her reunite with her owner, so I kept moving.

She tensed when I got close enough to feel the heat coming off of her body. She didn't try and claw me, which was a good sign. I wasn't tricked into thinking it was because she wouldn't do anything. She had that look in her eyes that said she was planning something.

We jumped at the same time.

Hissy tried to dart out of my reach. I gently curled an arm around her upper body. I had to bend over to do it. She was as tall as Huzzar. The size difference worked to my advantage. I was able to nestle her against my larger frame to secure her. I didn't need to use much force.

Having her skin against my scales was a strange sensation. Her body produced its own heat. It felt like I had settled against the rocks in our heating area. At first, it was too hot.

Then suddenly, it felt perfect. *Trust Huzzar to find a living heat source.*

Huzzar's new pet ensured that he would never get cold, even away from the ship, in the middle of the night, in a snowstorm. The little green Vispur had the best luck.

Slowly, I began leading her toward the bed. She didn't fight me though her body remained tense. We made our way toward the side of the bed with Seph and Huzzar. Hissy kept her eyes trained on Vesex at the other end. I stopped a few hand lengths away from the bed.

"Huzzar," I hissed, "your pet needs a little reassurance."

Seph turned slightly to angle Huzzar towards Hissy. He nodded in agreement. "She was very worried about you. I bet she thought the ship ate you. Then, Vesex scared her. She could use some care."

"Did he scare the piss out of her?" He asked as his tongue flicked.

Vesex huffed, "Yes. Can we get on with this? There are things to discuss."

Huzzar held his hand out. He wiggled his fingers. "Hissssssy, come here, girl. Hisssssy." He exaggerated the exhale in her name.

I felt her shoulders dip as her head dropped. After a deep breath, she stepped away from me and bent down so Huzzar could scratch her head.

"Good, Hissy. You're such a good girl! Did you get scared?" Huzzar kept saying comforting things in a high-pitched tone until Hissy finally stepped away. Her hair was sticking up in all directions. She rubbed her hands all over her head until it was flat again.

"Alright, good," Vesex cut in abruptly, "now that we know Huzzar is safe and," he barely stopped himself from pulling at his hood, "Hissy is calm. Can we discuss the latest turn of events?"

"What's come up?" Hix asked.

“One of the freezer cabinets malfunctioned. All of the fesik meal is rotten.” Vesex paused for everyone’s groan. The meal did not smell good fresh. They were not going to enjoy what it smelled like rotten. “We need to clear and clean the cabinet, find out why it malfunctioned, and keep up with our inventories.”

“We also can’t leave Huzzar alone,” Seph added. “In light of his difficulties with the temporary blindness, it’s best if he stays with me in the med bay. I can keep an eye on him while I finish my inventory.” Sephie nudged Huzzar playfully.

“You can’t watch Hissy if you’re doing inventory, too,” Vesex said. He took a breath. His tail tapped against the deck softly while he thought. “Huzzar will stay with Seph while he finishes his inventory. I will take over Seethur’s inventory of our weapons and food. Hix is going to figure out what went wrong in the freeze cabinet. Hopefully, the ship will be fine on autopilot for a short time.” He turned to me. “You’re in charge of clearing out the rotten fesik meal and keeping an eye on Hissy while you’re at it.”

“She’ll need to be cleaned first,” Seph told me. “I have a gown in medical she can wear to keep the chill off.” He stood up and turned to help Huzzar stand. “I’ll get Huzzar settled, grab the gown, and be right back.”

Vesex left with them. Hissy tried to follow. I gently held her wrist and shook my head. Once the door closed, we were stuck together. With the lock broken, I wasn’t too worried about her getting out.

Once she realized we were alone, she took a few steps away from me. While I wasn’t the tallest Susix, I was among the largest. Kithhari needed a lot of mass to wrestle prey in the water. It also meant my tail was much larger than the rest of my nests’. I could outrace anyone in the water because of it. I was well aware of my disadvantages too. I tended to intimidate other species.

The last thing I wanted to do was to scare Hissy. I sat down on the bed, hoping I looked smaller. Hissy glanced at the door

a few times. I didn't move; I just sat on the bed, waiting for Seph to return.

Hissy didn't look at me directly. She stared at the floor, the ceiling, the piles of clothing Huzzar left around, anywhere but me. Her body was tense. I knew she was very aware of me.

I watched her shuffle uncomfortably. At first, I thought it was because of me. Her knees bent as she picked at the costume on her legs. There was a stain from Vesex scaring her. That couldn't be pleasant.

Slowly, I stood. I hunched over, trying to appear smaller. Hissy awkwardly stepped out of the way. Our rooms were compact. Moving around without invading Hissy's space was difficult.

I put my hand on the entrance panel when I got to the bathroom. It flashed red. Someone had locked it. Seph had probably done it when he'd left Huzzar and Hissy alone. Smart. I typed in the override code and opened the door.

Our personal washing areas were basic and small. They were not areas for leisurely taking care of one's hygiene. We had a public heating area where we all relaxed. As such, things looked a little different. I wasn't sure how familiar Hissy was with our baths, so I started getting the washing basin ready.

I slid back the wall covering the small sand basin. It wasn't like Seph's large soaking tub in the med bay. This was meant for quick daily cleanings. I turned on the dispenser. It filled the hand basin with warm sand. I shut it off before it overflowed.

I heard the front door chime. I made sure to make noise before entering the living area again. I didn't want to risk startling Hissy. I noticed that she was close to the bathroom door, watching what I was doing.

The light over the door was flashing. It didn't open. Hissy had probably destroyed the mechanism with the comb. I walked over to open it manually. Seph was waiting on the other side with an armload of towels.

He hissed a greeting. "That was fast. I put Huzzar in a bed, turned the heat up, and he was asleep instantly. His body is

working overtime to heal.” Seph walked past me. He glanced around, looking for Hissy. He leaned his head into the bathroom. “Ah, good, she’s getting cleaned.” Feeling confident enough to leave the pet alone, Seph dumped his load onto Huzzar’s bed and started sorting.

He handed me a towel. We didn’t have large cloth towels in our personal areas. Seph kept some in the med bay for the soaking tubs. “Hissy likes these. She rubs them over herself after washing. I think it might be a scent-marking thing. Here we go,” he cried, shaking out a long white tunic. “This should fit her. Please don’t tell Huzzar this because he will go wild about it, but we need to think about getting her some clothing while we are planet side. She never goes without it, and I’m starting to wonder if she’s been trained to wear it. She reacted poorly when I tried to take it off of her.” His head swayed from side to side as he shrugged. “Who knows?”

Hissy’s head peeked out from the bathroom. The hairs over her eyes were in a line on her face. Her lips were turned down. From where I was standing, I could see that she had taken off her costume to wash. She looked around. She stilled when she noticed Seph.

“Hi, Hissy,” he hissed in a soothing tone. “Did you get scared? I’m sorry.” Without any hesitation, Seph walked to her with a towel held out.

Vesex must have really scared her. Now that she was free of her costume, she was shivering and hugging her body. When Seph got within a span of the door, her arm shot out, and she quickly wrapped the towel around her body. With her arms and hands in the way, I didn’t get a good look at her anatomy. What I did see looked like a newly hatched Thusi with all of her pale skin.

Seph got Hissy into new clothes. I stayed where I was. Seph talked to her the whole time. Hissy didn’t make any noises back.

“I have to finish inventorying our medical supplies, and that will be hard enough when I have to keep one eye on Huzzar. It

will be impossible if I have the other eye trained on you, Hissy.” Seph joked as he pet her head.

“Is there anything I need to know about taking care of her?” I asked softly, not wanting to break the moment.

“Show her where the bathroom is first off. Please give her a nutrisphere every hour. Keep an eye on her. Make sure she doesn’t get into something dangerous.” He swayed, “She’s fairly well-behaved. I think you’ll do fine.” Seph thought about it. “Actually, the smell of rotten fesik is awful. Neither one of you will be fine.” He gave me a sympathetic smile. “Let me know if you need any help clearing your scent passages afterward.”

He turned to Hissy. “Alright, girl. I’m leaving you with Seethur. You and Hix are going to help him clean up. Be good.” As he spoke, he led her over to me. Without breaking eye contact, he put her hand in mine. Then he patted her head and walked out. It was well orchestrated.

I looked down at Hissy. She was looking up at me. I jerked my head toward the hall. She didn’t fight me. She followed along quietly.

It was difficult to walk holding her hand in mine. The size difference forced me to bend over slightly. I stopped in the hall. Hissy stopped next to me. I slowly let go of her hand. I stood to my full height, untwisting my crooked spine.

I held my tail out for her to grab. She stared at it, the hair over her eyes curved up. I waved it. She jumped, shrieked, and made a strange panting noise all at the same time. I reared my tail back instantly. The last thing I wanted was a bite mark on my body.

Hissy made a whining noise. She leaned around my body, looking for my tail. I moved it to the opposite side, out of reach. She pursed her lips and began cooing at it.

She stepped around me, trying to reach my tail. She was so focused on the end of it that she didn’t notice when she had to step over a portion lying on the floor. She put a hand out to touch it but stopped. She looked at me expectantly. I nodded.

She waited, then touched it with one hand. She made a noise and grabbed it gently.

Slowly, I wrapped a length of my tail around the hand, grabbing it. She made that unique panting sound again. It sounded like the air in her lungs was getting stuck coming out. She didn't rip her hand away, so I decided to keep moving.

Hissy stumbled slightly when my tail tugged her to my side. She didn't stop, in any case. She kept by my side until we were at the fesik's room.

Hix was already there when we arrived. He was practically inside the freeze cabinet. His tail whipped behind him. A sign that he was agitated.

I hissed a laugh when I saw the cloth contraption wrapped around his rattle.

Hix leaned out. He was spitting mad. "Don't say anything. The little pet is scared of my rattle. I want her to like me. Hence the silencer.

"I can still hear it."

He held up a hand with a tool in it. "Not as loudly, which counts." He turned to Hissy, giving her his biggest smile. "Hi, Hissy. You like the cover, don't you?" Hissy didn't move or make a sound. Hix flipped back to me with a proud grin. "See?"

I kept a gentle hold of Hissy's wrist. I showed her the small toilet near the back of the storage area. There wasn't much else in the room. It was packed with freezer cabinets. They had food, medicines, and some of Hix's more sensitive ship parts.

I wasn't sure what to do with Hissy. There wasn't anything to play with. There wasn't even room to put up an enclosure for her.

I let go of her wrist. I pointed to myself and then to the broken freezer cabinet. Then, I pointed at Hissy, then the ground. She didn't do anything that indicated she understood what I was telling her. There wasn't much else I could do to communicate what I wanted her to do.

I went to start cleaning the rotten fesik feed. I could hear Hissy shift around once there was no attention on her. I wasn't too worried about how much trouble she got into. I could track her by scent well enough to keep her out of the worst of it.

I began pulling out all of the drawers from the cabinet. Most of the food was still sealed in their storage containers. It helped keep the smell from being too overpowering.

The problem was that a few bags had burst. The putrid grey powder we added to the fesik's water had liquified into a slimy consistency. It seeped down the sides of the drawers in the cabinet. I needed to remove the food, clean everything, and ensure the entire area was sanitized.

Hix had found what had happened. One of the electric panels behind the freezer cabinet had melted. He was focused on it. He barely poked his head out. I heard his muffled curses the entire time.

As we worked, Hissy moved around the room. I kept an ear out for her. She seemed okay with exploring. She tugged on a freezer drawer. When it didn't move, she lost interest. After a few spans, I stopped hearing her. I pulled off my gloves to look around.

She had found a space between two cabinets to sleep. She was curled around her legs. I turned and went to the emergency supply drawer. There was a blanket in it. I shook it out and draped it over Hissy. She didn't move.

Hix and I worked in silence for a long time. Hissy slept. Once everything was clean and put back, I commed Vesex.

"Glad the smell is gone," Vesex murmured after I told him I was done. "I've almost finished going through our weapons. You should probably go over the list I've made. I'm sure there are a few items you want to add."

I always wanted to add a few new weapons to our arsenal. With the Serex Nest readying to make a move, there were a few items I would feel more comfortable if we had on hand. I hummed my agreement.

“Would you check on the fesiks? The last thing we need is for our food source to run out,” Vesex asked.

I disconnected with him after letting him know that I would take care of the fesiks. “Hix.” I waited for him to pull himself away from the smoldering pen. “I’m taking Hissy to the fesik pens.” He nodded and went back to work.

Hissy was still asleep when I went to her hiding spot. I wasn’t sure how I should wake her up. Most creatures don’t like getting woken up. Using my tail, I poked her. She began shifting. Her head poked out of the mound she was sleeping in. She looked around, confused, before she noticed me. She made a low groan and then flopped back onto the floor. When she didn’t move, I poked her again. She started making strange noises before she staggered to her feet.

I picked up the blanket and refolded it. Then I wrapped my tail around her wrist again. We left Hix behind after putting the blanket away. Before exiting the room, I grabbed the bags of rotten fesik food. We needed to shoot them into space before they contaminated something. The stuff was truly vile.

I barely needed my tail as I led Hissy toward the airlock. She kept close enough that my tail hung limp between us. She seemed much more interested in looking around than running off.

The airlock on our ship doubled as our access to the outside of the ship. We had needed to do exterior repairs more than once. Because it was dual-purpose, it was larger than the average airlock. There was a decompression chamber between the inner and outer doors. An extensive security system also kept it from accidentally shooting anyone into space.

It was at the back of the ship’s cargo bay. The first door was close enough to Hix’s repair station that we didn’t have to carry his tools very far during repair sessions.

I stopped in front of the control panel. I let go of Hissy. She stared at me expectantly. “Stay.” I pointed at the floor. “Stay.” She didn’t move, so I walked toward the airlock.

The valve to open the door was heavy. It took a lot of force to get it to start turning. It was a basic security measure. On the door was a single window that looked into the airlock.

On the other side of the airlock was an identical window. It looked out onto black space. Besides that, the decompression chamber was bare except for a few emergency straps secured along the wall. We had never used them. Still, I checked their strength every so often. I slept better, knowing they were ready to hold one of us if the outside door malfunctioned.

The outside door was automatic. There was no handle or valve to grab onto. Whoever programmed the control panel made it open and close.

I set the bags of fesik food in the center of the room. I closed the inside door. Then I double-checked to make sure that it was shut.

Hissy was standing almost exactly where I had left her. She was close to the control panel. Her hand raised and flopped back and forth. I waited for her to follow up with something else. She didn't move.

I stepped towards the glass screen. I selected the airlock function and typed in the jettison sequence. It was fairly straightforward. It only took a few taps before the airlock activated.

Hissy's head twisted towards the inside door. She rushed towards it.

"Hissy!" I raced forward to stop her from trying to open the freezing thing. Luckily, Hissy ignored the heavy valve altogether. She gripped the tiny edge of the window and tried to see what was happening. She was too small to get a good look, just like Huzzar.

I shook my head. Then I wrapped my tail around her slight frame and lifted her up. She made a high pitch screeching noise. It cut off when she saw into the decompression chamber.

Unlike when we used it for repairs, there wasn't much waiting. The outer door hissed as it opened. The safety straps

started to twist. The bag of rotten food moved towards the door. A strip of black appeared at the bottom of the white frame. That was all the room the bag needed. It was sucked out into space almost too fast to see.

Hissy gasped. She used both of her hands to brace herself against the window. We watched as the door opened fully, then closed. It was boring, but Hissy was glued to the window.

Once the door was closed, the control panel beeped, letting me know that the door was locked again. I set Hissy down and rewrapped my tail around her wrist.

I led her towards the fesik pens. This time, she walked beside me. She made happy noises the entire time.

We kept the fesik pens inside a storage closet we had converted. Yes, that meant we lost some room but having food security in deep space was worth it.

Fesiks were native to Susurex. They lived in the leaf litter in the northern portion of the planet. They were a hearty protein source. They reproduced quickly, in great numbers. They were easy to care for. So long as you kept their enclosures damp and gave them enough reusable synthetic leaf litter to burrow in, they would thrive. They typically overpopulated their pens within a few weeks. We almost couldn't eat them fast enough. There were bags of them in our freezer cabinets.

Hissy's excited steps faltered when we stepped into the converted storage closet. Only a few dim lights were on. Fesiks preferred the dark. We had built shelves along each wall. The bottom rows were full of cleaning supplies, supplements, and fesik food ready to be mixed. Every other scale of available space had a pen in it.

The dark, tight storage area wasn't what had Hissy pausing at the door. The smell was overpowering. This room was not built to house animals. There weren't proper vents in it. The dank smell took some getting used to. From the noises Hissy was making, she did not like it.

I walked straight to the back of the room, where there was a thin doorway. It was barely wide enough for me to wriggle my shoulders into. Inside was a bucket and a mixing stick. I grabbed them quickly before slapping the access panel for the tiny space.

Hissy had covered her face with both of her hands. Her shoulders were stiff as she slowly moved around. Her eyes were barely open. She shook her head back and forth a few times while I watched.

“I know. The smell is a living thing,” I chuckled. The fesiks were delicious when soaked in lichen powder. It was always worth the smell.

I took down a flat work surface from the wall and set the bucket down. I pulled out a bag of thawed fesik food. The little creatures usually went through two bags a day. Until we could restock our supply, they were only getting one bag. My claw sliced a clean line across the top of the bag. I emptied it into the bucket. I filled the bucket halfway with water using a tube next to the work area. Hissy had inched closer by the time I started mixing it.

She made a strange popping noise with her throat when she looked inside. I gently stepped between her and the fesik food at that point. It wasn't for everyone. Hix couldn't stomach the smell for very long.

I filled the food dispensers with the liquid meal. I checked on each pen as I did. While they were easy to care for, fesiks still got sick. It was better to check into anomalies quickly.

Once I had washed out the feed bucket, I went back to one of the pens on the left wall. The synthetic leaves were a strange color in a corner. I wanted to make sure everything was okay before we left.

I slide out the shelf containing the pen I was interested in. I pulled off the lid and took a look. I couldn't see any abnormalities about anything other than the leaf color. It even smelled normal.

I stuck my hand in and started rooting around. My claw touched a spongy, hot mass. I pinched it between the pads of my fingers. It wriggled lazily. I pulled the fesik out from its hiding spot.

The fat, walking dirt clump was a dull brown color. It had nine black legs that flailed in the air. Its black eyes stared blankly at nothing. I gave it a gentle squeeze. Its body huffed. This little beast was as healthy as could be. It was almost ready to eat too.

A scream had me dropping the fesik to cover my ears.

Hissy had uncovered her face and was waving her arms around madly. She stabbed her whole arm towards the pen. Her voice changed. She started making a lot of different noises very quickly. She had stopped screaming, at least.

I put both hands up with my tail low. "It's okay, Hissy. They're just fesiks. There's no reason to be scared."

I started walking towards her. Hissy stuck one finger in my direction. I stopped. She kept making rapid noises. "Don't worry, girl. They can't hurt you. We eat *them*."

I started moving again. Hissy's voice had gotten less shrill. She was still agitated. She let me get close enough to wrap my tail around her.

"That's a good girl. You're safe. I won't let the fesiks hurt you."

I felt her relax a little. Her whole body gave one big shiver before she settled completely.

"I'm almost done. I need to finish looking at that one pen. Then we can wash this stink off."

I put Hissy close to the exit. It was the farthest point away from where I was working. I ended up finding a broken feeding tube in the pen. The feed was dripping, causing the leaf litter to discolor. It was a quick fix.

Afterward, I took Hissy back to the med bay. We both got sand baths to wash off the smell of the fesik pens. I left her with Seph so I could help Vesex inventory the weapons. I

couldn't stop thinking about Hissy. Huzzar had Versetti's own luck.

Chapter Seven

Cece

The giant bald one was my current favorite. Even though he took me to the stinky bug room, he was mindful of me without hovering. He let me explore most of the areas we went to. He even took me to wash the bug smell off before returning me to the doctor. He gave me a little tail hug when he left. It was cute.

I had been scared spitless when his thick tail had hefted me off of the floor by the garbage chute. When it turned out he was letting me see into the tiny window at the back of the ship, I had calmed down. Then I got to watch trash get sucked out to space. That had been cool. I wouldn't have been able to see it without his help.

Like before with the doctor, I had tried to memorize the buttons he had pushed to make the garage door open. I wasn't completely clueless. I knew we had gone to some kind of exit out to space. I figured that could be helpful in the future. Luckily, there hadn't been many symbols to remember.

Going back to the hospital had been boring. Meyer was still splitting his time between the baths and his bed. The doctor was busy making notes on his little glass tablet thing. None of the drawers opened.

I tried to stay busy. The doctor stopped my fun every time. He cleaned up my water balloon bowling game. Then he turned off the water when I tried to take a bath. I wasn't sure why I was allowed to use the sand baths unsupervised, but the water one was off-limits. The final straw for the doctor came when I found a metal pipe that sounded like a doorbell if you hit it in just the right way.

The doctor rushed over, grabbed the pipe, and snorted at me. Then he had tapped his tail for a few minutes. I stood where I was until he hustled me towards the door.

It opened to reveal the rattlesnake guy. His shoulders were slumped. He gave me a small closed mouth smile.

I casually eyed his tail but couldn't see the end. The last time he had visited, it had been wrapped in cloth. I was kind of interested in seeing what his rattle looked like. Now that I knew he probably wasn't going to eat me.

The doctor started talking the instant the door opened. He shoved a few items into the rattlesnake man's arms. The rattler just nodded.

It was obvious that he wasn't paying attention to what the doctor was saying. He kept giving me subtle glances. Like he wanted to stare. I didn't get a bad feeling from the looks. If he had been human, I would have said that he was nervous.

The doctor stopped lecturing for a second. That's when I heard it—the muffled sound of something rattling. The doctor started up again. I used the opportunity to subtly lean to the side and look behind the alien standing in the hallway.

The end of his tail was covered in fabric. It looked like someone had wrapped a white sheet around a Wiffle ball bat.

The second I spotted it, the thing went wild. The top whipped back and forth excitedly. The fabric made a muffled sound. It sounded like a box of Christmas bells was falling down a set of stairs.

The rattlesnake man snatched the thing mid-swing. He tucked it firmly against his stomach. It twitched frantically but didn't break free.

We stared at each other with wide eyes. While I watched, the scales along his cheeks shifted. They caught the light. The iridescent flash made it look like he was blushing. It was adorable. I laughed and smiled. He ducked his head.

The doctor didn't seem affected by the moment. With a firm push, he directed me toward the rattler. His voice was soft

and reassuring. Just like earlier when he had passed me off to the bald guy.

I gave the rattlesnake a look. “So, you’re my new babysitter?”

He didn’t reply. When the door to the hospital room closed, he bobbed his head toward one of the hallways. Without waiting, he started walking in that direction.

This guy didn’t double-check to make sure that I followed him. He didn’t hold my hand. His tail bounced and jiggled like a lure. My eyes caught the movement, and I just followed along.

We came to an open doorframe. He dropped his tail and walked in. He said something. The lights dimmed just as I entered.

“Woah,” I breathed.

The entire back wall was an open view of space. It was the most intense blackness I had ever seen. It encompassed everything. In the distance were bright shapes. They weren’t all white like the stars I saw at home. I saw reds, purples, and flashes of blue.

I stepped into the room to get closer to the window. I could tell that we were moving. It was like being at sea. The small bright lights stayed where they were as we gently floated past them. I wondered how fast we were moving.

I’m not sure how long I watched the universe go by. I probably could have stayed there for days. Too bad my stomach rumbled.

My babysitter barked a single word, and the lights turned on. His eyes met mine suspiciously. I watched him scratch the side of his head.

He said something. He paused and then bobbed his head side to side. He said something else before tapping the side of his head again.

He turned in the chair he was sitting in. After tapping on the arm for a second, the window’s image changed. A video

feed of the ship popped up. The screen was broken up into four sections. I saw the doctor and Meyer in the hospital area. The bald guy was in a storage closet. The King Cobra was tallying bags in a small room. The final image was a room filled with silver surfaces. I couldn't see it very well. I could tell that it was empty.

The rattlesnake man hissed a laugh. He turned to me. He made a big show of walking over to the video feed. He pointed at the doctor and then covered his eyes. He said something. He opened his eyes. Then he covered his mouth and wrapped his tail around his body. He started shuffling across the room. After a few feet, he stopped, straightened, and looked at me expectantly.

“Aah,” I mumbled, “the doctor can't see us?” I covered my eyes. He bounced excitedly.

As a pair, we left the room. He kept gesturing for me to stay close. He kept to the walls as we made our way through the ship. His attitude was contagious. I started checking behind us every so often to make sure that no one was following.

We came to an extra wide door. The rattler practically shoved me inside the instant the door was open wide enough.

“Oh, we're in a kitchen.” This was the first recognizable place I had come across in space.

There were metal work surfaces all over. I saw a few counters with alternative coloring. I guessed those were heating areas. Oversized coats were hanging next to another door. I was willing to bet that there was a freezer on the other side of the door.

My babysitter made a beeline for the cabinets in the back. He opened one and started making a pile on the counter. He moved around the kitchen, gathering strange things. The entire time he spoke and avoided eye contact.

I watched him cut a soft oval thing. It was a splotchy green color. It nearly fell apart when he used his claw to quarter it. The inside was pulpy and yellow. He scooped the inside out with a claw.

Gently, he pinched a piece of it between two fingers. He offered me the slice by stretching his arm as far as he could.

I flinched back. “That can’t be hygienic, right? You didn’t wash your hands before you cut that thing.”

He shook it in front of my face. I had a mini flashback to last Thanksgiving when I had fed my dogs some turkey under the table. This was karma.

He shook it again. I caught a whiff of the smell coming off of it. There was no way to describe it. I had no frame of reference for the scent. It wasn’t fruity. It wasn’t floral. It just smelled fresh and sweet. My mouth watered—my teeth ground at the thought of biting down on something.

“Screw it.” I grabbed his wrist gently with both hands. He froze. I let go with one hand and pinched the food with my other one. Once I had my treat, I let go of him altogether.

Whatever the food was, it was sticky. Juice coated my fingers immediately. I took a tiny bite. The food was fleshy like a mango. I had to gnaw a little to get a piece off.

It was worth it. There was a lot of liquid in that small bite. The flesh was soft and enjoyable. I ate the rest of it. Then I ate every other slice he offered me.

It felt so good to eat real food again. We cleaned up the peel. I helped wipe down the countertop. My babysitter put the utensils away. Then we sand-washed our hands.

We didn’t sneak back. We walked like normal people. Not that we saw anyone either time. We could have walked normally both ways.

When we got back to our original room, the video feed was still up. Not much had changed. Without the impressive view blinding me, I took a look around.

There were glass computer screens around the room. I saw one chair tucked into a hole in the wall. There was only one other chair, and it was in the center of the room. There wasn’t anything else.

My babysitter sat on the central chair and started typing. The video feed disappeared. The view of space came back. He kept typing. A red line appeared over a white square. The image enlarged until I could tell that the red line was moving. Dark shapes popped up with strange symbols next to them. Whatever he saw must have been good because he exited the map.

“So, you’re the captain?” That didn’t seem right. It was obvious that the King Cobra man was in charge. They all deferred to him when he was present. “Are you the navigator?” That didn’t fit his personality. “You’re more of a getaway driver.”

He ignored what I was saying and stood up. He walked over to the extra chair. He pulled it out of its hiding spot. He rolled it as far away as he could. He walked over to a set of drawers set into the wall.

He paused for a second before turning around. He covered his mouth with his hand again. I understood what that meant. I nodded.

He turned back around and opened the drawer. There were a lot of crinkling noises. Too bad his body was in the way. I couldn’t see anything. The sounds were familiar. Even across the galaxy, every living home had a junk drawer. I heard things shift and topple as he kept looking. Whatever he was digging around for had his tail whipping back and forth.

The drawer slammed shut as he stood up. When he turned around again, he had the biggest smile on his face. He threw something up in the air and then caught it with a slap.

“A ball!” I rushed forward without a thought.

The rattlesnake man went stiff as a board. I kept heading toward the ball. I never even thought he would strike me. I was so focused on touching something familiar. Not that it was all that familiar.

The “ball” was the size of a softball. The texture was unlike any ball I had ever held. It was closer to a tanned hide. There were large ridges on every surface of it. I squeezed it. The

inside gave like a squishy ball. I let go, and it sprung back to its original shape. That felt familiar.

My babysitter yanked it back and tossed it onto the ground. He trapped it under his foot. Then, his tail whacked it. The ball rolled across the room toward the hole where the spare chair had been. The ball wobbled like crazy. It didn't move in a straight line at all. It hit the side of the hole, and it bounced to the other side of the room.

My babysitter hissed. I laughed. Then I jogged over to get it.

“My turn,” I sang as I dribbled towards the tiny goal.

Or tried to dribble. The stupid ball bounced unexpectedly. It never went where I expected it to go. I was swearing at it by the time I lined up for my goal kick.

The stupid thing hit the ceiling. My babysitter laughed so hard his tail cover shook loose. He stopped laughing when I threw the ball at him.

We took turns trying to get that misshaped thing into the small hole. I was very sweaty by the time we stopped. We both managed to score a few goals, so I felt good.

He took me back to the doctor eventually. I was grateful. After all of the running around, I was tired. I didn't even wash the sweat off of me. I just climbed into my bed for a nap.

I woke up to my bald friend tapping me. He wrapped his tail around my wrist as I got out of bed. I went where he pulled me. The doctor had Meyer by a similar hold. They led us through the ship to a room next to the kitchen. Everyone else was already there.

There was a long, narrow table at the center of the room. It took up most of the space. I noticed that there was an opening between this room and the kitchen. I assumed that the opening was like a serving window. I could see a pot bubbling away on one of the heating surfaces. There were already a few dishes set out on the table.

I counted the empty chairs. I huffed when I realized there wasn't a seat for me. It's not like they were going to put out a

table setting for the pet but still.

The rattler carried the pot of bubbling liquid to the center of the long table. My bald friend brought out a few more bowls filled with steaming food. They had a whole spread set out.

As everyone else sat down, the doctor pointed to a piece of fabric in the corner. I trudged over to it without a word. He smiled and pet my head. I sighed when the doctor handed me one of the water balloons.

After eating real food again, this was the last thing I wanted. The aliens started dishing up. They served everything family style. Everyone reached across the table to put different foods on their plates.

I watched as the King Cobra filled a plate with steaming mush and a chunky bread-type thing. Then he set it in front of Meyer. It didn't take long for everyone to tuck into their food.

Nothing looked familiar. It looked hot. My stomach didn't care that nothing was identifiable. I cared that it was hot and I could chew it. I wanted to try it all.

I set the water balloon down and inched toward the table. No one paid any attention to me. They were busy talking. I saddled up next to my rattlesnake babysitter. He had fed me before. There was a chance that he would do it again.

He didn't pass me anything when I stopped right next to him. I poked him. He glanced at me but quickly focused on his food. I poked him and then pointed at his plate. He shook his head and tried to ignore me. That made me want to stomp my foot. I poked him harder.

The doctor made a sharp hissing sound. I jumped. He pointed at the fabric in the corner where my water balloon was. I huffed and went back over there.

I finished my water balloon while everyone ate dinner. It was mind-numbingly dull. Luckily, I didn't have to wait long for everyone to finish. They stood up, put their dishes in a small drawer, and left the room as a group.

I followed behind as they wove through the ship again. Everyone chatted happily. The cheerful sounds got louder as

we entered an echoey chamber.

It was very different from the rest of the ship. This room was scorching hot. I felt uncomfortable the instant I stepped through the doorway. This room lacked the sterile metal that made up most of the surfaces on the ship. The ground was made of a porous clay material. I could feel the heat coming up from the floor through my socks.

The ground was uneven here too. In some spots, there were mounds. In one corner was a steaming pool. It was like a desert sauna.

The aliens immediately started getting naked. I threw a hand over my eyes before remembering that I wasn't going to see anything anyways.

My babysitter stretched across one of the mounds. His tail wrapped snugly around the base before giving a happy rattle. He groaned as his body practically melted into the clay.

The big bald alien headed right for the water. He barely paused long enough to get off his clothes before stepping in. Watching such a large figure circle around and around like a cat trying to get comfortable was strange. Eventually, he submerged himself up to his chin. His eyes closed on a loud exhaling hiss.

Everyone got comfortable at different spots around the room. Eventually, the conversations lagged. Then stopped altogether. By that point, I was beyond uncomfortable.

I had sweat through the minimal clothing I was wearing. Which was saying a lot considering I was in a sports bra and a skirt that had started life as a dress. I was beginning to get a little dizzy from the heat too.

I didn't bother sneaking out. I stood up and staggered toward the door. Outside felt so good. The hallway was almost cold compared to the sauna room. I stood there and caught my breath for a long time. The sweat along my body cooled.

No one came to check on me. My head cleared. I started to get tired. I wanted to lay down for a nap again. The floor was unbearably hard. My muscles got sore every two minutes. I

was practically crying by the time I decided I needed to go somewhere else to sleep.

It didn't matter if I got in trouble for wandering off. I was finding somewhere to sleep. I roamed the halls for a few minutes before I noticed a familiar glass computer screen.

I placed my hand over it. The door slid open. I did a little dance when I saw the weird fridge room the bald man had taken me to yesterday. I went straight for the little hidey hole in the back.

Unfortunately, I didn't have the blanket from last time. I was disappointed since I was starting to get cold. The sweat had dried, and my skin was breaking out goosebumps.

It didn't affect my ability to sleep. Now that I was in a more comfortable place, I fell asleep immediately. I barely moved.

I woke up when I heard the door slide open. My heart started to pound. I froze even though I hadn't moved in the first place.

Whoever had just walked in was enormous. I could hear the weight of their steps as they walked further into the room. They weren't stomping around in anger. They were moving slowly, but it didn't hide how heavy their feet sounded on the metal floor. Which meant it was one of the three hulking members of the crew: the bald guy, the rattlesnake, or the King Cobra. I was okay with two of them. The third might make me die of fright if they scared me.

A massive shape stepped into view. I could tell by the size and coloring that it was my bald friend. Their rounded snout paused. I watched as his long, nearly black tongue flicked out. He tilted his head one way, then another before flicking his tongue out again. *He's tracking my smell*, I realized.

He stayed still for a moment. Then, his head tilted to the side until he could see me with both eyes. He didn't move otherwise. He kept still. He said something in his deep vibrating voice.

My heart slowed when my stupid brain realized nothing terrible was going to happen. I uncurled from my spot on the

floor and got up. My bald friend waited patiently as I stretched out the kinks in my body.

I was moving slowly after the day's excitement. My new friend didn't tug me to go faster. He slowed his pace until we got to the hospital doors.

The doctor didn't greet us. The bald snake man didn't come inside either. He gave me a tail hug and left. I was so tired that I didn't think about escaping or pressing my lack of supervision. I dragged myself across the dimly lit room and crawled under my blanket. I was asleep before I could take off my gross socks.

Chapter Eight

Cece

I woke up in a bed on an alien spaceship for the fourth day in a row. Once again, I was awake before Meyer. I had missed the doctor coming in again. He was nearly silent. I never heard him. Every morning when I woke up, he was already sitting at his desk working on something.

I knew from previous experiments that the sand bath and toilet did not wake Meyer up. Neither did my stumbling to the bathroom. He slept through almost everything.

I didn't bother rolling out of bed this morning. I was exhausted. My head felt heavy. My whole body ached. The thought of hot sand scraping my hands, let alone the rest of my body, made me shudder. They were going to have to pry me out of bed today.

I must have fallen asleep because the next thing I registered was a strange groaning sound coming from Meyer's bed. I blinked, trying to focus on the shape under his blankets. I couldn't tell which end was which, let alone what was going on.

The doctor came over much more quickly than he usually did. That had me swinging up in bed. Something was wrong. The doctor was not messing around. He ripped the blanket off of Meyer without hesitation.

I tried to look around him, but I couldn't see anything. I got up on my knees and leaned as far as I could. Meyer's sleep clothes blocked what little I managed to see around the doctor.

The doctor gave Meyer an intense head-to-toe examination. It was quick because he was laser focused. He asked something in a sharp tone. Meyer moaned something back. The doctor lifted some fabric and gave a subtle head bob.

His demeanor changed instantly. The doctor's shoulders relaxed while his gestures got bigger. He threw his arms in the air and made a very pathetic sound. He immediately started rearranging pillows and blankets. Every so often, he would cup Meyer's face and say something. He was in full mama hen mode.

I relaxed, realizing that whatever was happening wasn't life-threatening.

While I watched, Meyer got the complete sick day treatment. The doctor got him wrapped up in a big blanket. Then he fiddled with something in the back for a bit. He paced until I heard a ding. He came back with a steaming mug and helped Meyer sit upright.

I got my first full view of him. He didn't look good. The white patches covering his eyes were different. They looked like someone had gone over them with a second coat of paint.

The rest of him looked like it needed a touch-up. His scales had become duller since our swim in that acid river. Today, they looked like they were starting to break off. Some were opaque. Others looked dusty. It was gross. Even I wanted to sit next to him and fuss over him for a bit.

That was saying a lot because I was not feeling well. My head was starting to do that angry pounding thing. My muscles felt like they were made of stones. I wanted to stay in bed, but my mouth was so dry.

I practically fell out of bed. Luckily, Meyer was too miserable to care, and the doctor was too focused to notice. I shuffled to the doctor's desk and riffled through his drawers until I found some water balloons. The strange consistency felt nice because my throat was scratchy.

I drank two on my way to the bathroom. I grabbed a pair of thin towels from the towel drawer and took them into the toilet area. I took off my sweaty clothes from yesterday. Then I tied the towels together into a toga-style dress. It wasn't pretty. It did the job of keeping me covered.

Making the dress took all of my energy. I did the most half-hearted job of scrubbing my hands with the sand. Once my hands were sand free, I shuffled back to bed.

I was left alone for a while. The doctor forgot about me until the midday meal. Nearly all of the crew squeezed into the hospital area. They were loud enough to wake both my sick buddy and me.

My bald friend was carrying a tray of food. Behind him was the King Cobra. I waited to see if the rattlesnake was following them. He didn't show up.

They gathered around Meyer. He hissed and complained a bit. He ate a few bites of the food they had brought. He wasn't very interested in it. Seeing a group of aliens be so openly concerned about their friend was touching. They chatted quietly for a few minutes before the doctor shooed everyone away.

As the two extra crew members left, my bald friend stopped and gestured to me. I almost groaned. I had nearly gotten away without being noticed. The second he pointed at me, though, the jig was up. The doctor went stiff as a board.

He rushed over. Clearly, in all of the commotion this morning, he had forgotten me. His fussing spilled over to include me for a few minutes. He checked my bed to make sure I hadn't had an accident. I just rolled my eyes at that. He pet my head frantically while he tried to get me to drink a water balloon. I did not need to speak alien to know that he was feeling guilty.

I gently touched his hand. The cool, smooth texture made me pause, only for an instant. I squeezed him, then let go.

He made a huffy sigh. His hand tangled in my hair. I grumbled. These aliens were too touchy-feely with me sometimes. I tried to get free. That only made the doctor cling harder. It was too much. I completely ran out of energy wrestling him.

The big guy watched the whole thing but didn't do anything. When he saw me slump in defeat, he hissed a laugh

and then said something to the doctor. It was short and quiet.

It made the doctor perk up. He leaned over so that one side of his body was closer to the bald guy. The two talked. By the end, they had come up with some plan.

The bald guy stood next to me while the doctor ran around the room gathering items. At one point, he stopped next to Meyer and spoke with him. Then he went back to running around. He pushed a floating chair towards Meyer. Bags were hanging from hooks at the back. My bald friend slinked over and helped bundle Meyer into the chair.

The group started towards the door. Technically, Meyer led the way. It was impossible to see him under the giant white blanket covering him from head to foot. The doctor directed the chair from behind. He didn't have to push it. Regardless, he kept his hand on the headrest. My bald friend brought up the rear.

As they passed by, he wrapped his tail around my wrist. At this point, I knew the drill. I followed.

We went impossibly slow. I wasn't sure why since the injured party was in the neat futuristic wheelchair. Meyer could probably beat us in a race. No one spoke.

I tried to keep track of our surroundings while we walked. I had been to a few areas on the ship. I hadn't memorized any paths yet. Everything looked similar. There were words written at each of the turns in the hall. They looked like scribbles to me. I was probably going to need to start paying more attention. If I could recognize one or two symbols, I might be able to get around.

I knew where we were going the instant we turned down a new hallway. I noticed the rise in temperature. I had to force myself to walk through the doorway.

The sauna was still as hot as it had been last night. I swear it felt damper. The humidity had me shaking out my homemade toga.

The snake men converged on Meyer. They helped him out of the chair. Then they carried him to the hot spring.

I couldn't help but watch as they took turns holding him while the other took off his sleep clothes. Meyer gave a few heartfelt tries as he wriggled out of his pants. The doctor and my bald friend chuckled at his antics. They babied him until he was nestled against the doctor under the water.

The pair made quite a sight. Their colors contrasted even with Meyer's duller tones. They both had their eyes closed, leaning against one another. It was sweet.

My bald friend wrapped himself around one of the mounds on the floor. He didn't relax like last night. He kept his body facing the pool.

I stood around like an idiot for longer than I should have. I wasn't sure what I was supposed to do. There weren't any chairs to sit on. I did want to lie down, so I tried to find a way to lie on one of the smaller clay mounds.

The thing was lumpy and bumpy. It made me want to move every few seconds. The heat felt terrific. It seared the aches out of my muscles. Instead of sleeping, I strategically flopped around, trying to work out my poor body.

It eventually got to be too much. Humans just weren't made for relaxing in places that hot. I stood up and wobbled until everything stopped spinning. I waved at the bald guy. He didn't notice. I shrugged my shoulders and left.

This time I didn't bother sitting in the hallway. I wasn't going to take up space while I waited for them. I wanted to explore.

I took a right and started walking. None of the glass screens I touched opened anything. Nothing happened when I touched the words written on the walls.

Finally, one of the doors opened when I touched the keypad. I poked my head in slowly. I didn't want to surprise anyone.

Inside was a room similar to Meyer's bedroom. At least the layout was identical. This room was much cleaner.

I walked in and looked around. The room wasn't empty by any means. There were rows of shoes tucked under the bed. I

saw a few pictures taped to the mirror. The bed had a unique blanket on it. There weren't any piles of clothes on the floor. The bed was made. All of the personal touches were subtle and organized. Essentially, the room was a minimalist's paradise.

I also noticed the same button that Meyer had pushed in his bedroom. The button that made the bed disappear into the floor. I made sure to stay away from that button.

I snooped but not much. I wasn't sure whose room it was at first. I started opening drawers hoping it would help me figure out who lived there. It wasn't until I got to the bathroom that I found something that helped.

One of the drawers was full of metal pins and odd combs. The pins matched the ones that the King Cobra used to keep his hair back. I noticed them every time he came close because they caught the light.

Satisfied now that I knew whose room it was, I continued my self-guided tour. I eventually found everyone's bedroom. The rest of them were easier to guess than the first. Everyone else was messy enough that I figured out who lived where quickly.

I walked around long enough that I got a better feel for the ship's layout. I managed to backtrack through the hallways and find the bug room. I did not go inside. From there, I went to the hangar, where I had watched a trash bag get sucked into space.

I had already been gone longer than I had planned, so I only poked my head into the hanger. I was confident I could find it again if I found the bug room first.

As I was walking back, I heard the tell-tale stomp of my big bald friend. I had almost gotten to the bug room but was too far away to hide inside. Instead, I flattened myself behind a support beam against the wall.

The bald guy walked into view slowly. He was searching for something. I could guess what it was. His tongue scented the air constantly.

His confident steps came to a halt outside of the bug room. His tongue flicked out. He shook his head before flicking his tongue out again. He sneezed. He took a deep breath and then slammed a hand over the glass computer screen. He raced in.

I know, buddy. They smell awful. The little bugs stunk bad enough that it threw my friend's sense of smell off. I got it. They smelled so horrendous that I could *taste* them. If his sense of smell was more sensitive than mine, he must be dying.

The big guy sprinted out of the room. He heaved in clean air. He rubbed his face against his shirt. His whole body shuddered.

The entire thing was so human. I couldn't help it. I laughed.

His head jerked towards my hiding spot. His eyes locked on mine immediately. His lip curved into a smile.

I don't know why I did it. It was such an instinctual response that I didn't even think before I acted. My lizard brain just took over, and I sprinted away.

My socks caught on the strange floor. It threw off my stride. My feet couldn't keep up with my legs.

I scream-laughed. Then I glance behind me. I screamed for real.

He was right behind me. I hadn't heard him at all. He was moving fast.

His body was low to the ground. It undulated as he raced toward me. His eyes were lasered in on my torso.

My brain went haywire. I took a quick turn, hoping to lose him. My socks caught on the floor while my body continued down the hall. It equated to a misstep. It cost me.

His tail slapped on the ground hard enough to shake my footing. It gave him enough leverage to launch his body forward. The transition was seamless. He was running. Then he was flying. My awkward footing was cementing me in place. I couldn't even duck.

He hit me like a freight train. I sounded like a broken bagpipe when all of the air left my lungs. His arms wrapped around me as we landed with another ground-shaking slap.

Neither of us moved for a few breaths. I could feel his cool scales rise and fall. My legs stopped shaking.

My friend stood upright. He kept me in his arms, so I was left dangling. He swayed back and forth. He spoke the whole time.

He set me down. He looked happy. He kept talking, which was unusual. He pet my head once. He was acting like a proud owner.

I could only shake my head. I was still trying to come down from the adrenaline rush. If I ever got back to Earth, I would have to tell everyone that hide and seek is universally loved.

We didn't go back to the hospital. We walked past the doors. I tried to pay attention to where each hall led.

I recognized the door we stopped in front of. The rattlesnake man was sitting in the captain's chair when we walked in. He jumped a little when he saw us. He gave me a strange double take.

My two babysitters talked for a few minutes. The bald man tried to hand the rattler something. He refused to take it.

Instead, the rattlesnake's tail tried to wrap around the bald guy's tail. The rattler tugged and tapped on the bald guy's much longer tail. The bald guy tried to shake the rattlesnake off once, but his little tail was determined. It kept pulling on the bald guy's.

I had no idea what was going on. I had no frame of reference either. I wasn't sure if this was more of a handshake, an arm wrestle, or a flirting technique.

Finally, my bald friend huffed a deep sigh. He tugged his tail free before stomping towards one of the glass screens along the wall. He pulled the glass off and started rooting around in the brightly colored wires inside.

The rattlesnake shot up the instant the bald guy's back was turned. He moved towards his treasure drawer. He was much more subtle this time. He checked over his shoulder once, then opened it without a sound.

There weren't any shifting sounds either. I couldn't hear the ball rolling around. Whatever he wanted must have been strategically placed because he shut it almost as soon as he opened it.

I watched him silently move back to the captain's chair. He asked a question just as he sat down. It covered up the slight creaking sound from the chair shifting. The bald man answered without looking up.

The rattlesnake bobbed his head toward me. I caught on. Double-checking to make sure my current babysitter wasn't watching, I tip-toed toward the rattlesnake.

As soon as I reached him, he put his hand out. His fist was balled around something. I put both of my hands under his. He opened his hand. Something heavy dropped into my palms. The rattlesnake man wiped his hands on his pants lightning quick, then pretended to be very busy.

I turned my back to the bald guy and pretended I was exploring.

I looked at what the rattlesnake man had given me. Whatever it was, it was food. I gave him a look. He pointed his chin toward my current babysitter. *Oh, I see. It's okay to feed me, so long as no one else sees.*

I checked out the food again. It was brown and square. There were flecks of red in it. It looked like an oatmeal bar. I pinched it. It didn't budge.

I took a small bite. It crumbled into my mouth. There was almost no moisture in it. As soon as my mouth got wet enough, I could tell that it was sweet. It was not pleasant to eat. I was desperate for real food, so I took another bite.

This time I got one of the red flecks. They made the bar palatable. Whatever they were, they were essentially balls of

liquid. When I bit into it, the little thing exploded. Suddenly, the sweetness of the bar was coming out. It was nice.

The rattlesnake was watching me covertly. I gave him a subtle thumbs-up. His tail rattled.

My bald friend finished whatever the rattler had conned him into doing. The pair spoke again. This time the conversation was quick.

The big guy hissed sharply. I wasn't sure if the sound was a word or just a noise. I walked over to where he was standing. He bobbed his head once and wrapped his tail around my wrist again. We said goodbye before leaving.

We ended up in a storage area. It had floor-to-ceiling cabinets lined up in every available space. It looked like a library with wider aisles.

Just like the first day, my friend showed me the bathroom. Then, he left me alone. I watched him open up drawers and begin emptying them.

I got bored watching him organize each drawer. I started to explore. This room was by and far the most interesting on the ship because the drawers weren't locked. I picked a cabinet and began sliding drawers open.

I didn't move things around too much as I peeked. I didn't want to break something accidentally. I did shuffle stuff around so I could see what was in the back of every drawer.

The first cabinet I picked was full of fabric bundles. They were all tiny. The largest was smaller than a water bottle. They were organized by color and size. One of the smaller bundles felt like the towels I used in the hospital bathroom.

My friend checked on me a lot. More often than he had before. I wasn't sure if it was because I was rooting around in their stuff, but it started getting on my nerves. After the third little walk by in five minutes, I lost my temper.

When my babysitter checked in on me again, I waited for him to return to the drawer he was working on. Once I heard him moving things around, I raced around the room as quietly as possible. I made sure to touch everything. I rubbed my body

against the cabinets. I tried to drench the place in my smell. All while I was being as quiet as I could.

I started to worry that I was running out of time. I rushed to find a hiding spot. There weren't any spare chairs to move. There weren't any hiding places like in the fridge room. My internal clock was screaming that he would check on me any second. I panicked and started climbing one of the cabinets.

I wasn't a good climber. Trying to climb silently was one of the most challenging physical feats I had ever performed. My hot breath kept hitting the metal cabinet and bouncing back into my face reminding me that I hadn't brushed my teeth in forever. I was sweating instantly. That made my hands slippery. I was determined to hide. I shimmied, heaved, and grappled to the top of the cabinet.

I stretched my body across the metal frame. The thing felt steady enough. I mean, it didn't wobble as I shifted. I covered my mouth to try and muffle my gasps.

I heard my babysitter start to move. His footsteps left his aisle. They went down the center path towards where I *had* been. I heard him turn the corner and pause.

He didn't shout for help. He didn't call my name either. I heard the faint sound of a gentle exhale. Then he backtracked.

I couldn't see him most of the time. I saw his tail bounce between the aisles once. I could hear him. He retraced my path almost perfectly. There were a few places he doubled back. He followed it right to me.

I saw his large frame enter the aisle of the cabinet I was hiding on top of. His head turned from side to side as he slowly walked to the last cabinet. He paused. Then he walked back. He turned around and faced the dead end again.

He stood there for a second. Then his head raised. His eyes went wide when he saw me. He leaped toward me. He had me in his arms, sliding off the top of the cabinet before I could try and get down myself.

He was not happy about my hiding spot. I could tell by his tone that he was scolding me. He pointed to the top of the

cabinets and then made a hand gesture. He pointed to the ground and bobbed his head.

“I will stay on the ground from now on,” I promised.

We went back to what we were doing before our game of hide and seek. My babysitter got caught up in his work enough that he stopped checking on me obsessively. I explored all of the unorganized drawers. I tried to figure out what I was looking at. Everything was compact and tightly stored. I couldn't imagine what the little bundles would look like once they weren't vacuum-packed.

We were in there long enough for me to get grumpy. My muscles were sore again. I could only blame myself for trying to climb a metal cabinet. I hadn't had anything to drink since the sauna room. I was so glad when my friend came to collect me.

I was much less excited when I realized where we were going. Everyone else was sitting around the dinner table already. They had food on their plates and everything. The bald man said something to everyone.

He went to the last open chair without glancing my way. None of them looked at me. They all kept eating like they expected me to go to the fabric on the floor. I huffed.

I shuffled over to my corner. I grabbed the water balloon someone had left. I grumbled about it, but I drank the whole thing.

Whatever the crew was eating smelled delicious. One of them refilled their bowl. A thick, orange stew hit their dinnerware with a slurp. It looked so good. I didn't know what it was. I still wanted to eat it. My brain kept thinking that it would go great on rice or pasta.

I stomped over to the rattlesnake. He had fed me twice now. I understood he didn't want to get in trouble for feeding the pet. I didn't care. I was desperate for real food. He couldn't get in too much trouble when I needed to eat.

This time I didn't wait around. I poked him. When he turned toward me, I pointed at his bowl. He swayed his head

from side to side. I figured that meant “No.” I pointed again.

The doctor hissed at me. I looked up. He pointed to the fabric. I ignored him and poked the rattlesnake again.

Everyone else had stopped eating to watch what was happening. The rattlesnake was desperately trying to ignore me. I shuffled right into his personal space. The doctor shot up from his seat and hustled over to me.

I knew that if the doctor managed to grab me, I would never get close to real food again. I looked around. The rattlesnake had curved his body around his bowl protectively. He was smart. He anticipated my next move.

On my right side was the King Cobra. He had a strange utensil in his hand. It was raised halfway to his mouth. The little curved stick was full of orange stew. His left arm was in his lap. He was wide open.

I made a slight push toward the rattlesnake’s bowl. That made the doctor yell and rush around the last little bit of the table. The rattlesnake hunched over his bowl even more.

While they were focused on the rattler, I whipped around and wrapped my mouth around the King Cobra’s weird spoon. I flipped my chin up and quickly swallowed the stew. The spoon was wider than I had expected. Most of the stew ended up on my cheeks.

I barely had the time to register that the orange stuff was good before a dozen hands were on me. Someone grabbed me from behind. Someone ripped the dish out of my mouth. Someone smacked my hands.

Honestly, I was the calmest person in the room. Everyone else was yelling and flipping out. The rattlesnake had me in a death grip. The doctor was in my face trying to force my mouth open. The King Cobra was pointing and talking very loudly. Meyer was outright screaming. My bald friend hovered in the background.

The whole thing escalated when the doctor said something that had everyone heading to the hospital. The rattlesnake stood up and followed the doctor with me in his arms. My bald

friend got Meyer into his floating wheelchair before coming with us.

The doctor had the rattlesnake set me on my bed. Then the tests started. Luckily, they were the same ones from the first day. Once I had been poked for the last time, the doctor sat down with his glass tablet.

The mood had changed considerably. Meyer was sleeping on his cot. The rattlesnake was rolling something back and forth. The bald guy was sitting in a chair with his eyes closed. He wasn't asleep. He would open his eyes every so often and check out the room. The King Cobra was staring at nothing, not saying anything.

Finally, the doctor said something. Everyone perked up. No one moved. He spoke briefly, then ended his speech with a tail wave. Everyone else bobbed their heads in understanding.

There was a pause. Then the rattlesnake's tail raised into the air. It shook just enough to catch everyone's attention.

He said something quickly and quietly.

There was another pause.

Then the doctor exploded. He stood up and threw his arms wide. His tail thrashed behind him. He deflated immediately. His tail drooped, and he put his face into one hand. He huffed out a breath, then said one word.

The rattlesnake held up his hand. He put up two claws. The doctor groaned.

I had an inkling that the rattlesnake had just confessed to feeding me. I laughed silently. He looked like a little kid confessing to eating too many cookies. His rattle even gave a sad little shake.

It got me off of the hook completely. The aliens all relaxed at various places around the room, ignoring me. I snuggled under my blankets and dozed. One by one, most of them got up and left. The doctor was still puttering around the room when I finally fell asleep.

Chapter Nine

Vesex

“We have a problem,” Seph said. I could tell that he was out of breath even through the neuro-comm. An indication that he was stressed.

“What is the problem?” I didn’t bother with any pleasantries. When Seph said there was a problem, it was best to let him get it out as quickly as possible. By the time he came to us with a problem, he usually already had a plan.

“Hissy is sick.”

I sat up in bed. That was a unique problem. “Was it the fesik soup?” The entire nest had a collective panic attack when Huzzar’s pet ate some of my dinner the night before. Seph still wasn’t sure what she could eat. He had guessed that she would have an allergic reaction and die before morning. The computer had assured us she wasn’t going to die. Maybe it had been wrong.

“She doesn’t show any signs of poisoning. Besides, the computer knows what she has.” I heard him sigh in my head. “Apparently, she never got inoculated against the diseases that transfer from common livestock. Most space travelers get those shots with the core set. The last thing you want when you’re traveling across the galaxy is to get sick from a marketplace selling animals. Considering the fact that Hissy was probably transferred with livestock at some point, she should have gotten them.” He hissed angrily. “Then she went and played around in the fesik pens. It’s partially my fault. After the computer said that she had received her shots, I didn’t bother double checking the exact list of inoculations.”

“Will any of the nest get sick because she was missing those shots?”

Seph was silent for a while. “No,” he said finally. “The computer is predicting a low probability of us getting sick. Until Hissy has all of her shots, she could get sick again.” He hissed. “I am frustrated that our computer did not include those vaccines during the entrance examination.” He cut me off. “Before you ask, I’ve already found a much more thorough examination software. The computers are upgrading right now.”

“How did Huzzar react when you told him his pet was sick?”

Huzzar was in the final stage of his shed. His scales had hardened in preparation to come off. It was a very uncomfortable time for any Susix. Your whole body itched. Any time you moved, your scales pulled and pinched.

To make matters worse, Huzzar was shedding his eyecaps. Those were very sensitive. It was making him agitated. Luckily, the actual shedding only took a day or two. Until then, Huzzar would be miserable.

“I haven’t told him. He’s in a fair amount of pain. Whatever was in that river damaged the skin under his scales. It is making this shed exceptionally uncomfortable. I put some painkillers in his drink. He’s sleeping.”

“Will there be lasting effects we should prepare for? How can we help him?” Huzzar might be our nest’s youngest and most aggravating member, but he was beloved. We adored him. He knew it too. That’s why he pushed the limits so much. He knew he could get away with it.

“So far, things are looking positive. The skin underneath has healed well. I don’t think there will be any lasting effects. However, this shed may take longer than normal. He will certainly need more hands-on care than he normally would. Which brings me to my biggest complication.”

“Hissy.” There was no way Seph could care for Huzzar while keeping an eye on a strange, sick animal. “Hix and Seethur are checking all of the fans and filters today. I will be in the captain’s chair since Hix is the repair specialist. None of us can come down and watch her.”

“Then I will bring her to you on the bridge.” He hit back.

“Seph, I-”

He cut me off. “If you want Huzzar to have quality care and for the inventory to be done by the time we land, then you will do this.”

I sighed and got out of bed. “You will need to go over care instructions very slowly. I’ve never cared for a warm-blooded creature before.”

My morning food was still steaming when I walked onto the bridge. Hix was looking at the maps as I stepped inside. He turned on me immediately.

“Are you going to babysit Hissy?” His tail bounced in agitation.

The entire nest was made up of gossipers. I didn’t answer him at first. I sat down on the only other chair in the room. I set my bowl down and then turned to him.

“Yes, Hix. Thanks for asking after her. Seph says she is fairly sick,” I didn’t spare him any sarcasm.

He went ridged. “She’s sick? Seph didn’t tell me she was sick. He just said that you were babysitting her.” He ran a hand down his tail absentmindedly. “It is tough that she and Huzzar are both unwell.”

“Yes, Seph said that Huzzar is in for a rough shed. He will need more help this time around. Seph would have been able to watch her if she had been well. With her being sick, someone has to keep a close eye on her.”

Hix slowly turned around in the captain’s chair. “I could do it.”

I shook my head. “You are the fastest diagnostic technician on the ship. If you babysat Hissy, I would have to take over for you. I’m terrible at your job, Hix. I can do it. I’m not as good as you. It would take me three days to check all of the fans and filters. We don’t have that kind of time.”

He bounced his head from side to side. “You are so slow. I would be proud if you managed to check and change the filters

in three days.” He sagged a little. “Okay, I’ll go find Seethur. Maybe we can get started early and end early.”

He stood up to leave.

“Grab some food and some sleep,” I called out after him. “Pets can wait.”

He pretended not to hear me. His cheeky tail wave gave him away.

Luckily for him, Seph walked in before I could stalk Hix down. He was laden down with bags and blankets. He had Hissy bundled up in a med chair.

They were handy inventions. They helped transport patients. They had upright and flat options. They were made to be used as a bed in a pinch.

Hissy was awake. I could tell that something wasn’t right with her. Her eyes were glazed. Most of the flesh around her face was pale. There were two sets of colored spots highlighting how different she looked today compared to yesterday. One set was under her eyes. They were an odd purple hue. They made her look exhausted. The other set was a pair of angry red splotches on her cheeks.

“Are you sure it is safe for her to stay with me? Shouldn’t she be in the med bay?” She didn’t look well enough for my level of supervision. I had no idea how to take care of animals.

Seph gave me a wane smile. “Yes, Vesex. She will be fine. I just refreshed myself on warm-blooded care. This will be fairly simple.”

He pushed Hissy into the room. He tucked the med chair against one of the walls. He typed a command into the chair, and it stretched out until it was lying flat.

Hissy practically melted into the new shape of the bed. She wiggled around until the blanket covered her entire body. Then she settled down.

Once Seph had put down all his bags, he gestured me over. “There are two main things to keep track of: her temperature and her hydration. Her body is trying to burn away a virus.

She feels hot to the touch. That's normal. She can't get hotter than she is right now. Just keep track of that." He pointed to one of the bags. "That is full of nutrispheres. Try and get her to drink five today. If anything happens, contact me."

I glanced between Hissy and the bags. I was not feeling confident. "That seems simple enough. You should probably get back to Huzzar. I will comm you if anything happens."

Seph didn't need to be told twice. He hightailed it back to the med bay.

With Hissy sleeping, I decided to get as much done as possible. I double-checked the route that Hix and I had gone over yesterday. It would add a few days to our travels. That was because it avoided all of the major space ports. Hopefully, that would keep the Serex Nest from catching us planet side

My shift went like clockwork for the first few hours. Everything was calm. Then Hissy started to move. At first, it was just a shuffle here or there. She got more restless as time went on. She began to thrash around, making small, low noises. She threw her blanket onto the ground. That settled her down for a little while. Not for long, though. She started moving around again.

I stood up and went over to her. The hair on her head was damp. It was tangled around her shoulders. Her strange covering was askew. While I stood over her, the little lines of hair above her eyes tried to touch in the middle.

I commed Seph.

"What's the matter?" He asked frantically.

"Nothing urgent, I think. I forgot to ask what temperature she was supposed to be."

"Normally, she is around two hundred and forty-one sunvuls. Right now, she's floating around two hundred and seventy-five," he answered in a distracted tone.

"Veck, that is hot." Susix are usually one hundred and sixty-five sunvuls.

“I’m assured it is normal for a sick warm-blooded creature.”

I touched a braid. “If that is normal, what temperature should I look out for?”

“There’s a health gauge in one of the bags. You can check her with that. If she gets above two hundred and eighty-five, contact me.”

I watched her struggle to get comfortable. “What can I do to help her sleep?”

“Hydration will help. I imagine cooling her down would help too. Let me know if you need anything else.”

I didn’t bother answering. He was already gone. I wasn’t sure what to do. Seph’s limited instructions hadn’t given me a clear answer.

The little thing kept twisting as I stood around. Her hair was sticking to her face. She clawed the scaleless skin on her cheeks. Her nails left red scratches.

“Ssstop,” I hissed between my teeth. I gently pulled her hands away. Her struggles were weak. “Shh,” I sang, trying to calm her down. She lost her fight almost immediately. I placed her arms onto her stomach.

Her hair was wilder than before. It would only annoy her more if it kept getting in her face. That would make sleep difficult.

“I can help with that.”

I reached into my vest pocket and pulled out a hairpin. The rest of the nest ridiculed me for it, but I always had a few extra hairpins on hand. They were always needed.

My hood made having long hair difficult. As soon as I got worked up, it would open, and my hair would become tangled. Keeping it braided helped. It didn’t solve the problem completely. Hence the pins.

Careful not to pull her hair, I gathered it into one hand. The texture was odd. When it was all together, it was soft. Individually, I could feel how thick the strands were.

I didn't bother with an intricate braid. I made it tight enough to stay out of her way and loose enough not to pinch. Then I twisted the pin through the hair to hold it in place.

A single length had fallen out on one side of her face. As I twisted it up, my hand brushed her face. Hissy leaned into it.

She was scorching hot. I almost flinched at first because it felt like I would get burned. I didn't. The heat felt good after the shock of it wore off. It was better than the heating room.

Hissy must have felt the same way. She burrowed into my palm before sighing. Her muscles relaxed.

Seph had said that cooling her down would help. I pulled off my vest. Then I shuffled Hissy until she was in my arms. I got us both settled into the captain's chair. Luckily, she was small enough to fit between the armrests.

Hissy had her face pressed flush against my shoulder. The warmth of her body slowly started heating my blood. I could feel it pumping faster. I knew from experience that I would get a burst of energy soon.

That was one of the benefits of being cold-blooded. A heat source could give you a surge of energy. It was also a huge disadvantage. It meant never being far from a heat source.

If we trained her, Hissy could become a valuable asset. She could provide heat in areas without power. Having a backup source of heat was nothing to flick a tail at.

She slept on my lap for a short time. It was long enough for most of her heat to transfer to me. I was running hot. I didn't do anything to alleviate the extra warmth. Moving too much would wake Hissy up. She needed her sleep.

I was anxious when she started to move. I wanted to know how she was feeling. Her face was flushed. It had a shine to it. She blinked at me a few times. She made a noise and then started coughing.

I leaned to the side and grabbed one of the nutrispheres I had put on the ground. I bit off the top and held it out to her. She didn't bother taking it. She put her mouth over the opening and proceeded to spill most of it onto us.

I pulled it away with a laugh. “Slowly, or you’ll end up giving us both a water bath.” I put the nutrisphere back in front of her. When she lunged for it, I pulled it back. “Slowly,” I repeated.

This time she went slow. Once she was done, I bit open a second one. She ended up drinking most of it.

“Seph brought you over while you were sleeping. You got too hot to sleep. Hence why you are sitting in my lap. I cooled you down, and you heated me up. I can see why Huzzar has kept you in the med bay. It’s like sleeping with a heating rock.” I wasn’t sure why I was talking to her. It just felt strange to ignore her like that.

She made a scratchy groan and then flopped onto me. I chuckled. Hix had done the same thing the last time he had gotten sick. He got very clingy when he wasn’t feeling well.

“Alright, girl. We’ve got plenty to do from the chair. No need to move. Get some sleep.”

She stared at the viewing screen for a while. I went through our route again. I checked our current location. Then I started combing our communication channels for news about the Serex Nest.

The only good thing I could say about the Serex Nest was that they were too arrogant for their own good. If there was a chance to be loud and throw their weight around, they took it. It meant that there was also something in the communication channels about them.

They were closer to us than the last time I had checked. They were far enough away that we still wouldn’t be able to predict what path they were going to take. There was no sense evading them when we didn’t know where they would be. Hix and I had routed exit strategies along our current path. So long as we didn’t lose track of them, we would have enough time to plan.

Hissy woke up two more times. She drank a few nutrispheres when she was awake. Other than that, she didn’t

move. She shifted into new positions repeatedly but fell back asleep quickly.

Since Huzzar was sick, we had our end meal in the med bay. I wheeled Hissy past the table straight to her bed. She didn't wait for me to put her in it. She rolled from the med chair to the bed, blankets and all.

Seph went to stand up. I put my hand out to keep him sitting. There was no need for him to examine her.

"She's fine, doctor. She had all of the nutrispheres you sent. She slept almost the whole time. Her temperature has reduced. She's tired so let her be."

He sat down with a slump. "Sorry, I am sure you took excellent care of her."

I went over and folded him into a tight hug. "You're in doctor mode. I understand. Stay seated. We will take care of the nest." I gestured to Seethur and Hix.

Seph laughed without humor. "You will eat those words. Huzzar is in a mood today. He almost nipped me! Like a snakelet." He sighed. "I shouldn't say anything. He is in pain and anxious. It's not his fault."

Hix's tail tapped Seph's shoulder. "It's Huzzar. It's not the shedding. He tried to nip me the last time we went drinking."

Seethur nodded, "He bites when he gets tired too."

"Oh my, Versetti, he's practically feral," Seph cried.

"We've seen the bite marks on you, Seph. You can't pretend you didn't know," Hix teased.

Seph hissed at him. We all laughed. After such a stressful day, the three of us went out of our way to make Seph's night better. Seethur made him a plate of food. Hix provided comedic relief. I used my position as Prime to keep Seph from getting out of his seat.

Huzzar and Hissy slept through our evening meal. We kept food for Huzzar. No one wanted to risk feeding Hissy while she was sick, so there were nutrispheres piled by her bed.

The rest of us sat around after our meal. Hix fidgeted with a piece of metal. He was usually fixing something. Seethur had his eyes closed. He wasn't sleeping. Seph, on the other hand, was falling asleep.

"How much longer until Huzzar has shed?" I asked quietly.

He sighed. "At least one more day. I think he will be moving around the day after that." He rubbed the scales under his injured eye.

"I can take Hissy tomorrow," Hix volunteered.

"You and I need to replace the adhesive on the ceiling vents," Seethur didn't bother opening his eyes.

Hix puffed out an angry breath.

"I'll take her again," I told them. They all gave me a look.

"Will you be fine?" Seph asked hesitantly.

I rolled my eyes. "Why are you acting that way?"

Hix shared a silent conversation with Seph. "It's only because you haven't been Hissy's biggest fan."

"You called her 'it' until today," Seethur added.

"I'm allowed to change my opinion," I defended.

"Was it before or after your cuddle with her?" Seph asked with a cheeky smile.

My face heated. "When did you stop by?" I tried to sound casual.

"Around lunch," Seph answered. "You didn't notice me, so I didn't interrupt."

I sighed. "She was too warm to sleep. Once I had her in my arms, she settled down."

Seph gave me a knowing nod, "Very noble of you."

"He is royalty," Seethur murmured.

They all laughed at that one. Once we had our days planned, everyone went to bed. I tried to get Seph to allow me

to stay in the med bay that night. He assured me he would be fine taking care of Huzzar and Hissy.

I knew it had been a bad idea when I returned in the morning. Seph looked exhausted. His scales were pulled tightly around his eyes.

“Did you sleep at all?” I asked as I pushed him into a chair.

“Only for a heartbeat,” he admitted. “Hissy tossed and turned but was fine besides that. Huzzar’s scales aren’t shedding like they normally do. We have to pull off a lot of it.” I winced at that.

Pulling off shedding skin was like scraping a burn. It hurt. We rarely had injuries that required us to shed like that.

“Let me call Seethur. He can watch Huzzar for a few hours while you sleep.” Seph started to complain. “Don’t start with me. If you have one more night like last night, you will be in a sick bed too. Seethur has more patience than all of us combined. He will take great care of Huzzar.” I pulled him towards one of the spare beds. “I will have Hissy. Hix will have something to keep him out of trouble. We will all be taken care of.” I pushed him onto the bed. “Now you can take care of yourself.”

“Okay,” he murmured, “only because I know Seethur won’t be tempted to rip Huzzar’s skin off his body.”

“We’ve all been tempted once or twice,” I admit.

I let Seethur know that he was needed in the med bay. I started getting bags ready to take Hissy to the bridge while I kept an eye on Seph. I was close enough to Huzzar that I heard him stirring before Seph could.

“Hello, little Vispur. How are you feeling?” I helped Huzzar sit up. I tried to keep my touch light.

There were patches of flaking scales on every inch of visible skin. I could see the irritation in the areas that were still coming off. It looked awful.

The scales underneath the old set were bright and colorful. That was a good sign. I know Huzzar was worried that his

coloring might be affected by the acidic water. I didn't tell him. I didn't want to get his hopes up just in case that was not true for his whole body.

"I feel like my skin is being vecking pulled off." He ended the angry words with a snarl.

"Now I understand why Seph looks like rotten fesik meal. He's been taking care of you and deflecting your biting words. That is exhausting." I didn't bother coddling him as I got him settled.

Huzzar lifted his nose but remained silent. I opened a nutrisphere and placed it in his hand. Neither of us said anything while he finished it.

Huzzar folded and unfolded the empty container. I waited for him to say whatever he was sitting on. When his head dropped, I knew I had him.

"Can you help me pop my eyecaps off?" He asked it quietly.

I didn't move for a breath. "Will you stop being mean to Seph?"

Huzzar bobbed his head side to side in frustration. "I'm not trying to be mean. This hurts, and he won't let me be. He wants to help, but his help isn't helpful. He keeps trying to be soft. That is making the whole thing last longer. I don't know why he is being so fussy about this injury."

I sat down on the bed next to him. I rested my arm around his shoulder. I made sure to keep most of the pressure off of his skin. "He feels guilty. We all do. You were hurt helping us get the Crown. We hate that. So, Seph wants to try to save you as much pain as he can. We're not very familiar with this type of injury. If he is making it worse, you need to tell him."

Huzzar nodded.

"Seethur is staying in the med bay for at least a few hours. I will get Seph to sleep in his room while Seethur is here. I think he will be able to stomach helping you how you want to be helped." I wasn't joking too much when I said we took turns wanting to skin Huzzar. The Susix had more energy than

sense. “Do you want to get the eyecaps off before he gets here, or do you want to wait?”

Huzzar glanced towards the bed that Seph was sleeping on. We could both hear his deep breathing. “Will you get him to stay in his room?”

“I’m in the captain’s chair today. I can lock his room. I might need to physically carry him there. He is pretty worked up.”

If Seph caught wind of what Seethur would be doing, then I would need to carry him out of the med bay. I would have a few new bite marks to show for it too. It wasn’t just that Seph was feeling guilty about Huzzar’s injuries. He was also viciously possessive of the little Vispur. Seph could be insufferable when he thought Huzzar needed him.

Seethur walked into the med bay and headed straight for where we were sitting. He looked between us and then said, “What’s the plan?”

I filled him in on Huzzar’s problem. Then I told him what strategy we had devised to tackle it. He stayed with Huzzar and Hissy while I took Seph to his bedroom.

Luckily, the Thusi slept the whole time. He was so exhausted that he didn’t even flinch under the bright hall lights. The instant I put him in his bed, he rolled over and coiled around himself.

Huzzar and Seethur had moved into the shower area. I checked in on them. There were towels and tweezers laid out on the countertop. Huzzar was sitting on a stool while Seethur put on gloves. I left them to it.

Hissy was sleeping when I bundled her onto the med chair. It was still early, so I wasn’t too concerned. I switched shifts with Hix and was going over our ship’s diagnostics when I heard her moving around.

She popped her head out of the mountain of covers she was inside. Her face was flushed and a little swollen. She blinked and then made a noise.

“Good morning, Hissy,” I said.

I watched her wake up fully. She was slow in the morning. Or maybe it was her illness, but she didn't move for a while. I thought she might have fallen asleep again. Until her mouth opened wide, she made a strangled yell, and then her whole body shivered. She looked at me and made another noise.

I held out one of the nutrispheres. "I have food right here."

She didn't bother with it. She hopped off of the med chair and began wandering around. She walked the edges of the room, pressing every surface she could.

"Oh!" I jumped up, suddenly realizing what she was doing. "You're looking for the bathroom." I waved my tail. "Follow me."

We walked out of the bridge. Hissy was right on my tail while I walked down the hall to a communal bathroom. She walked in by herself. Then walked back out once she was done.

When we got back to the bridge, Hissy grabbed one of the nutrispheres and went right back to her bed. She ripped it open, getting most of it on herself. She hastily gulped it down and then slammed back onto the bed.

If I was a little disappointed that she hadn't come to sit with me, I didn't admit it. I went right back to work. I couldn't deny that I perked up when I heard her wrestling with her blankets a little while later. This time, I only let her toss and turn for a bit.

I went over, picked her up, and rearranged her on my lap in the captain's chair. She found every uncovered scale on my arms as she tried to find relief from her fever.

I felt her warmth working its magic. My muscles were loosening. I could feel the morning sluggishness melting away.

I puffed out a satisfied breath. A deep sound vibrated from my chest. Hissy sighed and relaxed even more.

"Good heat source," I purred.

We spent most of the morning like that. Occasionally, she would wake up for food. I had to set her back onto the med

chair while I went to help Hix with something. Other than that, we stayed in the captain's chair.

After my mid-shift meal, I felt her body temperature drop. She wasn't scorching my scales anymore. She was still hot, but after her fever, it felt manageable.

This time when she got up, there was comprehension in her eyes. She straightened and looked around. The first thing she noticed was where she was sitting. She stared at my lap and then slowly shuffled off of me. I didn't say anything. She rubbed her eyes and lifted her hands above her head.

"If you're feeling up to it, maybe we should head back to the med bay. Seph has been sulking since he realized I locked his door. He won't respond to the neuro-comms. We can pick him up on our way."

I piled the med chair with Hissy's bags. I pointed for her to stay sitting. I took off to Seph's room.

I didn't bother comming him. I unlocked the door, and it slid open. Seph had a mound of things on his bed. He was scrubbing his shelves. When he saw me, he threw the cleaning rag down.

"Oh, thank you, can I go now?" He didn't wait for my answer. He bowled past me into the hall. He didn't acknowledge Hissy. He booked it to the med bay.

I grabbed Hissy and followed him. "Did you sleep?"

"Yes, for two whole heartbeats," he didn't break stride as he joked. He was determined to get to Huzzar.

I reached out, forcing him to stop. "Seph, stop." He rolled his shoulder, brushing my hand off of him. He finally stopped. He did not look like he wanted to hear anything I was about to say.

"Seph, you were being Huzzar's lover when he needed you to be his doctor." That broke down some of Seph's attitude. "He told me that the soft, gentle method hurt him more. He needs a firm hand right now." My tail wrapped around his. "Don't let the guilt stop you from helping Huzzar. *You* are

what he needs. I know if you take a second, you'll remember that.”

His head dropped back. “I don't think I can use a firm hand right now. Listening to him whimper while we tried to clean up his back made me sob.”

My tail wound around his as I wrapped him up in my arms. “Oh, Sephie.” I held him while he cried. His tears made a hot trail down my shirt while we both rocked in the hallway.

His wracking sobs trickled down to hiccups eventually. I leaned back, looking down at him. “Do you feel better?”

He chuckled. “Yeah, but somehow I'm even more exhausted than before.”

I nodded my understanding. “Then this is a good time to let you know that Seethur and Huzzar have been working on his shed while you've been gone.” I held firm when he tried to get away. “Hold on now. We knew this was hard for both of you. We also knew it had to happen. You and I are going to go in there and be helpful. We will not make this about us by stomping in there in a huff.”

Seph straightened out of my hold. He pulled his practice coat on straighter. “I am not in a huff.”

“Good because you can't go in there if you are.” I got behind the med chair and gestured for him to lead the way.

The med bay wasn't destroyed when we walked in. The lights were dimmed. The temperature was raised. Seethur sat at Seph's desk. He raised a hand when he saw us. He gestured to the bed.

A giant mass sat under a blanket. The white mound rose and fell gently. Huzzar was asleep, at least.

That did not deter Seph. He had a look in his eye. He sprinted to Seethur. Seethur turned his chair so that he was facing his coming opponent.

“What happened?” He demanded.

Seethur didn't let Seph's tone perturb him. “We tried a few methods to loosen the scales,” he said calmly. “Eventually, he

soaked in the water tub while I used a tweezer to lift sections off. He's mostly done. There are a few patches that need more time." Seethur looked at me for an instant before looking away. I braced for what he was about to say next. "We got his eyecaps off. His vision is sensitive. I wasn't sure what to tell him."

Seph nodded absentmindedly. He was staring at the floor, already thinking things over. "We'll have to scan him when he wakes up. I wonder if the acid damaged more than we thought." He looked at Seethur. "Thank you, Seeth. I appreciate that you stepped in for me."

The big Kithhari stood up and nodded. He slapped a hand on my shoulder. Then he wrapped his tail around Hissy before leaving.

Seph was glued to his computer. He was already looking for explanations about Huzzar's eyesight. I was going to have to force him to sleep again.

I got Hissy set up on her bed. I piled some nutrispheres at her feet. It wasn't that I thought Seph would forget about her. These were just in case. While she was much more aware than she had been for the last few days, she didn't have much energy. She made a few sounds as I finished up.

"Goodbye, Hissy. I will see you tomorrow." She lifted her hand as I walked away. I raised mine too. Her lips spread, and her eyes squinted in a huge smile.

Chapter Ten

Cece

Meyer was looking brand new. The dusty, gross flakes covering his skin were mostly gone. He was back to his bright, flashy coloring. Something settled in me when I saw him get out of bed that morning. I had been more worried about him than I had realized.

Unfortunately, his mood was worse than ever. He ran into a desk on the way to the bathroom and kicked the thing within an inch of its life. The whole day had gone downhill from there. Everything made him upset.

He got huffy and puffy about being forced to stay in bed. He snapped at the doctor about lunch. Then he whined about the lights.

I was not spared. Meyer kept making that annoying “hssee” sound while waving his hand at me. It didn’t matter if I was asleep or if I had just walked away; he made the noise constantly.

He dragged me around the room too. Meyer used me as a cane if he needed to take more than one step. I wouldn’t have minded helping him, but he kept wrapping his whole tail around my body when he did. I had to penguin waddle to get around.

He finally wore the doctor’s patience down. After lunch, they started bickering about something. It had happened a dozen by then. Usually, the fights ended with the doctor making a long hissing sound and walking away. This time something made him snap.

He turned on Meyer and flashed him a pair of bone-white fangs. He hissed at Meyer so viciously I saw spit. His body inflated as he stood his ground.

Not to be outdone, Meyer flung his blankets to the ground. He stomped to the bathroom in a move I hadn't seen since I was thirteen.

I heard the sand bath run for a long time after that. The doctor didn't go in and make him stop or anything. I'm pretty sure the doctor was happy that Meyer was out of the room for a little bit.

The doctor went to the very back of the hospital area and started pacing. His tail slapped the ground angrily. He took a sharp turn towards a line of coats hanging on the wall. He grabbed one and bit it. His head whipped back and forth as he growled. It looked like the snake man equivalent of screaming into a pillow.

"Yeah, doc," I said, "that was intense."

Meyer came out of the bathroom after a while. His hair looked more put together. He still radiated a foul energy. He even glared at the doctor as he walked to his bed.

The room was tense. When the door opened, I was relieved that someone else was there. I didn't care who it was.

The King Cobra walked in. He looked at the other men in the room. They were literally in opposite corners. He looked at me and said something. He smiled afterward, so I smiled back.

He walked over to Meyer and formally bowed. I was suddenly very interested in what was going on. Meyer sat up straight.

The King Cobra tucked his hands behind his back in a very militaristic stance. His tail was suspended perfectly still behind his shoulder. He spoke to Meyer in a deeper voice than he usually used.

Meyer nodded at whatever his leader had said. Then the pair spoke back and forth.

By then, the doctor had wandered over. He stood at the edge of the conversation. He had a look on his face that made me think it was only a matter of time before he interrupted.

Meyer started making gestures. He mimed holding something and lowering it. Then he spoke animatedly to the other man.

The doctor made a single noise. Meyer's face dropped. His teeth flashed. The doctor snarled right back at him. The King Cobra hissed. His hood expanded slightly. The other two settled down.

The cobra turned to the doctor. The doctor said something. The cobra nodded, then replied. Meyer looked smug. The doctor tried to argue, but he got shut down.

That was the end of it. The King Cobra got the floating chair for Meyer. Meyer got himself seated. The doctor hovered. He couldn't help himself. Meyer was being a grade-A brat, and the doctor was still worried.

Meyer started waving his hand and screeching, "Hssee!"

I rolled my eyes. I ignored him out of spit for two more off-key shrieks. I barely stopped myself from stomping over to him. When he reached out to grab me, I dodged. I had come over like a dog. I drew the line at being pet the whole time.

We walked out of the hospital and headed down a familiar path. As we got closer, I double-checked everyone's faces to double check we were actually going where we were. Sure enough, Meyer leaped out of the floating chair once we got into the refrigerator room.

He pulled a drawer open and started rummaging around. The cobra man and I stayed back. Meyer's tail danced when he found what he wanted. He brandished a bag of that awful-smelling stuff the bald guy had jettisoned out to space. I shuddered at the memory. Meyer practically danced back to the chair.

I leaned over and took a cautious sniff. I couldn't smell anything. My shoulders relaxed. Maybe the bags kept the smell in.

Then we were off. This time, we headed towards the crew's hall. We didn't go into anyone's rooms. We walked past them.

The chair stopped in front of one of the many storage closets along the hallway. Meyer's lousy mood was nowhere to be seen. He got up from the chair, set his bag down, then shimmied to the door. He playfully tapped the glass screen to open the door. He bounced while he waited for the door to open fully.

Then he stepped into the closet. There were boxes of pale sand on the bottom shelves. There were bottles filled with different colored liquids filling most of the shelves. The highest ones were stacked with fabric.

Meyer stopped right inside the door. He knelt on the floor and started moving boxes of sand. He cleared a space under the shelf. He reached his hand under and began fidgeting with something. I heard a pop.

Meyer leaned back. He reached forward with both hands and pulled a piece of the floor out from under the shelf. Then he reached right back in. He had to press himself against the floor this time. I heard him exhale when he grabbed whatever he was looking for.

He pulled out a very delicate box. It was about the size of a piece of paper and only about an inch thick. It was a black color that caught the light with iridescent flashes.

Meyer handed it back to the King Cobra. He took it and held it close to his chest. Meyer stood up and got the bag of gross stuff. I wasn't sure what it was, but I knew that whatever was inside those bags smelled awful.

Meyer knelt in front of their hiding place. He used his claws to pierce the bag a few times. Meyer shoved the bag into the hole with an evil laugh and sealed it back up.

We went back to the hospital after that. The cobra held the box the entire time. He didn't even feign helping Meyer this time. Not that Meyer needed any help. There was practically a pep in his step.

The doctor came over to talk with Meyer. The conversation was only a little awkward at first. Then things relaxed. I wandered back to my bed for a nap.

My bald friend woke me up. He gestured towards the table. The entire group was gathered around the small hospital table. They were bumping elbows as they put food onto their plates. Somehow, their tails were clumsier, smacking into one another and getting tangled.

The bald guy led me to a plate set up on one of the countertops. It wasn't around the table, but it was close by. Someone could reach over and tap my shoulder. When I got closer, I saw that food was already on the plate.

I turned to the large alien next to me. "Thank you. This is so nice." I gave him a quick hug before I thought twice about it. He still managed to wrap his tail around me before I got away.

Dinner was a calm affair. Everyone chatted quietly. Meyer ate a second plate. There was a small commotion about that. No one went to the sauna room afterward. The three biggest crew members waved to the rest of us and then left.

The doctor wandered around, picking things up. As he passed by Meyer, Meyer's tail caught him. The smaller alien started walking his hands up the doctor's arms.

The doctor turned towards Meyer. He smiled coyly. Meyer said something. The doctor bit the air playfully.

That was all I needed to see. I made my way to the bathroom. I started the sand bath and scrubbed every inch of my body. Then I dried off and counted all of the tiles on the floor. Then I counted them again.

I put my ear to the door. I couldn't hear anything. I poked my head out.

Meyer and the doctor were asleep on Meyer's bed. The doctor was wrapped around Meyer tightly. I tiptoed to my bed.

I went to sleep, happy that they weren't fighting. I was also happy that I knew how to open and close doors this time.

The happiness did not last very long. The next day, Meyer was in a bad mood again. Only this time, he was solely focused on me.

He wouldn't let me leave his side. He kept his tail around my upper arm at all times. The one time I tried to untangle it, he snapped at me. He didn't want to be left alone.

The doctor tried to run interference. When Meyer followed me into the bathroom, the doctor had distracted him with food. He tried to get Meyer to play games to keep him busy. It didn't help much. Meyer was stuck on me like glue.

I stared at Meyer's tail and wondered how I could get some space. He was acting strangely enough that I wouldn't put it past him to follow me if I tried to hide. If my bald friend had taught me anything, it was that snake men were very good at hide and seek.

That gave me a great idea. I checked to make sure that the doctor could see us. I made a big show of pulling at Meyer's tail, trying to get it loose. The doctor noticed. He walked over and gestured to my arm. Meyer reluctantly unwound his tail. The doctor started in on a lecture just like I knew he would.

I started walking towards the bathroom. I put my hand on the glass to open the door. Instead of going in, I raced to the exit. I just hoped they wouldn't notice this door opening too.

I got outside and flattened against the wall. No one was around. Quickly, I ran down one hallway. Then I backtracked down a different one. I did that at every intersection I came across. Hopefully, it would slow them all down.

I had no way to hide my scent as I opened the door to my almost foolproof hiding spot. I was banking on the smell of the bugs covering my smell even in the hall.

I went straight for the closet in the back. The smell was a little better in there. I moved the buckets and sticks. Next time, I would have to rummage around the refrigerator room to find the blanket my bald friend had pulled out.

Hix

Something was going on. I could practically feel the neuro-comm buzzing in my head. No one had contacted me about it yet. I was stuck on the bridge. I couldn't just leave to find out. I didn't want to reach out and seem nosey. Again.

"Hix." Seethur barked.

Finally. "Yes."

"Go over the video feed for the hallway in front of the med bay," he ordered.

I didn't ask for details. Seethur had his Security Officer's voice on. "Is there a specific time I should be looking at?"

He didn't say anything for a minute. "After the mid-shift meal."

I pulled up the feed. We were only a few hours past the mid-shift meal, so there wasn't much to look through. I picked up something quickly.

"Uh, is there a reason Hissy snuck out of medical?" I watched her flatten her body against the wall outside the med bay doors. Then she sprinted down a hall. Only to sprint right back.

"Oh, thank Versetti, you found her," Seph breathed through the neuro-comm.

"I wouldn't say that. I saw her sprint up and down the halls. I don't know where she is now." I started to panic a little, thinking Hissy might be missing on the ship. It wasn't the most dangerous place in the galaxy. She could still get hurt.

"Follow her on the video feed," Seethur commanded.

I switched from camera to camera as I followed Hissy on her mad race. She went everywhere. She ran up and down the

halls touching all of the doors.

“Let me guess; you couldn’t scent her?” I asked dryly.

“Her scent is all over,” Seethur complained.

“Yeah, because she practically rubbed it on everything.” I chuckled when I saw her give the kitchen door a full body rub down before dashing off. “She’s smart.”

I saw her slow down. She did a double take down both halls. When she was sure no one was there, she touched the screen to open the fesik’s room. I cut the feed.

“Stay where you are. I’ll come show you where she’s hiding.” I smashed the buttons to put the ship on autopilot and raced towards the med bay.

I saw Vesex huddled up with Seethur, Huzzar, and Seph. “Oh good, you’re all here,” I panted from running, “No need to comm Vesex.” I straightened and waved a tail at them, “Come on.”

“Where are we going?” Vesex asked.

“Where did she hide?” Seethur cut in impatiently.

I didn’t say anything until we turned down the right hall. “All I’m going to say is that our pet is a genius.”

I stopped in front of the fesik’s room and slapped the screen to open the door. I walked right towards the cleaning closet in the back. When the door whooshed open, Hissy made a grumpy moan. She blinked at the light and started making noises at me.

Seethur pushed past my pointing arm. He bundled her into his arms and stomped right out. Vesex leaned around me. Seph stood in the hall with his mouth open.

“She used the fesik’s smell to hide herself,” Vesex stated. “Clever.” He shook his head. “We might want to look into those locks that parents have.” Vesex left us standing there.

“What happened?” I asked.

“We noticed Hissy was missing after our meal,” Huzzar started.

“When we couldn’t find her, we called Seethur,” Seph continued. “He can usually scent where she hides during the day. He couldn’t find her either.”

“He kind of freaked out,” Huzzar confided. His thix-eating grin told me he was gossiping, not passing along any concern. The little veck couldn’t help himself.

“That’s when he called me,” I guessed. They both nodded. “Hissy hasn’t run off like that before. What was up with her?”

Seph shot Huzzar an annoyed look. Huzzar puffed up like a Royal Susix. “It was not my fault.”

“It was most certainly your fault. You were not giving her any space. She’s a wild animal. You can’t keep a tail on her at all times.” Seph waved his arms wildly.

“Wildish at best,” Huzzar sassed. He turned his nose up, completely ignoring Seph’s face changing colors.

I shook my head at their antics. They were always nipping at each other. It was their dynamic. This was a little sharper than usual.

I tapped Huzzar with the flat side of my tail. It was enough to get him to stop antagonizing Seph. “How about you come and hang out with me on the bridge?”

He looked at me suspiciously. “Why?”

I glanced at Seph, then at him, “You know why.”

He slumped back into the med chair. “What will you give me?”

My tail shook in annoyance. Trust Huzzar to force me to bribe him. “I’ll let you pick something from my stash.”

It was no secret that I loved food. I always stocked up on strange things when we were planet side. I had stashes all over the ship. There were multiple in the bridge. I’d show him where my third-best stash was. I wasn’t going to let Huzzar see my best hoard. That way, I wouldn’t be too upset when he cleaned me out later.

“Deal.” He pat his legs impatiently. “Let’s go.”

I motioned for Seph to head back to the med bay. “Are you sure you want to watch him right now?” Seph asked through the neuro-comm.

“Yeah, it’ll be good for him to get out of the med bay.” I did not mention that it would be good for Seph too.

“Alright, you two. Stop gossiping about me. Let’s get going,” Huzzar demanded.

Huzzar and I made it to the bridge without incident. I stopped the med chair in front of a set of drawers. I made a big deal about making Huzzar swear not to tell anyone about my hiding spot. I tried to sell it. Then I lifted the tray of tools in the drawer, revealing the false bottom full of candy.

Huzzar’s hand shot out. I pinched his wrist right before he could grab anything. “You only get one.”

He grabbed a handful. I watched him steal a few more. I pretended not to notice. We settled around the room. I kept an eye on the ship while Huzzar ate and slept.

Huzzar was relaxed. He was lying on the med chair playing with one of my spare onuri spheres. It was the perfect time to ambush him.

“What’s going on, Huzzar? You and Seph don’t fight like this.”

He didn’t stop throwing the onuri. “I don’t know. He’s extra annoying right now.”

I tried to keep my tail from shaking. He could be such a brat. “Is he extra annoying because he’s taking care of your sorry hide?”

Huzzar shot me a dirty look before throwing the sphere at me. I caught it. He burrowed under his blanket. I stood up and ripped it off. He hissed at me but didn’t move.

“Come on. I’m not leaving this alone.” Mainly because this felt bigger than just arguing. It felt like it could spill over to the rest of the nest if we didn’t solve the problem quickly.

Huzzar saw that I didn’t move. He deflated. His body folded in on itself. I kept waiting.

“My eyesight didn’t return like normal. Everything is out of focus.” His voice was quiet. “The acid most likely damaged my eyes more than the rest of my body since the tissue there is so sensitive. Seph says that it should come back gradually. He thinks the worst-case scenario is that I will get my sight back after another shed.” It was obvious from his tone of voice that he did not believe Seph. “It’s frustrating.”

I settled on the floor next to the med chair. “It sounds scary. I would be scared, at least.”

He tilted his head up. A tear caught in the light. “It is scary,” the words barely hissed past his lips.

Huzzar and I weren’t intimate. We didn’t have that type of relationship. That didn’t matter. We were nestmates. We loved each other deeply. We mourned with each other.

I closed the small distance between us. I leaned my body against his legs and hip. My tail coiled around him.

We sat together until my tail lost feeling. Huzzar was calmer now. He brushed his hand over my head. It was a mindless thing.

“Have you talked to Seph about it? About how you feel?” I asked, breaking the silence. I felt his head shake. “Why not?”

He took a deep breath and then let it out slowly. “He’s taking this hard. I think the eye injury might be messing with his head. That’s why I think he is so stressed out about my recovery. I don’t know.”

I hissed. “I hadn’t even thought about that.” Seph didn’t complain about his scarred eye, so it was easy to forget it sometimes. He lost it violently. That left more than just physical scars. His demons were probably resurfacing now that Huzzar was hurt like this. “I’ll talk to Vesex. He can usually uncoil Seph’s brain.”

Huzzar snorted. “Yes, they have this strange pair bond thing. Vesex bundles him up and purrs until Seph has straightened himself out.”

I groaned. “It’s so embarrassing to watch.” Vesex would literally wrap Seph up and agree with everything he said.

Seph usually talked himself down. All while Vesex got touchy-feely.

Huzzar shook his head. “You don’t feel embarrassed when he does it to you. There is something about his purr,” Huzzar shook his head, unable to describe it. “Maybe it’s a Royal Susix thing. It takes all of the bones out of your body.”

“Maybe that’s how he got Hissy to sit on his lap. I’ve been sneaking her food for days and haven’t gotten one pet!” I complained

“I knew it!” Huzzar screamed. “Seph kept yelling at Hissy to get away from you at dinner. I guessed it was because you were feeding her under the table. Seph pulled me aside and told me not to start rumors about you!” He started laughing hysterically.

I rolled my eyes. “It wasn’t under the table. Yeah, right, like I would be brave enough to do it in front of Seph.”

“Oh yeah,” Huzzar agreed, going back to eating some of my candy, “Seph can be a pain when you’re not following his plan.” He pointed a spiced sweet drop at me. “He had a whole nutritional introduction plan. The computer stalled out trying to find out anything about Hissy, so Seph had no idea how to care for her. He was going to feed her like a snakelet with basic stuff first. Then go from there.” He shook his head as he popped another candy into his mouth. “After she ate Vesex’s soup, he deleted his plan.”

That made me feel bad. “Veck, I didn’t mean to ruin his plans. I was just sharing my food. Maybe I can take him somewhere when we’re on Katotic 5.”

Huzzar perked up at that. “I’m sure he’d love that. He is always complaining about never getting to spend any time at the food markets when we’re planet side. If you take him there for lunch, he will talk about it until we get home.” Huzzar’s tail swished along the floor. “What’s the plan when we get there? No one’s told me.”

“Me, Seph, and Seethur are hitting the specialty markets for ship parts, medicines, and weapons. Vesex is in charge of food

and amenities.”

“What about me?” He sounded so expectant.

He was not going to like this. “You are on Hissy duty. You’re going to stay here on the ship and make sure she stays safe.”

He stared at me. I didn’t say anything. “Did you rehearse that?”

“It’s an important job, and if your eyes are giving you a problem, then it’s going to be difficult-”

“This is thix, and you know it!” He cut me off. He stood up and stormed across the room. His balance was visibly different, but he didn’t run into anything. “You guys are deliberately keeping me on the ship.”

“First off, our Prime and Seph are ordering you to stay on the ship, not everyone.” I did not hesitate to throw them under the wheel. “Secondly, you just said that your eyesight is not as good. It’s not safe to take you out into the streets when you are still adjusting to this new shed. Especially when we know the Serex Nest is hunting us.”

“I’m not easy prey,” he hissed.

I laughed. “Right now, you are.”

I stepped into his path. He bumped into me. I coiled around him. I wasn’t built for constricting like Seethur was. He could crush someone easily. I didn’t need to be as strong as Seethur. Huzzar wriggled and twisted, trying to get free. His body was too weak from his sickness to be effective. He went limp in my arms.

“Your pride is making you stupid, Huzzar.” I kept my arms around him. “It’s not about your eyesight. Your body needs time to regain its strength.”

“You’re right.” He stretched as I let him go. “I’m just mad because I was looking forward to being planet side.” He frowned. “I wanted to buy clothes.”

I tugged his tail. “We’ve got three days until we get there. Who knows? Maybe if you stop ignoring Seph’s suggestions

and start doing them, you'll feel well enough to help Vesex out with the shopping?"

He nodded, not looking at me.

"And you've got to warm up to Seph. You can't keep nipping at him. If this injury is bringing up the past, then show him compassion. He doesn't deserve to be treated like this."

His hiss was loaded with emotion. "You're right. I'll apologize."

Chapter Eleven

Cece

The last few days had been normal, for lack of a better word. I was feeling better. I went back to being passed back and forth between different babysitters. The only difference was that Meyer came with me. Whoever stopped by in the morning to get me, got him too.

We had helped my bald friend make space in one of the closets. I hadn't helped too much. Mostly, I had sat back while the two snake men moved boxes around. I tried to pay attention to their language. I didn't think I would ever learn it. It was hard to discern when one word began and another ended.

The rattlesnake had made two goals in the room where he babysat. Meyer and I had played a modified version of soccer until we got bored and started opening drawers. No matter what I did, I could not find the secret hidey hole that the rattlesnake had opened that first day. Meyer found one. He shared some hard candy with me.

Meyer wasn't so bad now that he was healthier. He still made that awful noise when he wanted my attention. He wasn't pulling on me constantly anymore. He was actually kind of funny.

He liked to mess with his crewmates. If their backs were turned, he was getting into trouble. When the cobra had taken us to the kitchen, Meyer had done some sleight of hand and switched out some of the ingredients for dinner. Whatever he had traded must have been awful. When they sat down for dinner, he sat back, pretending to take a bite. Everyone else had started eating, only to cough up their food. The doctor had turned to the cobra and started giving him a stern talking to.

That is what set Meyer off. He started laughing hysterically. That's when the doctor turned on him. He had to stay after dinner and clean up alone.

He wasn't all jokes. When we were in the hospital, Meyer used the downtime to stretch and help the doctor. He took over cleaning duties.

It was very domestic to watch them both do their own work. Meyer went around organizing all of the cabinets and wiping down countertops. The doctor spent more time at his computer and rushing around the hospital. They had stopped fighting as much. There were still some spats. The tone was more playful.

On the third day, Meyer was up before me. That was strange. He was not a morning person. Waking up to find him dressed and sitting on his bed startled me.

I didn't protest when he shuffled me into the bathroom. I did get done in half the time. I was worried he would come in at any point.

When I walked back into the main area, Meyer was wrestling with a tangled mass of rope. He didn't notice me. I took the opportunity to walk around his flailing tail and return to bed. The doctor walked in through the front door with a stack of bowls in his hands. When he saw me, he said something.

"Hello, doctor," I said. "Meyer is in a tizzy about something." I pointed behind me.

The doctor leaned around me to see. He took in Meyer, and his expression dropped. He was done with whatever Meyer was doing.

He asked a question. Meyer shook the rope and replied. The doctor set the bowls on the table much more firmly than required.

The pair started to argue. This one sounded real. It was not one of the flirty back-and-forth fights from the last few days. The doctor puffed up. Meyer hissed angrily.

The doctor wasn't happy. It was easy to tell by the way his tail flicked back and forth. He whipped around with major attitude and went back to gathering items.

Meyer turned towards me with a big smile. His look made me uneasy. He walked over chatting. I started to back away. Meyer rounded on me before I could get away.

His hands twisted me in a circle. I felt his tail lift one arm while I was twirling. My head started to spin. I felt something tighten along my chest. There was a snapping sound. Suddenly, the hands were gone, and I was left wobbling.

I looked down. Black straps crisscrossed over my chest. I pinched them. They were pretty tight. I wiggled my arms. I could still move.

Meyer moved around me. He made some approving noises. Something dragged across the floor. I thought it was a tail until I heard a clicking noise accompanied by a tug.

I gasped and whirled around. Meyer had a rope in his hands. He gave it an experimental tug. The straps pulled across my chest, dragging me closer to him.

"Is this a leash?" I picked at the offensive black straps. My fingers traced the stiff fabric, feeling around for a clasp.

Meyer reached out and pushed my hands away. He bobbed his head talking to me. No doubt telling me to leave the leash alone. *Not happening, buddy.*

The doctor lost interest and walked away. He started to put things into a small bag. Meyer looked me over one more time before shrugging his tail and going back to getting ready.

I kept pulling on the harness, hoping it would come off. It didn't budge. It didn't stop me from trying. Eventually, I was only halfheartedly tugging on the stupid straps.

While I was half paying attention, Meyer sat on his bed and started putting something on his skin. He covered everything from his head to his tail with thick orange cream.

Once he was done, he threw a large piece of fabric over his body. He looked like he was wearing a caftan. The fabric

wrapped and twisted until it covered nearly all of his scales. Only a flicker of a tail could be seen.

The doctor was doing his best to ignore Meyer. His back was to the other man, and he was intently focused on packing his bag. For the third time.

The front door slid open, and the cobra walked in. He pointed at Meyer and said something that had Meyer giggling at the attention. The doctor huffed. Everyone ignored him.

Meyer saddled right up to the cobra and started his flirting routine. I had seen him do the same thing to the doctor multiple times. The cobra took it in with a bemused look. Meyer talked the whole time. He stared up at the cobra with an expectant look.

The King Cobra thought about whatever Meyer had said. He glanced at me where I was fiddling with the leash. He nodded toward me.

Meyer's tail bobbed excitedly. He gestured for the cobra to follow him. As he walked towards me, he talked. I knew exactly what he was going to do, so I snatched the leash's handle. There was no way I was getting tugged around.

Meyer paused when he saw what I was holding. He put his hand out and gestured for the handle. I shook my head. He shook his hand. I didn't budge. Meyer took two steps and tried to grab the handle from me. I jerked my hand back. He followed. We wrestled over the handle. The straps around my shoulder cinched tighter.

A loud, barking hiss made my muscles freeze. Meyer froze too. The King Cobra strode over to us. His hood was flaring out. He towered over our tangled forms. I shrunk, trying not to be his first target.

He reached between us and took the handle out of my hands. Not that I fought him for it. He put a hand on each of our chests and physically pushed us apart.

Meyer swung away, managing to rewrap his outfit in the same motion. His chin went up immediately like he hadn't

been fighting with me a second ago. The cobra didn't give him an inch.

He started giving Meyer a tongue-lashing. There were hisses and barks. His hood opened and closed with the changing volumes. He said something expectantly.

Meyer held firm for longer than I would have. Then, he nodded. The cobra relaxed. Meyer said something and held his hand out for the leash. The cobra didn't let go of it. He shook his head and tugged me closer. I didn't resist. After watching him lose his patience with Meyer, I wasn't going to risk it.

The doctor came storming over. He pointed to Meyer and me. The cobra bobbed his head as if to say, "So what?" The doctor started speaking very agitatedly. The cobra laughed and walked right up to the doctor. He folded the doctor into a hug.

I lurched forward as the leash got tight. *Yeah, this is going to suck.*

He nuzzled the doctor as he spoke softly. He gestured to Meyer and then to himself. He asked a question.

The doctor sighed but nodded. The cobra nodded back. Whatever they had just said must have put the doctor at ease because his body relaxed for the first time that morning.

They hugged one more time. Then the cobra asked both Meyer and the doctor something. The pair separated and grabbed a few items. The cobra and I waited while they hurried around the room.

When they were done, we all walked out together. The cobra led the way. I trailed behind him slightly. He took us to the hangar at the back of the ship.

My bald friend and the rattler were waiting at the back of the room. Both wore similar outfits; loose-fitting pants, strange split-toe boots, no shirts but enough leather straps to cover most of their upper bodies.

The bald guy stood still. The rattlesnake was fidgeting. He loosened a strap on his side. He pumped his arms back and forth. He readjusted the strap again. This time, his arm reached

across his body before springing back in a wide arch. He nodded, satisfied.

I gasped when I saw the wicked knife he was holding. I hadn't even seen it when he was swinging his arm around. It wasn't small either. The blade was over half a foot long.

The pair straightened when they saw us. The rattler's tail pointed toward me. He said something that had Meyer huffing. The cobra gave him one look, and he knocked it off. Turning back to the rattler, the cobra gave my leash a slight tug. I stumbled towards him before huffing just like Meyer did. I heard a few chuckles at that.

The cobra shook his head but ignored everyone's reaction for the most part. He started talking and pointing at his crew. Sometimes he would ask a question, and someone would answer. At the end of his speech, he gave one nod. Then he asked everyone one last question. Instead of answering, everyone pulled a terrifying weapon out of hidden places. The cobra nodded and then shouted one word. I flinched. The aliens started moving towards the back of the hanger.

The bald guy walked ahead of everyone. He tapped a sequence into the panel on the back wall. A section of metal dropped down, creating a ramp. He waited as we all filed past him.

The sky outside was overcast. It gave everything a strange, muted tone. We were surrounded by other spaceships. None of them looked remotely the same. I tried not to run into anyone as I gawked.

Masses of aliens walked the same way we were. We joined the crowds as they made their way toward a group of buildings. Everyone pressed in on one another.

I barely noticed the crush. I was too busy getting whiplash. Everywhere I looked was something new. There were so many aliens I couldn't believe it.

A massive furry alien ran past us, causing the crowd to yell. Someone tripped in the commotion. A tentacle shot out,

grabbing a nearby ship. When the alien righted itself, it left behind a slime trail on the ship.

As we got further away from our ship, I could see that there were a lot more structures than I thought there were. They were small and easily obscured by the taller buildings. The little structures were everywhere. Tiny fabric tents filled every available inch between the stone walls of other establishments.

Aliens wove through the chaotic layout as if they knew exactly where they were going. As I watched, I realized they did. My eyes followed a red-colored alien as they walked through the crowd. They were heads taller than everyone else. It was easy to keep an eye on them. They didn't hesitate as they turned this way and that. They stopped in front of a beige tent that looked identical to every other tent in the city. They ducked inside.

We stopped right on the threshold of the madness. The cobra said something to everyone before leading Meyer and me down a wide alleyway. The doctor, the rattler, and the bald guy went in a different direction.

Instinctively, I grabbed onto Meyer. The cobra still had a tight grip on my leash. There was no way I was losing him. Without the doctor around, there was no one to keep a leash on Meyer. I had a feeling he would get lost in the crowd.

He hissed softly at the touch. Then he petted my hand as if to say, "There, there, no need to be scared. I am here." I rolled my eyes. As if I would run to *him* if I were scared. The King Cobra was way more capable. He was the better choice to hide behind. I just didn't want Meyer wandering off.

The cobra took sharp turns around gathered crowds and unexpected shops. I almost ran into him when he stopped in front of a tattered old tent. He looked over his shoulder briefly. His hood flared as he said something to Meyer. Meyer puffed out a breath but didn't say anything back.

So, I'm not the only one expected to behave, I thought with a laugh.

The cobra opened the tent's door, which was nothing more than a ratty flap, and gestured for us to go in first. The inside was not as abysmal as I expected. The space was small. It was well decorated. There was a lush, colorful rug on the ground. Around the ceiling of the tent were floating lights. Their soft glow gave the area a bright feeling. Across the space was a small countertop. It was only big enough for one individual to stand behind it.

That individual was rail thin and see-through. They looked like one of those x-ray fish at the pet store. I could see oddly colored lumps floating around their insides. I could also see their green blood pumping in and out of their opaque heart. My eyes shot up. Luckily, the skin around their face held some color. It obscured whatever was under it.

They spoke to the cobra in a watery tone. The cobra replied. Whatever he said made the individual behind the counter open a drawer. They reached in, grabbed a transparent sheet of glass, and handed it to him.

The cobra touched the glass. A picture menu popped up. I watched as he scrolled through pictures of meals. The food was displayed on the same plates the crew ate on. The captain clicked on a few items I recognized. Once he had tapped on a few dozen, he handed the glass back to the salesperson. The pair spoke back and forth. The salesperson may have been an alien, but their customer service voice was instantly recognizable.

I was a little confused when we walked out a few minutes later. We weren't carrying anything. It wasn't like there had been merchandise in the tent. I had expected something to be brought to us, however. It was strange. I felt uneasy walking out empty-handed. Meyer and the King Cobra didn't mind. They walked right to the next stop.

We visited a few tents. Sometimes, the owner gave the cobra a glass panel to look through the merchandise. Sometimes, the cobra would negotiate without me seeing what we were buying. We never carried anything out of the shops.

I kept close. The crowds weren't aggressive. They were just everywhere. It was easy to get jostled around by bigger creatures. The last thing I wanted to do was to get separated from the snake men and end up with new owners.

Which meant that I was not watching where I was going most of the time. I kept my eyes focused on the cobra. Halfway through the day, my foot slid into something hot and gooey. I tried not to gag. My sock was soaked instantly.

I started shaking my foot, hoping to fling some of the goo off of me. I felt my sock sliding off with each shake. I dragged it across the dirt. It didn't help.

The cobra looked down when he felt me jumping up and down. He watched me shake my foot for a few seconds before he turned around and pointed to a shop. Meyer perked up and said something back.

Without another word, the cobra took off in the direction he had pointed. Meyer followed, grabbing my leash as he passed by. I hobbled behind them both.

All day Meyer had been content to let the cobra take the lead. He didn't argue about what they were buying or where we were going. When we were inside the tents, he stood off to the side until the cobra finished. Then he left just as quietly.

Not this time. He dragged me along as he practically sprinted past the cobra. He didn't even open the tent's flap all the way. He slid inside as quickly as he could. The fabric slapped me in the face as I was pulled through the opening.

Meyer stomped up to the attendant and started talking very fast. The attendant didn't seem fazed. They answered and handed Meyer a sheet of glass.

He settled down as soon as he had both hands on the glass. I let out a breath. I readjusted my clothes and looked around. The tent's fabric was light enough to let the sun shine through.

The cobra walked in quietly. He didn't seem upset or flustered that Meyer had run off. He stood in the back and let Meyer take over.

With nothing to do, I went back to trying to save my sock. Under normal circumstances, the soggy mess was not salvageable. They had started out as black socks. Now they were a bleached-out grey. The fabric was so thin and holey that it barely provided any protection. I would rather wear Swiss cheese socks than walk barefoot across the galaxy.

The slime had hardened. I bent down to try and peel some of it off. After picking at it for a few minutes, I called it quits. It would have to wait until we were back on the ship. Hopefully, I could wash it off with water.

The cobra stepped behind me. He leaned across me and said something in Meyer's ear. He was so close that I could feel the cool temperature of his skin. Meyer glanced at me, then went right back to buying things. The cobra went back to standing next to the exit.

Finally, Meyer handed the glass back to the attendant. They said something in a positive tone. Meyer nodded. The attendant touched their head and then pointed to the exit. Meyer bobbed his head, grabbed my arm, and walked out.

Once we were outside, the cobra took the leash again. This time, Meyer saddled up next to the cobra. The cobra threw an arm around Meyer's shoulder. He gave my leash a little tug forcing me to walk closer.

Meyer pointed at something. He started hissing excitedly. The cobra laughed and steered us in that direction.

I knew where we were going before we got there. The air was suddenly filled with rich smells. Some were sweet. Others had the distinct scent of cooking fat. It made my mouth water.

We turned the corner on the most organized alleyway we had come through. Each tent was uniform, with large fabric awnings hanging over wide cooking areas. The fabrics were new and neatly kept. There were two neat rows of them. In the center was a mass of creatures with sticks of food or bowls with steam rolling off them.

Meyer tugged the cobra towards a bright purple tent with a smiling bug. The bug zeroed in on Meyer immediately. They

turned and made a loud chattering noise. They shook a black stick in Meyer's direction. That had Meyer dragging the cobra closer. I got dragged along.

The cobra didn't mind at all. He laughed and pulled something out of his pocket. He handed it to the vendor. I figured it had to be physical currency. The bug turned to Meyer and gave him the black stick.

Meyer didn't wait. He bit into it. A yellow substance shot across his cheek from the stick. I recoiled. Meyer laughed. The cobra swiped a finger across the stuff and put his finger in his mouth. He moaned and then dug in his pocket for more money. The bug chittered and handed the cobra two more black sticks.

The cobra took a bite out of one before handing me the other. I looked over at Meyer. He was finishing his already. I took it.

It wasn't a stick. It was some kind of soft dough. I squeezed it. Yellow oozed out of the top. The cobra nodded encouragingly as he took the last bite of his own.

"Please don't let a food cart kill me," I prayed before taking a bite.

It was a lot crispier than I expected. It snapped as I bit into it. The filling startled me. It was hot and sour. The outside had a sweet earthy flavor. It didn't help cut the sour taste. I handed mine right over to Meyer.

We wandered through the food tents for a while. I watched the two snake men eat all kinds of things. I shuddered when they got a cup of small things that moved. They kept offering me tastes. I did not try most of what they shoved my way. There were a few things that I refused to taste.

By the time we had made our way to the shipyard, it was getting dark. There were fewer aliens around than this morning. I still felt overwhelmed by all of the ships looming over me. The cobra took every turn confidently, so I assumed he knew where we were parked.

The doctor and my bald friend were standing at the ship's entrance. They were hissing over a pair of metal boxes. The doctor pointed to the ship. The bald guy shook his head. The doctor hissed again. The bald guy didn't move. The rattlesnake walked out of the ship. He saw the pair, and his tail started shaking. He stomped down the ramp. He grabbed one of the boxes and carried it into the ship like they weren't there. The bald guy threw up his arms.

My bald friend noticed that we were walking over. He pointed to the boxes and barked one word. The cobra said something back and then pointed to me. The bald guy looked at me and then nodded. He picked up a box and followed the rattler inside.

The bay was filled with small metal boxes. There were two main piles. One that everyone was working on emptying and the empties. Meyer and the cobra didn't hesitate to jump in and start unloading the merchandise.

I watched as items were pulled out of the boxes. Most things were in those small freeze-dry-style packets I saw in the storage room. The doctor had a few narrow containers. The bald guy had some long cylinders in his hand. He secured them to the wall. The cobra was separating the small packets as they were handed to him by the other crewmembers. The whole thing was organized chaos.

The rattler bumped me on the shoulder. "Hey," I whined.

He stopped next to me, carrying some metal cases. He pointed his tail towards the rest of the ship, then pointed to me. Without waiting, he started walking off.

"Am I supposed to follow you?" No one answered, obviously, but the doctor pointed toward the rattlesnake. I followed him.

He led me to the same room we played in. He went straight to the main chair and set down the boxes he was carrying. Then he started unpacking.

Most of what he pulled out looked like spare parts. They were different shapes. All of them were made of shiny metal. I

watched him flick a few and look at them for a moment before nodding and putting them away. I wasn't sure how he measured quality. He seemed satisfied with everything.

Once he had looked everything over, he opened all of the cabinets and drawers. They were full of molded inserts. All of them were different shapes and sizes. The rattlesnake was familiar with them because he did not hesitate to start putting his new toys into their holders.

It was fascinating to watch. When the rattler put a part over the indent, it would widen slightly, then the part would be sucked down, and the rattler would put another one in. I had no idea where they went.

He was down to the last two parts when he growled. He had been pacing the room back and forth. I realized that he had no idea where they were supposed to go. His tail was going wild.

He stomped over to a black section of the countertop. He set one of the parts on top of it. Then he tapped the upper lefthand corner. The surface lit up. A ring of blue appeared around the section. Slowly, the ring began to get smaller.

“What is it doing?” I asked because I was fascinated.

The blue ring got smaller, one teeny tiny bit at a time. Once the light hit the surface of the piece, it stopped. After a few minutes, the part was outlined in blue light. Then, there was a loud ding.

The rattler straightened.

The blue ring turned gold. There was a whirling noise. A cabinet at the far end of the room opened. A panel slid away. The rattler grabbed the part and walked over. I followed.

He moved the inner panel aside. There was another row of indentations. The rattlesnake placed the part over its specific indent. Then he closed the cabinet and did the same thing with the last part.

“I get why you didn't want to use it,” I said casually. “That thing takes forever.”

He made a noise that sounded like he agreed.

Chapter Twelve

Seethur

Getting off the ship had not been a relaxing experience. Katotic 5 wasn't known for being relaxing. It was known as the last outpost before the Graveyard. It was usually packed to the heat pits with people desperate enough to be there. This had been no exception. Fortunately, the most desperate individuals didn't try and rob us like other times we've been forced to travel through Katotic 5.

Unfortunately, I did not get to unwind when we got back to the ship. There were too many preparations to be done before we tried to cross the Graveyard without dying.

Hix was feeling the pressure too. He hadn't spoken much while we had been gathering supplies. He had grunted most answers. He did open his mouth to grill the merchants. He asked them too many questions. The first tent we hit up had been a little put out by Hix's behavior until Hix had bought him out.

Once we returned to the ship, he had disappeared to the bridge with armfuls of supplies and Hissy. I hadn't heard from him since. He was probably upgrading our equipment and going over our flight path. He would be busy until we passed the gas ring surrounding the last planet. He'd comm if he needed anything.

While we were still on the ground, I took the opportunity to inspect the whole ship. It was easier to make repairs with gravity. The entire thing took a few hours.

"The ship is ready to take off whenever we are ready," I commed Vesex.

"Is it ready to get us through this gauntlet?" He asked seriously.

I didn't snort. "No way to determine that. I am fairly certain it will fall apart slowly enough to allow us to get out safely." I thought about that statement. "Unless something catastrophic happens."

"Naturally," Vesex deadpanned. "I will inform Hix. Please begin on the internal preparations."

I started going over every inch of our ship. I checked our emergency pods first. If something were to happen, I wanted to ensure they were working. Then I checked the rest of the safety measures on the ship: automatic shutoffs, safety harnesses, and emergency alarms. Everyone flinched when I tested the alarms. No one complained.

"Seeth," Hix said.

"Yes," I hissed.

"We're almost ready for takeoff. I need you to come and get Hissy."

"Be right there."

One of the few conversations he and I had on Katotic 5 was about who would be in charge of Huzzar and Hissy during the Graveyard. Huzzar could see. Despite that, he was still weak. Someone would need to make sure he got to safety if something hit the ship or the computers failed. Seph had volunteered since Hix was going to be busy flying the ship, which left me to watch Hissy. Not that I minded. I liked the little creature.

When I got to the bridge, Hix was already plugged into the ship's computer. He was beginning his reflex exercises. I watched his hands stretch over the captain's chair. He flexed his tail and neck in one direction before bending them in the opposite direction.

His tail constantly rattled, belying how nervous he was. I wanted to go over and reassure him. That was the opposite of what Hix would like, so I ignored him and went to Hissy.

She was sitting in the copilot chair we rarely used. One foot was dangling off the armrest while the other one gently pushed

her in a circle. She looked like a bored snakelet. I snorted at the sight.

“Alright, Hissy,” I jerked my head towards the door, “time to go.”

She sat up straight. She pointed at Hix and started chattering. I nodded like I knew what she was saying.

“Let’s leave Hix alone and go get strapped in.” I gently wrapped my tail around her arm. She gave a defeated sigh but followed.

I glanced over my shoulder as we left, “Good luck.”

The rattling stopped for a second before starting again. That was the only indication I had that Hix had heard me. Hissy made a high pitch noise. I pet her hair.

Everyone had a job while we were traveling through the Graveyard. Hix had to try and keep us in one piece. Vesex would be copiloting and keeping an eye on the region’s more dangerous areas. Seph would be monitoring our vitals. Huzzar was going to be secured in his room until his eyesight improved or we got through the Graveyard. That meant I was in charge of our safety and Hissy.

“Alright, girl, we’ve got to do our final personnel check, and then we can find our seats.”

I opened Huzzar’s door without knocking. He was sprawled across his bed, fiddling with something small and metal. Most likely a knife he was shaping. He was wearing his safety harness, at least. The harness allowed him to strap onto the ship regardless of where he was.

“I’m wearing my harness, *dad*,” he hissed like a brat.

I rolled my eyes but walked past him. I went right to his clothing storage and started pulling out drawers.

“Hey! You could at least ask before you start rummaging through my stuff,” Huzzar rushed to push me out of the way.

“I need your old safety harness. The one from before you had a growth shed.”

He stepped to the side while I kept digging. “Why would you want that? It’s too small for everyone now.”

I pointed my tail to Hissy, “And it still might be too big for Hissy. Nevertheless, I want her in one, just in case.”

Huzzar looked her over. He started going through his other drawers. Hissy came over to inspect what we were doing. She poked around at a few things but made a point not to touch most of Huzzar’s clothing. Considering the state of his room, it was probably a good idea.

I pulled out a faded white harness. The material was missing most of the luminescence patterns that made it glow. That was okay. I flipped it around and checked all of the specialized hooks. They looked like they were still solid.

I walked back to where Hissy was clearing a path by the front door. Thankfully, her back was turned to me. I held an armhole in each hand as I crept behind her. She threw a comb over her shoulder, and I struck.

I grazed my hand all of the way up her arm from wrist to shoulder, let go of the sleeve and pulled back. At the same time, my tail grabbed her other wrist and trapped it against her stomach. I reached around and carefully shoved her arm into the other armhole. Using an arm and my tail, I hugged her tightly while securing the harness to her body.

She fought like a beast the whole time. I got it on despite that. I jumped back and tried to get a good look at how the harness fit. Hissy pulled and tugged at it. She whipped around. All while making the angriest noises.

“She is not happy with you,” Huzzar whispered.

I huffed out a laugh, “You weren’t either the first time I strapped you into yours.” Huzzar had never been on a ship before we had started searching for the Crown. He had hissed and spat when I had wrestled him into his harness.

His eyes went flat at my comment. Then his lips turned up in a sassy grin. “I remember being very happy in the end.”

The wrestling had turned to groping pretty quickly. I shrugged. “I had to reward you for being such a good Susix.”

Huzzar's tail curled around mine. I squeezed back tightly, then untangled from him. "None of that right now. We've got things to do."

"How is it that everyone gets to help but me?" He cried. "You've done the safety measures. Seph is monitoring. Vesex is our eyes. Hix is flying the frozen ship, and I've been locked in my room." He sat on the bed dramatically.

I tried not to sigh. "Huzzar," I purred as I came to sit next to him, "tell me truthfully that you could run to a safety point if something catastrophic happened." He didn't say anything because he knew he couldn't. I wrapped my arm and tail around him. "The only reason we can go home right now is because of you. You carried us this far. Let us get us through this next part."

After some silence, he nodded his head.

"Use this time to rest up. I have a feeling that the rest of our journey will be eventful." I stood up and gestured to Hissy that it was time to go. She sighed, chirped at Huzzar, then walked out the door. "I'll be back to check on you if I'm able. Keep us in the loop about how you're doing."

We went to Seph next. He was rushing around the back of the med bay, securing everything. He was wearing his harness.

"Seph, where will you be while we are in the Graveyard?" I asked without preamble.

His shoulders drooped. "In my chair, strapped in."

"For the entire journey," I added.

He looked over his shoulder and lifted his lip, "Yes, for the entire journey. Now get out of here. I have a lot to do before we enter the fray."

I shook my head. He and Huzzar had been spending too much time alone. Seph was starting to get as bratty as Huzzar. "Contact us with updates frequently. Stay safe."

He lifted a hand but kept strapping things down.

I walked Hissy around the entire ship to do one final check on our safety measures. Everything was in working order. I

couldn't help feeling like something was wrong. I led Hissy to my room. I only half paid attention as I set out some items for her to play with. Once she started poking around the pile, I had laid out. I contacted Vesex.

"What's wrong?" He asked.

"I don't know. I have a feeling." There wasn't anything I could pinpoint that would explain why I was feeling tense. The feeling wouldn't go away.

Vesex didn't say anything for a while. "How are the safety measures?"

"In perfect condition."

"Have we secured all of our purchases?"

"Yes."

"Is everyone where they should be?"

"And they all have their harnesses on." Nothing was out of order. We were beyond prepared.

"What is your gut telling you?" Vesex was an excellent Prime. He didn't dismiss our instincts even when there was evidence to argue against them.

"That something is going to happen."

I heard him hiss slowly. "Going through the Graveyard is our only option right now. The other flight paths are longer and expose us to too many enemies." I didn't say anything because he was right. He swore. "Any suggestions?"

"Sell what we can to buy a ticket through the closest portal. Then come out the other side blasting every weapon we haven't sold." It wasn't a good answer.

There were a few commercial portals in the area that would allow us to skip the Graveyard. Unfortunately, Susurex was so isolated that there was only one portal in that part of the universe. There was a one hundred percent chance that a nest or three was waiting next to it, ready to attack any ship that came through.

“We’d have to sell the weapons to afford the ticket,” Vesex replied. “I will tell Hix that your instincts are blaring. Hopefully, that will be enough warning for us to catch whatever is coming our way.”

There wasn’t much else we could do at this point.

I sat down on the bed next to Hissy. She chirped at me. I didn’t pay much attention. I pulled out my monitor and stared at all of the ship diagnostics. The program showed me our stats in real time. If something went wrong with the ship, I would know.

Vesex’s voice came over the ship’s intercom, “We are entering the Graveyard. If we keep on pace and only run into minor interferences, we should reach the other side in eight hours. Everyone knows their assignments. I am counting on you all to stay where you are unless there is an emergency. If something does happen, secure yourself, and we will do the same. I want to see everyone on the other side in one piece. Good luck.”

The ship lurched forward, then jerked back. Hissy went face-first into the bed with a screech. I grabbed her and pulled her close to keep her from falling off.

“Sorry, girl. I should have warned you. Entering the Graveyard is rough.” The whole thing was rough. That first wave was especially jarring.

We sat in my room for the next hour, getting jostled around. The ship fought against the gravitational pull of X501, the first planet in the Graveyard. It was the largest of the three planets. It had one incomplete ring around it. The ring had gathered large rocks within it that made it hard to navigate. Smaller rocks hit the ship with deafening crashes.

Every time one struck us, Hissy jumped and started chattering. I tried to calm her down as best as I could. I couldn’t blame her. The pings and bumps rattled me.

“We’re coming up to a large rock. Hold tight,” Vesex warned.

I felt the ship slide as Hix maneuvered quickly. The thrusters roared as they fought their way out of X501's space. I grabbed Hissy. The ship shot forward when it made it past the planet's gravity.

"One planet down, two more to go," Hix said through the neuro-comm.

I shot up. Between X501 and X502, there was a small window of calm. It was the only time I would be able to check on Huzzar and Seph in person.

"You need to stay here," I told Hissy, pointing to the bed. "I'll try and make it back before we hit X502."

I didn't wait for her to respond. I left and locked the door behind me. I sprinted to Huzzar's room. I used my security code to open the door without knocking.

Huzzar was lying on his bed. I might have assumed he was sleeping if it weren't for the tension radiating from his body. His eyes shot open when he heard me come in.

"How are you doing?" I asked as I sat down next to him.

"I hate going through the Graveyard," he admitted. "It's so unpredictable."

I grabbed his hand and squeezed. "Hix is a good pilot. He's gotten us through it before." I didn't mention the feeling that I had.

Huzzar nodded, obviously not convinced. "How is Hissy doing?"

"She's scared and confused, but she's doing well."

"I can't imagine riding this out without knowing what was happening." He shook his head. He looked up at me, trying to put on a brave face. "You better get to Seph. We're almost at X502. You know how wild things will be from there on out."

I clasped him to me. He squeezed me tightly. "We'll get through this. We always do." It was a promise more than a statement of fact.

Huzzar just gave me a tight smile. I wrapped my tail around his head before kissing him. He rubbed his cheek against mine, ensuring I would smell like him. Without another word, I ran towards the med bay.

Seph was bent over his computer. He didn't greet me as I walked up to him. He pointed at the screen. "Hix's heart might give out. He's maxing out nearly all of my stats."

The lines on the screen were all over the place. I could see the sharp peaks and dips in Hix's heart rate. Off to one side of the screen were flashing red lines.

"Do we need to switch with him?" Hix was our best pilot. Vesex and I could fly the ship too. We just weren't as good.

Seph bit his lip. "Can you get us through X503's moons?"

The last stretch of the path back through the Graveyard was the most dangerous. X503's moons had collided eons ago, breaking apart both satellites. It caused geomagnetic storms, which affected the ship's navigation system. The ship had to be manually steered through the two masses.

"Not confidently."

With a snort, Seph tilted his head toward the computer, "Hix isn't all that confident right now." He sighed heavily. "We should have planned this better. Someone could have flown us through the first part, then let Hix take the last two planets."

"Will he make it?"

Seph tapped anxiously as he thought. "I can't risk giving him a relaxant right now. He would lose his reaction time." He looked at me with worried eyes. "We will just have to pray."

I rocked back. Seph was not religious. None of us were. He must be really worried to be suggesting that we pray. "Let Vesex know. It would be better if he takes over than letting Hix kill himself for us."

"I've been talking to Vesex through the comm this whole time." He rubbed a hand over his forehead. "He doesn't want to jump in unless Hix is going critical. He knows the path the

best. He has the most training, and it was his choice to risk himself for his nest,” Seph gritted his teeth, obviously quoting Vesex.

Vesex was right. All of us would sacrifice ourselves for our nestmates. Huzzar had done it. I had made similar choices. It was a matter of love and honor.

I grabbed Seph’s shoulder. “He can do it.”

Seph nodded, unconvinced. “I’ll do my best to get him to the other side.” He nodded towards the door. “You better get back. I can feel X502’s storms.”

He was right. X502’s storms were already causing the lights to dim and flicker. I gave Seph a nod before I ran back toward my room.

When I opened the door, Hissy jumped on me. I might have fallen if I hadn’t been expecting her to do it. Instead, I heaved her onto my shoulder and quickly locked the door behind me.

“Things are going to get rough for the next few hours. The lights are going to flicker. Alarms might go off, and the ship will be pulled all over the place. We are expecting this.” I knew she couldn’t understand me, but Huzzar had been right. Experiencing the Graveyard without any warning had to be terrifying.

Hissy and I huddled together as the ship’s lights went dark, then flared over and over again. Neither of us spoke. We sat in silence as Hix fought us through X502’s path.

I asked Seph about Hix once. “He’s still in a dangerous spot,” he said.

The lights finally gave out sometime after that. Hissy stiffened next to me. I waited for the backups to turn on. They didn’t.

“The storms have interrupted our power system. We still have power. There’s an interference stopping it from getting to our lighting system,” Vesex told us through the neuro-comm. His voice was strained. “Luckily, the life support lines aren’t affected.” I sensed him take a calming breath. “We’ve passed X502. We’re coming up to X503. Keep your wits about you.

The moons have shifted since the last time we went through them. It will be a tight fit.”

I shifted Hissy until she was in my lap. I wrapped my tail around her front. If something happened, I wanted her close. The entire time, I kept petting her hair, making reassuring noises.

Suddenly, the ship jerked violently to the side. My whole body tensed. Hissy screamed.

“Did we hit something?” Huzzar asked frantically through the neuro-comm.

“I didn’t feel anything,” Seph’s answer was tentative, like he wasn’t sure.

“If life support is still working, the alarms are still active. They would be going off if something hit the ship,” I told them both.

“BRACE!” Hix screamed into our heads.

I barely had time to curve around Hissy before we were thrown across the room. I felt weightless for a heart-stopping moment. We hit the floor hard. Before I could understand what was going on, the ship dipped. We went airborne again.

Hissy was thrown from my arms. I hit something as I tumbled through the room. My stomach plummeted as the ship righted itself. I dropped onto the ground with a crunch.

Hissy screamed. I didn’t wait for the ship to even out. I lunged across the hard ground toward her whimpering.

The second I touched her hot skin, I picked her up. The ship was pitch black, but the emergency connectors’ heat sensors were still working. I stumbled over the things that had been tossed around in the crash.

The ship tilted. Hissy and I hit the wall hard. I ignored the pain and jabbed my safety harness into the connector. I fumbled, trying to find Hissy’s. She yelped as I jerked her closer to get her strapped into the safety track. Our harnesses zipped us against the wall. If the ship got hit again, we wouldn’t be thrown around.

“Check-in,” I barked. “Who is strapped in?”

“I am,” Huzzar said quickly.

“Hix and I are strapped into our chairs,” Vesex said.

“I am,” Seph said.

“Medical status,” Vesex demanded.

“Minor impact damages for everyone. Hix’s hearts are redlining. We need to get him into the med bay,” Seph answered quickly. His anxiety was so intense we could feel it through the neuro-comm.

“Not happening,” Hix hissed.

“Don’t be a martyr, you frozen idiot,” Seph shouted.

“No one else can-” Hix started to yell back.

“Cut it out,” Vesex barked. That shut up both of their responses. “Hix has got to stay put until we get through this vecking section of space.”

The silence along the comm was uncomfortable.

“What happened?” Huzzar asked.

“A fragment from one of the moons clipped us,” Vesex bit. “We’re showing some damage to the side of the hull, and our power supply has been disrupted. We’ll have to pray that everything holds up until we’re clear.”

“How much further do we have to go?” Seph asked.

“We’ve got to decrease our speed to make sure nothing comes loose,” Vesex paused as he made the calculations in our navigation system. “So long as X503 has no flare-ups, we should be clear of the Graveyard in two more hours.” Vesex took a deep breath. “I need everyone to stay strapped in until I give the clear. Stay where you are and keep yourself from adding to Seph’s injury list. Clear?”

“Clear,” everyone but me answered. I wasn’t staying where I was. There were things to do.

Vesex sighed. “Keep the comm line clear unless there’s an emergency.”

The instant the comm went silent, I grabbed Hissy's hand and rushed toward the door. She stumbled behind me but managed to keep up. With the power partially down, I had to force the door open.

Thankfully, the hall was clear. I couldn't see any damage or detritus in our way. The thin line of heat sensors along the floor were lit, showing the path. I pulled Hissy along the wall rushing towards the med bay.

Our security lines followed the tracks on the wall, allowing us to move between parts of the ship without risking being thrown around. The metal clanking of their hooks racing through the path was the only sound besides our breathing. Hissy was pointedly quiet as she let me drag her along.

When we got to the med bay doors, I tried to force them open, but they were stuck. I braced my hands against the seam between the panels and pulled with all my strength. One panel slid open just a crack. Hissy jumped in. She muscled her way past my body and stuck her hands into the gap. I felt her brace as she tried to help. We grunted as the door opened slowly.

"Go," I shouted once it opened wide enough to fit through.

Hissy didn't pause. She dove inside. She disappeared for a breath before rushing back with something long and dark. She shoved it into the gap. Quicker than a Vispur, I jumped into the med bay.

"Be careful; one of the cabinets malfunctioned. There is broken glass all over." Seph called from somewhere deep in the dark space.

I picked up Hissy and followed the security track to one of the seats along the wall. I set her down and started strapping her in. She didn't make a sound. The poor girl had to be terrified.

"Was the recovery chamber damaged?" I shouted in Seph's direction.

"No. I'm getting it set up right now. We'll need to get Hix into it the second we're given the all-clear." Seph started muttering about frozen idiots.

I tried to find Seph in the darkness. Being cold-blooded, his heat signature was hard to decipher with all of the hot medical equipment. His angry murmurs and jerky motions were the only things I had to work with.

He was bent over the massive healing chamber we kept in the back of the med bay. It was sheltered in a section of the ship with a double hull. It even had a separate battery just in case of a devastating power loss.

When I got close enough, I saw that he had a headlamp on. The light was barely strong enough to illuminate what was right in front of him. He was typing something into the healing chamber's screen.

He didn't bother greeting me. He just started telling me what to do. "I'm calibrating the chamber to Hix's biometrics right now. It's monitoring him through our neuro-comms. It will be ready to start healing him once we shut him inside. Please get him here as fast as you can. I'll take whatever poison Vesex spits at you. I'll pull rank as the medical officer if I need to."

"How bad is it?" I was hesitant to ask. I needed to know. I didn't want to hear it, considering I knew he was in a rough spot.

Seph shook his head, his tail whipping back and forth sharply. "If the frozen idiot isn't seeing spots, then I will go back to school."

I put my hand on his shoulder. His body tensed. "I know you're scared. Don't misdirect that fear. He's doing what any of us would."

Seph's head dropped. "Why does he have to sacrifice so much?" The words barely made it past the lump in his throat.

Gently, I lifted Seph. Even without proper lighting, I could still trace my fingers across the scar along his eye. He'd received it from his clutchmate. The bastard had been trying to blind Vesex. Seph had taken the blow instead. He would never regain the sight in that eye. He never complained about it. He never once voiced his regret over the injury. He had taken the

strike without flinching and turned around and killed his clutchmate for trying to debilitate his Prime.

“Why do any of us sacrifice?”

He didn't answer. He just leaned into my palm. The tension left his body.

“I hate when they are hurting,” he confessed quietly.

I nodded in agreement. It was one of the most agonizing feelings in this universe. And one of the reasons we all sacrificed without thought. We would do anything to spare our nestmate's pain.

Seph took a deep breath and straightened. “How is Hissy?”

“She's scared. She's holding up well. She's keeping close and isn't fighting me.”

Seph clucked, “Poor dear has no idea what is going on.” He sighed, “She'll have to wait until we are taken care of. Then we can see what can be done to pamper her.”

I snorted at that. We were all going to need some pampering after this ordeal.

The next few hours were blessedly quiet. The ship went through a small magnetic storm, but it was mild compared to the hit to our hull. Hissy squeaked when the ship veered. She didn't try to escape her seat.

Seph and I gathered supplies for a triage station. Once we got Hix into the healing chamber, we could bandage the rest of the nest. Most of it would be minor, thankfully.

“I'm heading to the bridge,” I told Seph. I wasn't sure how much longer we needed to go. We had to be getting close.

He turned toward me. “Be waiting in the wings. Once Vesex says we are clear, you need to sprint Hix down here. I can heal him, but I need him here.”

I gave his arm one more squeeze. I pat Hissy on the head as I passed her. Luckily, whatever she had shoved into the doorway was still holding up.

I raced towards the bridge. The single door wasn't hard to pry open. Neither Vesex nor Hix acknowledged me as I stepped into their space. Both of them were staring at the scene in front of us.

Looming ahead was a ring of yellow gas. Space trash was stuck inside its sphere. A piece of X503's moons hung next to broken ships. Clouds of electricity sparked randomly. It was our last barrier. Once we crossed it, we were free.

"A lone wing is drifting our way," Vesex warned.

Hix nodded once. "I'm increasing our speed to clear it."

The ship jerked back as it pulled against X503's gravity. It shot forward as we got closer to the ring of debris.

"Watch for the wing," Vesex warned.

"I see it," Hix bit out.

The broken wing of a destroyed ship twisted into our line of sight. Hix steered us toward the gap in the ring to avoid it. An orange haze shrouded the view screen. The ship's engines hummed as they fought to break out of the Graveyard. The orange faded, and the ship shot forward. I braced one hand against the wall to keep from stumbling. My other hand palmed the release on my security harness.

"Clear," Vesex called.

Simultaneously, Vesex and I released our harnesses and ran to Hix. Vesex beat me by a scale. He clicked the release on Hix's harness. Hix went limp in his chair. I snaked my hands through the straps as I untangled his arms. Vesex disengaged his neuro-comm from the ship. The instant I had him free, I lifted him and raced for the door. Vesex ran past me and shoved it open.

"I've got him," I shouted at Seph through the comm.

"We're ready," he answered immediately.

Hix's body was cool to the touch. My tail whipped up and rested against his throat. His heartbeat was racing. He was breathing shallowly.

“We’ve got you,” I promised him.

He moaned, but besides that, he didn’t respond.

Seph had shoved a longer brace between the med bay doors so they were open wider. I ducked under it as I raced toward the healing chamber. Seph was standing at the ready. He had his hands full of medical attachments.

“Set him down in it,” he ordered.

I tried to be gentle as I maneuvered Hix’s large frame into the domed bed. Seph started hooking him up to the long wires inside the instrument. The healing chamber came alive with a loud alarm.

Seph ignored it. He just kept tending Hix in a flurry of motion. I stepped back, worried I would get in his way, as he rushed to the other side of the healing chamber.

Huzzar came sprinting into the med bay. He barely stopped long enough to look around the room before running to where we were standing. He skidded to a halt just out of Seph’s way.

“How is he?” Huzzar panted.

I shrugged. The healing chamber was making shrill noises. Seph kept poking and prodding Hix. He was intent on his patient, completely ignoring our presence.

Huzzar opened his mouth to ask again. I shook my head and pointed to the set of chairs Hissy was sitting in. Huzzar looked like he wanted to argue.

“Let’s go check on Hissy. She’s been strapped into the chair for a long time.” I didn’t wait for him to answer. I pulled him away from Seph and Hix.

Hissy saw us coming and started to pull at her straps. She was making frantic noises while pointing at Hix. I bent down to get her free from the chair’s harness.

“Do you think Hix will be okay?” Huzzar’s hesitant question revealed how nervous he was.

“His body went through intense strain to get us through the Graveyard.” I glanced back to where Seph was working on our

nestmate. “Seph is very motivated to keep him with us. He’ll make sure Hix pulls through.”

Once she was free, Hissy tried to sprint for the healing chamber. I managed to catch her before she got very far. She jerked against my hold. She started pointing towards Hix.

“I know, girl. We’ve got to let Seph do his thing.”

Hissy’s panicked movements finally snapped Huzzar out of his worried stupor. He wrapped an arm around her shoulder. “Let’s do get cleaned up. Then we can make food for everyone.” Hissy kept glancing at the healing chamber as Huzzar led her away.

“Vesex.” I waited for him to reply.

“Yes,” he hissed after a moment.

“Seph has Hix in the healing chamber.”

“How are things looking? What does Seph say?”

“Seph hasn’t said anything,” I answered truthfully.

“Which means Hix is not doing well,” Vesex swore. “I am never letting him take us through the Graveyard again. We’ll relay through the frozen thing.”

“I’m willing to put in time in the simulator to get my flying skills up to snuff.” I was willing to do a lot more than that to keep Hix from carrying the burden of navigating such a dangerous stretch.

“We all will be spending time improving our flying abilities,” Vesex promised.

“Are we in a place where I can start repairing the ship?”

Vesex made an affirmative noise. “I’ve got us stalled far enough away from the Graveyard that there won’t be any interference. Let me double-check our basic systems. Then I will help with the exterior repairs,” he said before signing off.

Seph had closed the healing chamber sometime during my conversation with Vesex. He was staring at his handheld computer. He absently flicked one of his fangs as he read. It was a nervous habit he did when he was very anxious.

I could barely see Hix from where he lay in the healing chamber. His eyes were closed. I could see his chest rising and falling. I couldn't tell if his breathing had gotten better.

I wanted to go over there and help. I didn't know what I could help with. I only had basic first-aid training. I would probably end up standing around. The best way for me to help was to get the ship back in working order.

With a sigh, I headed towards the main doors. First things first, I need to reconnect the power supply. That would get the med bay running at full capacity.

Chapter Thirteen

Vesex

“How does the hull look, Seethur?” I tried to keep my anxiety from bleeding into the neuro-comm.

The ship had taken one solid hit while passing through X503’s broken moons, but who knows what kind of damage we had picked up in the Graveyard. The place was known for its nasty surprises.

Seethur managed to reconnect our power supply to the entire system. Luckily, there had only been one burnt-out connector. My tail was in knots about the damage to the outer ship. We didn’t have the time or resources to do significant repairs to the outside of the ship, especially with Hix out of commission.

Hix was the real source of my fear. Seph had been working on him for the last few hours. He was still in the healing chamber. Seph was tentatively helpful about his prognosis. That being said, until Hix woke up, we would all be on edge.

“It’s a massive hit,” Seeth reported. “My initial exam is that nothing pierced the hull. We’re going to need to patch this before we travel further.”

I barely kept from swearing over the comms. That was good news but not the best. Patching the ship would take hours of him and I working in space. It was a vulnerable place to be at the best of times. This was not the best of times.

We were targets out here. Our ship was far enough from Susurex that we didn’t have to worry about the laziest of our competitors coming for us. I wasn’t worried about lazy Susix. I was concerned about the ones who were searching for us.

“What do you need me to bring out?” I asked Seethur as I made my way to the storage area we kept our maintenance materials.

He listed everything he needed as I went through the rows of materials. Once I had everything piled up near the decompression chamber. I quickly got into my space walking suit and started strapping everything to a lead to pull behind me once the decompression chamber opened up to the outside.

My tail whipped impatiently as I waited for the gravity to drop in the decompression chamber. I was ready to get out there and get the ship fixed. The process of preparing the narrow hall for a living creature to enter space was slow. My body was floating when the door began opening scale by scale.

Seethur was waiting for me at the door. He pulled himself into the decompression chamber. He immediately grabbed one of the tool kits from me and strapped it to his body. I maneuvered a flexible sheet of metal past him.

I found the dent quickly. Seethur hadn't been exaggerating. It was huge. It looked like a giant had punched the ship. The mark was longer than me and wider than Seethur, and I combined.

Immediately, I started to check the space for punctures. The hull was strong, but it wouldn't be the first time something had gotten through its protective layer. It looked clean. I gave Seethur a nod. He started to attach an automatic suction to the center of the dent.

The device was short and stocky. There was a metallic suction device on one end. Once he had it where he wanted it, Seethur turned it on. The cup magnetized to the hull with a dull thud. Seethur held on with both hands before clicking the reverse switch. I watched as the metal hull bent outwards against the force of the suction device. The metal groaned. It couldn't resist the pull of the tool. It began to round and reshape. Seethur kept it running until the section he was working on was nearly flush with the rest of the ship. Then, he disengaged it and moved to another spot along the dent.

I went behind him and started reinforcing the damaged metal. We bought the best materials we could. The new sheet of metal would protect the hull from coming loose or receiving more damage if we hit a tight spot. It wouldn't hold forever. We would need to get the ship to a repair shop once we found a safe place.

Seethur and I worked until the hull was repaired. We were out for hours. Once we were done with the dent, Seethur and I went around the ship together, looking for more damage. There were scorch marks spotting the entire thing.

“Hix is awake,” Seph cut in with a shout.

My head shot towards Seethur. We both froze. He nodded towards the entrance of the ship.

“Get in there. I'll finish up out here and be in as soon as I can,” he promised.

I clapped him on the shoulder as I pulled myself towards the opening. The decompression process took longer than it ever had. I would have forced the computer to speed up if I hadn't seen the safety videos about incorrect decompression techniques. I didn't want my organs to explode because I got impatient.

My hood flexed as I waited for the inner door to unlock. The instant I heard the locks disengage, I ripped the door open. I didn't bother taking off my suit. I ran towards the med bay.

There was a mass of bodies crowded around the healing chamber. Huzzar and Hissy were shuffling around Seph as he bent over the open bed of the chamber. I strode forward, pulling my helmet off as I went. Huzzar saw me coming and pushed Hissy out of the way as he stepped to the side. I stopped right next to Seph as he inspected Hix.

Hix was lying on the bed. His scales were pale. There was obvious strain around his eyes. Besides that, I couldn't see any physical signs of what he had put his body through. He looked deceptively healthy, if tired. His tail gave a half-hearted rattle as Seph poked him. He flicked Seph's hand away.

“Are you having any difficulties breathing?” Seph asked quietly.

“You’re pushing on my chest. Get off of me, and I’ll give you an honest answer,” Hix snarked in an exhausted tone.

I hissed out a barking noise. “Answer the question, Hix. Seph kept your hearts from giving out.”

Hix closed his eyes with a sigh. “No difficulty breathing. I’m just tired.”

Seph didn’t reprimand Hix for getting smart. He nodded and kept on examining him. He went around to the chamber’s computer to type something in.

I knelt on the ground. It put me at eye level with Hix. I grabbed his hand in mine. It was warm from being in the heated chamber. I rubbed it along my cheeks, scenting him. I felt the worry slowly bleed out of my body. I was grateful that he was awake.

“We were worried about you, Hix.” I looked at his brown eyes. They were so dark right then that they appeared black. “Thank you for getting us across the Graveyard safely.” He didn’t say anything, just nodded. “We’re all going to be practicing flying the ship. You won’t have to do it alone again.”

He chuckled. “I can’t wait to see it.” The fact that he didn’t argue was telling. That last trip had taken a lot out of him.

Seph stepped up next to me. He held a printout towards me. I took it from him and started reading. It was Hix’s vitals from when he was brought in and then again from just now. “What does it mean?”

Seph hissed out a breath. “It means that Hix is stable. His hearts are back to a healthy state. His blood pressure is within the normal range. Which is a miracle if you look at where he was when he was brought it.”

“When can I get out of this thing?” Hix asked, already impatient to be up.

Seph rolled his eyes. “That *thing* saved your life. You should be happy to be in there.”

Hix didn't look repentant at all. “That doesn't answer my question.”

Seph made an annoyed noise. “You can get out in the next few minutes. Fair warning, I am keeping you for observation for at least a day.” Hix started to protest. Seph held up his hand. “I will keep you longer if you can't follow my instructions.”

Hix looked at me like he wanted me to intercede. “When we're in the med bay, Seph is Prime. I will tie you down if he tells me to.”

Seph folded his arms like he was thinking about it.

Hix dropped back into the healing chamber. “Fine, I'll rest.”

Huzzar stopped next to Hix. He took a few minutes to pet and kiss Hix while he whispered things into his ear. Hix nuzzled him for a bit before playfully pushing him away. Huzzar stood up with a laugh. He turned his head before jerking his chin towards Hix.

Hissy bowled right past me. She practically jumped into the healing chamber to get to Hix. She did almost the exact thing that Huzzar had. Except her noises were soft and low.

Hix wrapped his arms around her and rocked her side to side. “I'm alright, Hissy. Seph took good care of me.” He listened while she made a few sounds. He nodded like he understood what she was saying. “Well, how about you keep me company until I can get out of the healing chamber? I could always use a heat source.”

Without waiting for a response, Hix pulled her into the bed of the chamber.

“Oh, come on,” Seph whined, “she's going to shed hair all over the place.”

I stood up and stepped back while Seph pretended to care about Hissy making the healing chamber dirty. I chuckled at

the half-hearted complaints. He had to have something to feel grumpy about now that Hix was on the mend.

Huzzar pulled me over to the table on the other side of the room. He pushed me into a chair. He brought over one of the kitchen's mobile trays. "You need to eat. Hissy and I brought enough for everyone. Seph won't let me feed Hix until he's had a full exam. I don't know when that will be, so you better eat while you can."

He placed a covered bowl in front of me. I lifted the cover. A plume of steam rose from the bowl. I couldn't help the sound I made seeing warm fesik broth. It was a simple meal but one of my favorites.

"The kitchen didn't have full power when I went there, so there wasn't a lot I could make," Huzzar explained.

I waved his excuse away, "This smells delicious. I'm glad you thought about food. I wouldn't have remembered to eat until my stomach started growling." Without another word, I started eating.

"How were the repairs?" Huzzar asked quietly.

"We're all patched up. We will need to find a shop before we travel too far. That moon damaged the hull. Nothing life-threatening. It needs to be fixed properly soon."

Huzzar nodded. He worried the bottom of his lip with his teeth. He glanced at the trio by the healing chamber.

I put my spoon down. "What's on your mind?"

Huzzar leaned forward and spoke quietly. "Can we afford to stop for repairs? We're on borrowed time until we get the Crown back to Susurex."

I made sure to meet his eyes. "There will be trouble. Too many Susix want the Crown. One of them will find us." If we were lucky, there would only be one. I was preparing for an onslaught.

Huzzar deflated. His shoulders dropped as his eyes closed. "You're right. I was hoping we could avoid it."

I reached out and grabbed his hand. "Me too."

Just then, Seethur came striding in. He didn't pay any attention to us. He went right to Hix, dropped to his knees in front of the male, and hugged him. Hissy got caught in the middle of their reunion. Hix and Seethur were embracing tightly. It was a tender sight. Ruined by the wriggling, squawking creature in the center. Seethur broke apart with a smile. He tapped Hissy on the head.

Seph cleared his throat. "Since we're all here, I figured I should tell everyone how Hix is doing."

"What? Don't I get to know before everyone else?" Hix complained.

"I would end up telling everyone individually anyways. This way, I can save some breath." Seph gestured for everyone to take a seat around the table.

Huzzar didn't waste any time putting food in front of everyone. We all ate for a few moments. The silence that filled the space was tense. Even Hissy was quiet.

After a few bites, Seph pushed his bowl away. "Hix, you'll recover. You can't fly for a while. The damage done will repair if you give it a chance to heal." Hix nodded reluctantly. I would have to keep an eye on him to stop him from sneaking into the captain's chair. "With that in mind, I need you to rest in the med bay for a few days. No helping with repairs, no strenuous activity, and if I catch you doing anything other than lying down, I will lock you in the healing chamber."

"I'll see what I can do," Hix bit out reluctantly.

I shook my head. That was the best they were going to get out of him. "We might as make this a nest meeting." I filled everyone in on the repairs Seethur and I had done. I warned them that we would need to find a place to get the hull fixed.

"Those kinds of repairs could take days," Hix said. "We'd be stuck planet side, in our own galaxy, mind you, with no escape. Every Susix with a ship could track us down and kill us for the Crown."

I nodded. "Someone will make a run at us. We'll need to plan this out as best as we can."

Hix's tail shook wildly, but he didn't say anything else. Seethur cracked his neck and leaned back in his chair. Huzzar gave me a reassuring smile.

"Alright, so long as we're preparing for it," Hix finally said.

"While Hix is recovering, I'll map out possible locations we can stop at. Until then, I want everyone on repairs or preparations. There are still a lot of things to do internally after that hit. We need everything cleared, cleaned, and patched as quickly as possible."

Seph raised his hand. I nodded for him to go ahead. "Who is taking Hissy? I've got my hands full here." He gestured to the mess from a cabinet that had malfunctioned and opened sometime during the trip through the Graveyard. There were shards of broken glass all over. I hadn't noticed it with everything else that had been going on.

"I'll take her," Huzzar volunteered. "We can go around and clean up everyone's rooms."

"Seethur and I will check for internal damage." Seethur nodded his agreement.

Huzzar gathered our bowls as Seethur and I left to tour the ship's inside. As we were leaving, Hix was being bullied back into the healing chamber by Seph.

Seethur and I only found minor damages inside the ship. The power line from the backup battery and the freezer cabinet had been fried sometime during the journey. Luckily, we had backup lines.

We started righting all of the items that had been jostled around. Seether marked a few spots on the floors that had been dented by large objects being thrown around. I was pulling some replacement siding from the cargo bay when Seph commed me.

"I need you in the med bay," he breathed.

"Is it-"

"Hix is fine. Something is going on with the ship."

Seph was at his computer when I came in. He jerked his head towards the screen. He had the ship's schematics up.

I leaned over and started reading the data that it was displaying. "I don't see what is going on."

Seph tapped on the med bay, enlarging the image. One side of the picture had a running list of biometric statistics. Seph pointed at the temperature.

"I keep the med bay at three hundred sunvuls. It's warmer than most of the ship. It's the ideal temperature for healing." Seph tapped the screen again. "We're at two hundred and ninety sunvuls right now. It's been dropping since the power came back online."

I gently moved him to the side. Exiting the med bay's screen, I pulled up the heating area. It was the hottest room on the ship. I cursed. The temperature had dropped nearly fifty sunvuls. I quickly surveyed all of the rooms. Every single one was losing heat. They all started to fall in temperature once the power came back online.

I glanced at the healing chamber. Hix was sleeping inside. "Have you told anyone?"

Seph shook his head. "I called you as soon as I noticed."

"Is the healing chamber staying at temp?" He nodded. "I'll redirect Seethur and Huzzar. Don't let Hix know. We need him to recover."

I commed the rest of my nestmates and told them to meet me in the engine room. It held the equipment that ran the ship. It was right next to the bridge. Seethur and I had checked it out when he had reconnected the power supply. Everything had been working when we ran diagnostics on the system.

The engine room was quiet except for the hum of the electronics. No alarms were blaring. I went over to our bio-support system. The heat was reading like nothing was wrong. My hood flexed in frustration. Quickly, I ran another diagnostic screening.

Huzzar walked in with Hissy tailing behind. "What's going on?" He asked immediately.

“Let’s wait for Seethur. That will give me a second to check something out.”

The computer finished going through our heating system. It hadn’t found anything wrong. I ran a hand over my hood to keep it from flaring. I went over to our main computer and started an in-depth system check.

Seethur walked in just as I hit the final command. The two of them gathered around, waiting for me to begin speaking. It was obvious that both of them were bracing for bad news.

“The heat is out. It started to drop once we got the power back on.”

Huzzar rocked back.

Seethur hissed in agitation. “That doesn’t make sense. Shouldn’t the heat be stabilizing after the power came back on?”

I shook my head, not understanding the pattern either. “I’ve run a diagnostics scan. The computer isn’t registering that anything is wrong. Seph only noticed because he keeps the med bay on the warmer side. I’m having the central computer run through our entire system, looking for something. I’m not holding my breath that it will find anything. It hasn’t picked up on the heating malfunction at all.”

Huzzar swore. Seethur’s tail slapped the floor hard, startling Hissy.

“Somethings got to be wrong with the computer,” Huzzar hypothesized. “It’s top of the line. That’s why we installed the vecking thing. If it’s not picking up on the problem, it’s damaged.”

“Or that impact fried more than just the hull,” Seethur added.

“We don’t have time to focus on one thing. It could be the computer, the heating system, or that the hit damaged more than we realized. The ship’s internal temperature is dropping too fast. We will start feeling the effects if we don’t find a solution quickly. We need to divide and conquer.”

If the temperature continued to drop, we would start losing function. Eventually, our bodies would hibernate to keep us alive. Out here in space, that would be a death sentence. We'd freeze inside our ship.

"I'll remove our repairs to the hull and recheck the damage. Maybe there was a puncture that we overlooked," Seethur volunteered.

"I'll check the physical heating elements," Hix said, "maybe something got burnt out."

I gestured to the computers. "I'm going to reset everything. Hopefully, that will at least point us in the right direction. In the meantime, I will have Seph cut off the heat to all non-essential rooms."

The pair of them left, taking Hissy with them. While the computer ran, I went back to the power line that Seethur had replaced. I went through the entire thing looking for damage. I couldn't see any. I replaced it anyways.

"Seph, has there been any change?"

He grumbled, "The temperature is still dropping."

I swore. "How long until we start feeling it?"

He hummed as he thought. "At this rate, we're going to get cold in a few hours. The outer temperature is too intense. It will start penetrating our ship fast. We will hit hibernation temperatures before the morning if we can't get the heat back on."

"Cut as much of the heat as you can. Hopefully, that will add more time," I prayed.

I went back to the engine room to check on the computer. The vecking thing was still registering that nothing was wrong. Without any time to spare, I pulled the data from our last system update. With a quick warning to everyone, I deleted our current system and reinstalled our old data. Then I rebooted everything. The diagnostics still read the same.

My hood exploded open. I felt the edges vibrating with anger. "Vecking frozen computer!" I attempted to breathe

deeply before I put a fist through the screen. “Huzzar, any updates?”

“Everything is in working order. There aren’t any burnouts. I can’t find any broken lines or fried connectors.” He sounded as worried as I felt. “The vecking thing is powering down for not vecking reason.”

“Start checking all of the main power connectors. There might be something wrong with one of the smaller energy directors.”

I started pulling off the siding inside the engine room, looking for fried lines to the computer. “Seethur, how are things going?”

“I’ve got the repair removed. I’m going over the hull scale by scale.” He hissed. “I haven’t found anything new. The damage to the hull was extensive. Nothing penetrated it. There are scorch marks from the electrical storms. They’re close enough to the engine room that they might have affected the internal system,” he suggested.

“Where along the hull are they exactly?” He gave me the coordinates. I redirected my destruction and started pulling apart the inside of the ship to get to the guts along the areas he had pointed out.

Huzzar came in while I was elbows deep in wiring. He took one look at what I was doing and started working opposite me. We worked for a painstakingly long time following every wire, checking every connector, and running diagnostics on everything.

Huzzar and I were both starting to feel the effects of the cold. My fingers began losing their range of motion. I could already feel myself becoming sluggish.

Footsteps echoed from the hall outside. I didn’t bother turning around, assuming Seethur had come to help. When Hix stopped a tail’s length away from our wrecked internal walls, I opened my mouth to tell him to get back to the healing chamber.

He threw a spacewalking suit at Huzzar. He was already wearing one. “Don’t even bother arguing. Seph couldn’t keep quiet about the heating forever. Tell me what you’ve already done while Huzzar gets into his suit.”

Huzzar and I outlined the problem and all of the dead ends we had hit. We talked about what Seethur was doing on the outside of the ship. Huzzar shuddered as he zipped up his suit. They were thickly insulated.

Hix didn’t say anything as he went over to the computer. Then he started picking at the mass of wires we were sorting through.

“Have we checked if the radiation messed with our system?” He asked finally.

“The radiation monitoring system never registered a surge big enough to affect our ship,” I answered. We had the radiation alarm system hooked up to our backup power supply. There was also a secondary system attached to our biometric monitoring instruments in case of an emergency. Neither had shown an abnormal spike. I even gone back and compared our readings from the first trip through the Graveyard. Nothing overtly abnormal had stood out to me.

“Can you tell me where the coordinates for the hull damage are?” He asked, stepping back.

I pointed out the outline of the hit as I walked around the engine room. “The damage corresponds to a portion of the kitchen. I didn’t hit anything out of the ordinary when I checked it just now. Some scorch marks extend to the navigation room.” I told him the exact coordinates. “We haven’t gotten there yet.”

Hix nodded. “It would be under the co-captains panel system. I’ll start pulling everything apart to see if something has been damaged.”

As I watched him go, I noticed Hissy for the first time since she had walked in. She had stayed out of our way while we had been digging around inside the ship. She was huddled in

the corner of the room, away from the sheets of siding we had piled up. She had her arms around her legs, looking worried.

“Seph, can you bring Hissy some clothing? We don’t have a suit for her, but she should have something on right now.” The poor animal had to be in a rough spot.

Inside the suit, it was hard to tell how much the temperature was dropping. My range of motion wasn’t improving, so I knew it wasn’t getting warmer. The last time Seph had updated us on the temperature, we were at two hundred and fifteen sunvals in the rooms with heat. Things were much worse in the parts of the ship where we had redirected the heat.

“I haven’t found anything,” Hix’s comment broke through my train of thought.

My anxiety spiked. Things were not looking good. Even with the suits, our bodies would not be able to withstand the cold for very long. We would run out of energy.

We were out of options.

“Seethur, have you found anything?” I held my breath, waiting for him to reply.

“Nothing,” was all he said.

I closed my eyes. We were going to need to talk about our options. “Come on inside. Let’s have a nest meeting in the engine room.”

The mood was dour as everyone gathered. Even Hissy picked up on it. When Seph came in with heavy blankets for her, she kept pulling on his arm and making noises. He ignored her as he wrapped a blanket around her body and set one on the ground for her to sit on. We didn’t have to wait long for Seethur to join us.

We stood in a circle, all wearing insulated spacesuits. They all looked at me with varying degrees of worry. Huzzar was openly anxious. His tail whipped behind him wildly, narrowly avoiding the piles of metal all around. Seethur was the most stoic. Still, he was shifting from foot to foot, a sure sign of worry. I’d never felt the weight of my position more than seeing their faces at that moment.

“Seph, how cold is it now?” I asked

“I checked before I walked over. We’re about to drop below two hundred sunvals.” His helmet partially obscured his face. I could still see the scarred scales around his eye crinkle. “The suits will maintain our body function down to a hundred sunvals. We will start feeling the effects of the cold after that.”

“If the ship drops to a hundred sunvals, how long before we go into hibernation?” I asked.

“It will vary for each of us. Huzzar and I will be asleep fairly fast. Seethur will last longer because he has more cold resistance naturally.”

“At the rate we’re going, how long before the ship hits a hundred sunvals?” Hix asked.

“Four hours.”

Hix’s tail rattled violently. Seethur’s head dropped back. Huzzar and I swore.

“We need to implement our emergency protocols,” I decided. There was no way I would let our nest die in the middle of space. I wasn’t about to leave the Crown drifting out here for any Susix to pick up, either. “If we get in our emergency pods now, we can coordinate a destination instead of letting the navigation system pick the closest planet.”

“There aren’t a lot of safe planets within range,” Hix pointed out. “We would be choosing between two rough locations. That’s *if* we arrived there. There’s a good chance our pods would be picked off before we hit the dirt.”

“And there’s no guarantee we would all make it there,” Seethur added.

“Our only other choice is to stay here, freeze to death, and let the Crown fall into someone else’s hands” There weren’t any good choices but at least the emergency pods would give us a fighting chance.

“Let’s not give up yet,” Hix argued. “Let me go out and check the hull with Seethur. Maybe I’ll be able to find something that got looked over.”

“We don’t have the time.” I wasn’t happy about our outlook. I would sacrifice a lot to keep our nest alive, even if it meant leaving the ship.

Seph lifted a hand. “I’m with Hix. I don’t want to abandon the ship unless we have to.”

“We wouldn’t be able to bring Hissy in the pods,” Huzzar whispered.

We all glanced at the pet. Her head whipped around as we all stared at her. My stomach turned. If we left in the emergency pods, we’d be leaving her behind to die.

I hung my head. I would choose my nest over a pet any day. I could live with that guilt if I had to. If it came down to it.

“Two hours,” I said, giving in. “We have two hours to find the problem and get a solution working. We’re gone if we can’t get the heat up and running in two hours.” I made sure to put as much venom into my words as I could. I needed my nest to know that this was non-negotiable.

Hix and Seethur barely acknowledged my order. They raced towards the back of the ship. I sent a prayer up that they would find something.

I turned to Huzzar and Seph. “Prepare for departure. Those two will take things to the last second. I want the pods stuffed to the scales with rations. I’ll take care of the Crown.”

I went to the secondary hiding spot Seethur had moved the Crown to. As I removed it from the secret panel inside the fesik’s room, I stared at it. The Crown was deceptively delicate. The bleach-white bones were thin and attractively curved. They looked like they would break if they bent. In reality, they were strong enough to provide a lot of flexibility.

In my hands, the interlaced bones draped loosely. When placed over a Royal Susix hood, the Crown would become taunt, highlighting the intricate pattern made by the gold wiring and glittering jewels. It felt heavy in my hands.

With a heart full of sorrow, I took the Crown to my room. If anyone was going to carry this weight, it would be me. My nest had already sacrificed so much. I tucked the Crown into

the side of my emergency pod. It was safe from jostling. The important thing was that if someone scanned our pods, they could pick it out by shape alone.

Hix was right. There were only two planets we could travel to with our pods. They weren't in opposite directions, but they were far apart. I put in the coordinates for the more dangerous of the two. I would go around to each of the others' pods and set them to go to the other planet. If the worst happened and another Susix found our pods, I would draw the fire. The rest of the nest would be flying far away. At least, I hoped that was what would happen. What other protections could I give them?

Chapter Fourteen

Cece

Something was wrong, very wrong. Half of the crew had spent hours tearing walls off of the ship. Wiring was scattered everywhere. At first, I hadn't known why they were destroying things.

Then, I noticed the cold. The ship was usually hot. Warm enough that I wore the least amount of clothing I felt comfortable wearing surrounded by aliens. The temperature started dropping as I watched Meyer and the cobra methodically searching for something. By the time everyone had gathered in the same place, it was getting downright cold.

The snake men were wearing spacesuits. They were form-fitting with narrow helmets and coverings for their tails. Seeing the suits made my anxiety ratchet up.

I wasn't sure what everyone was preparing for. No one had talked to me. No one had tried to gesture to me about anything. They were all focused on whatever was wrong. My mind went to the worst things I could imagine. I was half expecting the ship to start breaking apart.

It had to have been from the storm we had flown through. The ship had rocked and jerked for hours. The lights had gone out. I thought I had felt something hit the ship. Something must have broken during the hours we were tossed around space.

After a very tense meeting, the crew split up. The rattlesnake and the bald guy had raced off somewhere. The King Cobra had left the mess of metal and wiring with a determined stride. Meyer and the doctor had led me back to the hospital. They had started to pile things onto a floating cart. Once it was weighed down, they took it to the kitchen

and repeated the process. Then, they went to the storage area and did the same thing.

Once that was done, the pair walked to the crew's part of the ship. It was noticeably colder there. I followed them as they went into Meyer's room.

Meyer pushed away piles of things to make room for the cart. He wasn't very concerned with his stuff. Once he had cleared a path, he went over to his bed. He flipped open the button he had hit before. The one that had dropped his bed into the floor. This time, he lifted up the red button. Under it was a small blue rectangle about the size of a bottle cap. He pressed his thumb to the center.

The floor opened up, and the bed lowered down. This time was much slower than before. I inched forward. As the bed dropped, I saw a small chamber under us. Once the bed was fitted securely into the space, I could see panels and drawers lining the area. There was a computer panel at one end.

Meyer jumped onto the bed. He held his hands out as the doctor passed items to him. The pair worked for a few minutes putting things into the space. Once they were done, Meyer climbed out.

They went to everyone's room and did the same thing. By the third time, I realized that these might be the spaceship version of life rafts. They were stocking them with food, medical supplies, and necessities in preparation.

I grabbed the doctor's arm as they were filling the last one. I pointed to me and then to the life raft. With his helmet on, I couldn't see him very well. The visor was darkly tinted, allowing me only to catch his eyes at the right angle.

The doctor didn't nod his head. If he said something, I didn't hear it. His tail wrapped around my back and gave me a half-hearted squeeze. It did not comfort me.

We made our way back to the hospital area with an empty cart. By that point, the ship was freezing. My skin was starting to turn red from the cold. I wrapped the blanket I had been given more tightly around myself. I wasn't the only one

feeling it. I could tell that the snake men were slowing down. I had to be mindful of my pace. I kept having to stop myself from running into Meyer.

When we returned to the hospital, Meyer and the doctor headed for the computer. They had been checking on something frequently when we were in the room. Whatever the pair saw was not good. The doctor pointed at the screen, which made Meyer go ramrod straight. They argued back and forth about something.

This wasn't like the disagreements from before. They weren't yelling or flirting. They were discussing something intensely. At the end of it, they hug each other desperately.

They walked over to Meyer's bed and sat together under a blanket. They looked like they were trying to get as close as possible. The mood was somber. It set off every internal alarm I had.

I heard feet rushing down the hall. I raced to the door to see what was happening. The rattlesnake was running toward the other side of the ship. I knew it was him because his suit had a wider tail section than everyone else's.

I ran to follow him. He raced into the room with the video feeds. There were scrapes of metal scattered around it.

He ignored everything and dove for a hole he had made in the wall. It was in the same place we had shot goals a few days ago. The space was barely wide enough for his shoulders in the suit. He wriggled into it, using his tail to push his body as far as it would go.

I didn't know what to do. I watched his body as he worked with something deep inside the ship's framework. I felt anxious just watching. I didn't know what was happening, but I wanted to do something.

I strode into the room that had been torn apart. No one was in there. I had to suppress a shudder. It was colder than it had been earlier.

My feet were numb as I made my way back to the hospital. The ship was starting to feel like it was winter inside. I was

beginning to shiver.

Meyer and the doctor were still huddled under the blanket when I returned. I went over to the little pile of clothing at the foot of my bed and started layering everything. It didn't matter that the leggings were ripped or that the skirt went to my ankles. I was getting cold enough to know I wouldn't survive without more layers. It helped. I still wasn't warm.

I went to the bathroom. I turned on the sand bath. It was freezing cold. I wasn't sure why I expected it to be hot, but my stomach cramped as the full scope of the problem hit me.

Determined to warm up, I decided to join Meyer and the doctor under the blanket. I saddled up beside the doctor. He didn't acknowledge that I was there. I nudged him so he would open up the blanket. He didn't shift. I pulled the blanket, trying to force him to let me in.

He toppled to the ground. I stared at him, shocked. He didn't move. His body stayed in the half-bent position it had been in when he had been sitting on the bed.

"Doc?" He didn't respond.

I dove to my knees and turned his body over. With the suit on, I couldn't see anything. I couldn't feel if he had a heartbeat. I tried to tilt his head to look into the visor.

Wide, unmatching eyes stared right through me. My heart stopped beating. I couldn't breathe.

While I was frozen, the doctor's eyelids closed, then opened impossibly slowly. I gasped. He was still alive. I threw myself onto his chest. I couldn't hear or feel anything through the suit. Laying with my entire weight on him, I felt my body dip infinitesimally. Then, it rose again. He was breathing.

My head snapped towards Meyer. He hadn't moved either. He was curled into a small ball with the blanket gripped between covered hands.

I checked his eyes. It was harder to see them inside the shadow of his helmet. I pressed my head to his chest and my hand to his back. *Please breathe, please breathe*, I chanted

while I waited for any slight movement. I nearly dropped to the ground when I felt him inhale ever so slightly.

They were alive. They were both alive.

I stood up and raced toward the front of the ship. I didn't know where the King Cobra was, but the rattler couldn't have gone far.

I skidded to a halt inside the video feed room. The rattlesnake was still half inside the ship's wall. I knelt next to him so hard my knee cracked. I tugged on his leg.

He didn't budge.

I tugged harder. He didn't respond. My nerves were shot. I was in full panic mode. I shook him as hard as I could.

"Please, don't be dead. Please, no," I sobbed.

I grabbed his ankles and started pulling. He was massive. His body was dense and awkward. It felt like he got stuck in the tiny hole. I had to squeeze into the space with him and wrench his shoulder around before I could finally pull him free. Sure enough, he was breathing but not moving.

I started breathing erratically. I felt my fingers and legs begin to prickle as spots dotted my eyesight. My body started to weave as panic rose.

I didn't know what was happening. I didn't know why the crew was turning into living statues. Or why I wasn't being affected.

I forced myself to lay out next to the rattlesnake. I started taking deep breaths, holding them for a few seconds, then blowing them out of my mouth. I flexed my fingers and toes while I did. My vision started to return, and the prickles began to recede. Anxiety was still causing my heart to pound, but I wasn't on the verge of a panic attack.

After a few minutes, I sat up. I had to find the other members of the crew. There was a chance that the other two aliens were still mobile.

I started looking in every room as I made my way to the back of the ship. I found the King Cobra face down in the

hallway outside their rooms. He was ramrod straight. It looked like he had been crawling when he had frozen. I flipped him onto his back. His eyes were closed, but I felt his chest rise and fall when I put my hand on it.

I found my bald friend in the last room I checked. He was in the hangar. His body was propped against the door of the garbage disposal area.

I slumped against him when I felt him breathing. Seeing everyone lying out, unmoving, was freaking me out. I could feel myself going into shock. I kept trying to think. My brain wouldn't hold onto any serious thoughts. It just kept circling.

I had to do something. Anything to help wake up. So that I could start thinking critically.

I walked back to the hospital area. I grabbed the wheelchair the doctor had put me in before. I went to the video feed room first. I pushed the button that laid the chair out flat. Then I started the difficult process of tugging the rattlesnake onto the damned thing.

It was hard. If I had been thinking properly, I could have found an easier way to get him onto the thing. I wasn't, though, and this got my blood pumping. That helped clear the cobwebs from my brain and heat up my cold body.

I tried to rearrange him until he was in a comfortable position. Whatever had happened to him, he wasn't frozen solid. His legs and tail moved easily. As I was moving his arms, I noticed one of his hands was closed in a tight fist.

It took both of my hands to pry his open. At the center of his massive palm was a metal square. It looked like some kind of electronic. There was a thick layer of blueish material on one side. On the other side was a film with silver markings on it. They curved in an intricate pattern. There was a blob of black smearing one corner of the pattern. Whatever it was, I didn't want to lose it, so I wrapped a section of my t-shirt around it and tucked it into my bra.

When I got him back to the hospital area, I didn't bother taking him off of the bed. He was too difficult to move.

Besides, the hospital had enough beds for me to grab the other two aliens.

I went back and managed to wrestle the other two aliens onto the hospital beds. I lined everyone up in the open area near the table. Seeing all five of them lying still on white beds was eerie. The ship was too quiet without them moving around.

I zoned out, looking at them. I recognized that I was in shock. There was no other explanation for the sudden cut-off from my intense emotions.

The doctor's computer started making a shrill, beeping noise. I walked over to see what was going on. The screen was covered in strange symbols. At the center was a rectangle. There was a red line near the bottom of it. Below the line was an orange section. Suddenly, the orange section got smaller.

As I stood there looking at the orange shape, I became aware of the sweat drying on my body. After warming up while moving the crew around, my body began shivering in the cold. I shuffled from foot to foot to keep my muscles from seizing. The ship felt like a snowstorm had rolled in suddenly. With the temperature dropping, I was starting to slow down.

My head whipped towards the crew. I was so stupid. I rushed over to Meyer. I fumbled with the tab at the center of his spacesuit. My fingers were so cold that they had a hard time grasping it. I pulled it down just enough to stick my hand inside.

Meyer's body was cold. He felt like a rock on a winter day. I held my hand on his chest long enough to ensure he was still breathing. His chest rose and fell. The breaths were more spaced out than they had been earlier.

There were some frogs that froze during the winter. I had seen it in a nature documentary. When the weather turned, they would freeze solid. For months they became icicles. The frogs' bodies would go into a state of suspended animation until the weather got warm. Then, they would thaw and start moving again as if nothing had happened.

The ship was cold enough that I was starting to be seriously affected by it. My body was getting slower. I bet the snake men had felt the cold much more intensely than I had. Heck, Meyer had started to shut down after falling into that cold river. He'd only been in there for a few minutes.

I ran to my bed and grabbed all of the blankets stacked on it. I threw them over the crew. Then I ran to Meyer's stack and added them to the pile. There wasn't enough to cover everyone twice.

I ran down the hallway toward the storage area my bald friend had first taken me. I knew there was a blanket hidden in there somewhere. Hopefully, there was a whole closet of them. I started opening every drawer and panel in the room.

I was elbow-deep in a storage closet when the ship rocked. My hands slapped against the walls to keep myself upright. I waited. Nothing else happened.

During the storm, the ship had pitched wildly. We had been tossed around. Whatever had just happened wasn't been as violent.

I stepped out into the hallway, half expecting to see something. It was empty. There was a pit in my gut. I grabbed the single blanket I had found and then rushed to the hospital.

Everyone was still frozen. The snake men were still in the beds with their blankets. I checked their breathing and threw the last blanket over the King Cobra.

My hand was still on him when I heard it. It sounded like metal scraping on metal. It was quiet, muffled. Suddenly, the ship started to vibrate. I felt it through my socks. The floor shook like an earthquake was beginning.

I double-checked the crew before I went to try and find out what was happening. Out in the hall, the vibrations were more substantial. Halfway to the video feed room, I felt them get weaker. Turning around, I went in the opposite direction. I was near the kitchen when a deep rumble violently shook the ship.

I followed the sound to the hangar. Nothing looked different. I didn't see anything that could be making the noise,

let alone the violent shaking. A loud, echoing boom came from the garbage disposal area. I ran over to the door. I wasn't tall enough to see out of the window. I looked around. By the ramp was a stack of the boxes all of our purchases had come in. I grabbed one to stand on.

The small hall we had used to dispose of the trash didn't have much in it. There were a few white strips of fabric hanging along the walls. Other than that, it was bare. On the far end, there was another window I could see space out of.

My heart stuttered. There was something white on the other side of the exterior window. It looked like the mirror opposite of the hall in front of me.

A spark flared inside the door. It started at the left side of the outer door. While I watched, it rose slowly before stopping.

A figure appeared from the other side of the window, blocking my view.

I ducked down. Someone was out there. Call it instinct, or maybe I had watched too many crime dramas, but something inside me told me that I did not want to be seen. The thought made my heart pound.

This could be the space equivalent of the fire department I tried to ration. Maybe the crew had sent out a distress signal, and someone was coming to help. Or, these could be space pirates.

I slowly straightened. The trail of sparks had moved. It was nearing the top of the outer door. The figure was standing in front of the window now. It was wearing a suit similar to the ones the crew had on. This one was black, however. It made it difficult to define what their body looked like. Their helmet was focused on whatever they were doing. I could see that the visor was tilted away from me.

The creature was bigger than me. Its head reached the window. It wasn't as tall as my bald friend's. He was so tall that he had to crouch to see out of the window.

There was movement behind the being. Another body came up next to them. I saw them tilt their head toward whatever the other one was working on. The two started to chat. The newcomer went to lean against the window. In their gloved hand was a wicked-looking knife. It was so long that it extended past the opening. I dropped off of my perch.

“Not a rescue team,” I said out loud. I kept low as I backed away from the window. The last thing I wanted was to be seen.

Once I cleared the room, I started to run. I did not know who was trying to get into the ship. The specifics did not matter. Friendly people did not carry knives at the ready. Whoever they were, they were expecting to use that knife.

I skidded to a stop in the hospital area. These aliens had freed me, taken care of me, and made my life in space better. They might see me as a pet, but they had treated me well. I was loyal to them to the degree that I didn't want to see them stabbed.

I pulled my hair. “Now, how in the hell am I going to protect you?”

They couldn't defend themselves. They couldn't even move. Which meant I was going to have to hide them. The only problem was that there weren't many hiding spots on the ship big enough for them all. I could shove the doctor and Meyer in that tiny closet in the bug room. The other three were so big that it would be hard to find places to put them.

Then I remembered the trap doors under their beds. Everyone had one. I had even watched the doctor open them up and fill them with food. All I needed to do was hit a button. I got behind the first bed and started pushing it out the door.

I hit the walls as I raced the rattler toward his room. I was so glad I had explored earlier. I knew where everyone slept. I banged the hospital bed against the door, trying to maneuver it into his tiny room. I saddled the hospital bed right next to his. Then, I shoved, pushed, and shoulder his heavy body until he was on the bed in his room.

I stood to the side and slapped the big button on the wall. Just like the first time, the bed got sucked into the floor. It closed so quickly that it created a whoosh of air.

I left the hospital bed and ran back to get the next snake man. I moved quickly, getting everyone into their emergency hiding spot. My lungs were burning from the physical exertion.

As I was transferring the last one into their bed, the vibrations under my feet changed. They intensified before stopping abruptly. I held my breath.

A loud boom shook the ship. I felt the impact in my teeth. My brain was screaming at me to hide. I sprinted towards the bug room.

I heard feet on the metal before I got there. Someone was coming down the hall. Panicking, I slid into one of the open doorways. Before I could shut it, a dark shape walked past. I flattened my body against the wall.

A group of aliens walked past the door. I was too scared to shift. They were close enough that any movement would draw attention to me. I could barely see them out of the corner of my eye.

There were four of them. They were all wearing identical suits. They were relatively the same size too. They stopped outside of a small door.

One of them stepped into the room. The others stood outside, vibrating energy. I heard something get thrown. There was a long pause.

From where I was standing, if one of them looked back, they would be able to see my side. I focused on keeping my breathing quiet and shallow as I inched away from the open door. I craned my neck to keep an eye on them.

The first one came out of the room. They were on their knees. Balanced in their lap was a small metal box. The other ones started talking loudly as they crowded around the one kneeling. I lost sight of what was happening. There were too many bodies jostling around.

Suddenly, one of them screamed. The others jumped back and started shouting. The one kneeling frantically slapped at their face. They stood up and ripped the helmet off of their head. They tossed it down the hall.

As they threw it, I caught a whiff of the worst smell I had ever smelled. I knew exactly what it was; the rotten mush we had jettisoned out to space. I barely kept from gagging. It was so much stronger than before.

Without the helmet, I got my first look at the creatures that had invaded our ship. They looked like the doctor. They had the same face structure. They had similar coloring. Unlike the doctor, this alien had matching eyes.

They started spitting and yelling. The others began pointing and shouting back. The one without a helmet pointed to something further down the hall. Two of them peeled off. Then the snake man covered in rotten slime jerked their head in another direction and walked off. The last alien followed them.

I listened as they started destroying the rooms next to me. It sounded like they were tearing everything apart. Carefully, I peeked around the corner of the room I was in. No one was standing in the hall.

There was a sharp turn five feet away from me. It led to a long hallway. Halfway down that hall was the bug room. If I could make it there, I could hide. It had been the one place on the ship my bald friend hadn't been able to smell me.

I dipped back into my hiding spot. I listened to them as they moved around the rooms next to me. They sounded preoccupied. Taking a deep breath, I peeked out. The coast was still clear. Not bothering to wait, I sprinted towards the turn.

The socks helped insulate the sound of my frantic dash. I slid around the corner and kept going. I barely stopped myself from slapping the panel outside the door. I pressed it as quietly as I could.

I didn't bother going to the small closet in the back. There wasn't anywhere to hide in there. I moved aside the buckets

under one of the shelves. I wiggled under it. Then I used my foot to push the buckets back into place. There were bags filled with bark next to me. I shifted them until they covered the front of my body.

The door opened. I resisted the urge to scoot further under the shelf. I felt the thump of shoes hitting the floor. A pair of three-toed boots passed by. They walked towards the back of the room. There was a pause. I heard the metallic slink of the storage closet opening. The intruder shifted through the things inside. I heard the door close again.

They went through the room carefully. I heard them open a few bug cages and sift through what was inside. I listened to the work table drop down and then get put away.

The boots stopped in front of me. I felt their body crouch. They moved one of the buckets. I stopped breathing. I felt them touch the bag of bark. They shifted the other bucket aside. They didn't stand up.

I felt them poke the bag by my feet. There was another sharp jab at my shin. Something pierced my thigh. I sucked in a gasp of pain. The intruder didn't pause. They kept stabbing the bag in quick succession. They went up my body. One caught me on my shoulder. I bit my lip to keep from screaming.

The intruder didn't notice. They stood up and went to check under the other shelves. I laid my head against the floor and tried to breathe through the pain. It wasn't unbearable, but it was sharp.

I managed to block out the sound of them moving around the room. Once they had circled it twice, they made an angry noise. I heard a long scraping noise before something crashed into the ground. The sound of glass breaking made me flinch. The intruder screamed an angry sound before smashing more stuff.

I heard the cages above me slide as they were dragged off the shelves. The glass exploded right in front of me. The destruction went on forever. After everything had been thrown onto the ground, I heard them storm out of the room.

My body sagged. That had been close. I bit my cheek to keep from sobbing. The two stab wounds on my body started to ache. In the quiet of the room, I heard the bugs moving around.

Before, I had thought they were the most terrifying things I had ever seen. Their fat, furry bodies wriggling between tapered legs had made me scream. Everything was relative. After nearly being caught by violent snake aliens, I felt safe surrounded by the insects. The aliens had already ransacked this room. They wouldn't come back here. And I knew they wouldn't be able to smell me under the bugs' natural scent.

I let my body go limp under the bags of bark. My aliens were safe under the floors. The intruders could tear apart every other room, and we would all be safe. I could wait until they left.

I'm not sure how long I laid under the shelves. Long enough for my mind to lose track of time. The door opening startled me awake.

I heard someone step into the room. They stopped right inside. Something heavy landed near me. The footsteps went further away until the door closed.

I moved the bag of bark aside. The room was in utter chaos. There was broken glass and squirming bugs all over. I used the bags to keep my hands from getting cut as I poked outside of my hiding spot.

A flash of light caught my eye. At the center of the room was a cylinder. On one end, a yellow light blinked. As I watched, the light kept blinking.

Very carefully, I slid out from under the shelf. I crouched next to the cylinder. It was less than a foot long and thin. There was a cap on one end. I picked up a broken pole and poked it.

There was a sharp pop. Suddenly, the thing was on fire. I jumped back to keep from getting burned. The fire started to spread to the dark bark surrounding it.

I ran to the sink. There was a long hose attached to it. I turned the water on and started trying to put out the fire.

The fire had grown while I was running. It was moving across the room. I hit the edges of it and worked my way inwards. It sputtered and hissed but died out. I kept spraying the cylinder even though it was out.

My breath was coming in heaving pants. My heart was thudding against my chest. I was learning that there were a lot of different kinds of fear. This had been a livelier fear than when the alien had been poking around my hiding spot. My body was on fire with it.

I felt so naïve. It was stupid to assume the damn aliens would leave once they got what they wanted. They had broken into the ship with weapons and then destroyed everything. They weren't going to leave peacefully.

I turned off the water. Carefully, I walked over to the device. The outside was a charred mess. The light wasn't flashing any longer. I picked up a broken pole and poked it. Nothing happened.

I went to the door. It didn't have a window, so I just had to risk it. The door opened. I waited. When no one came to investigate, I poked my head out.

No one was in the hall. I saw a metal cylinder at the far end. It flashed yellow while I watched it. I looked down the other end. There was another cylinder.

They're going to set fire to the ship.

I went back into the bug room. I picked up one of the buckets. Luckily, they hadn't broken when they had been thrown around. I tip-toed over the broken glass and bugs to the storage closet. When I had hidden back there, I had seen a stick with a rounded sieve on the end.

The group invading the ship was not going to leave us alive. They were going to destroy the ship one way or another. No help was coming. It was up to me.

I took a deep breath and did the scariest thing I had ever done in space; I ran out into the hall. I barely glanced around for intruders as I sprinted toward the closest explosive. I used the sieve to put it into the bucket carefully. I tried to keep the

bucket stationary as I changed directions and ran toward the other cylinder.

As I turned the corner, I saw more explosives. I paused for a moment. I couldn't hear anyone coming, so I ran into the new hall. I opened the first door I came to. Sure enough, there was a flashing cylinder in it.

I had picked up six before I heard someone coming. I ducked into one of the small storage closets but no one passed by. Quickly, I looked around the corner. All four intruders were headed into the video feed room. They shut the door behind them.

As quietly as possible, I opened every door I passed by and picked up every explosive I found. My heart pounded as I ducked down low to pass by the room the newcomers were in. Inside the room my crew had torn apart, I found two cylinders.

I made it around the entire ship without getting caught. I went as fast as I dared. I didn't want to jostle the bucket in case it set off the damn things. I knew it was only a matter of time before the other aliens came out of the video feed room.

My bucket was full when I reached the hangar. There were half a dozen cylinders scattered around. I zigged and zagged while keeping an eye on the main door.

I paused at the garbage disposal room. The door was open. I looked inside to see what they had done to the thing.

The door on the other end was broken. There were jagged cuts all around it. The metal had been forced open. What was left was a gaping hole that led to another narrow entryway.

The two sections were similar. Both had two sets of doors with bare halls between them. They both had fabric straps hanging along the walls. The other end was dark. The light from the other end showed enough of the space that I thought it might be another ship.

I looked down at the bucket in my hand and got an idea. I needed to get rid of the explosives. I also needed to get the intruders off of the ship. Then I glanced behind me. No one was coming.

I hesitantly entered the entryway on my end. The room was intensely lit. It highlighted how empty the area was. As I walked through the twenty-foot passage, my muscles tensed, ready for something to go wrong and for me to be sucked into space. I checked behind me to make sure no one was coming. I stepped over the wreckage of the broken door.

A shiver went up my spine. This ship was noticeably warmer; it was shocking. At the other end of the entryway, I paused.

The door opened up to a narrow hall. There were no overhead lights. Thin strips of orange lights ran across the floor and ceiling. They gave the space an unsettling feeling.

I craned my neck waiting for a sign that someone was coming. I didn't hear any footsteps. I didn't trust my eyes in the dark space. The intruder's dark suits could blend into the shadows.

My ragged breaths were loud. They echoed between the passage. I kept my steps light as I walked further into the ship.

The bands of lights split in two. One kept going in the same direction. The other set took a sharp right turn. The new lights led into a space without a door.

The orange glow illuminated a small room. It was sparsely furnished. There was something mounted on the wall that I couldn't make out. In one corner was a mound of dark fabric.

I slunk into the space. My muscles kept tense, expecting something to jump out. The fabric mound was piled onto a dark platform. This far into the room, I could see that the lights continued into a more brightly lit area. There was a sink for sand set under a mirror. I looked around, wondering if this was a bedroom. Carefully, I placed one of the cylinders inside the bathroom. Then I put one in the center of the bed and covered it with the blankets.

Out in the hall, things were still quiet. I continued to follow the orange lights throughout the ship. There were four more bedrooms along the way that I hid explosives in.

The ship was much smaller than the one I was living on. There was a basic kitchen. I found a few storage closets. They had a hospital area too. It didn't have half of the equipment the other aliens' had. Everything was situated along the main hallway too.

As the path curved, I heard the hissing of a snake alien. I ducked into one of the open-frame doorways. I listened carefully. There was a cadence to the sounds that made me guess that whoever was on the ship was talking. The voice didn't come closer.

I set my bucket down. Keeping close to the wall, I went back into the hall. At the peak of the curve, there was a doorway. A light shone from it brighter than the other rooms. As I got closer, I heard the voice coming from it. Whoever it was, they kept talking. They didn't pause or start shouting.

Closing my eyes, I took a deep breath and held it. Leaning past the frame, I peeked inside. There was a massive screen displaying our video feed room. The video display in front of me turned with the mobility of head-mounted cameras. As the picture shifted, I saw three intruders standing around the room. Whoever was recording pointed at them, then towards something I couldn't see.

Silhouetted by the bright light was another snake alien. They weren't wearing the same suit as the rest of the intruders. Even in the dark lighting, I could tell that they were the same pale snake as the doctor.

They didn't notice me. They typed something along the armrest of their chair. I watched as the video screen on the other ship flashed red. Bright script popped up on the screen. The snake in front of me hissed. It was a sound I had heard from my crew when they were angry.

The snake typed something into the armchair. The screen on my ship flashed red again. They started talking rapidly. The person recording answered them in furious tones. The two argued back and forth.

While they were distracted, I went back and got the bucket. I traveled down the other side of the ship, placing nearly all of

the cylinders I had gathered. I backtracked to the video feed room. I had one explosive left.

The alien in the chair was still talking to the one on the ship. The hissing tones had gotten less aggressive.

I took a deep breath. These aliens intended to kill all of us. I had no way to negotiate with them or to get them out of my home. If I had more time, maybe I could have thought of something. I didn't have the luxury.

I would feel guilty about this later, but I refused to right then. I drew my arm back and threw the cylinder at the creature in front of me.

It sailed through the air and hit them. The impact rocked their head forward. The cylinder flared a bright yellow before it exploded. The snake screamed as shrapnel flew everywhere. I flinched as hot metal sliced all over my body.

The fire spread over the chair. The snake frantically jerked, trying to get free. Their body was strapped in, keeping them in the middle of the inferno.

The video feed jerked as the person filming started barking questions. I could barely hear them over the screaming. I saw them turn and race down the hall toward the back of our ship.

I turned to sprint back. Popping noises echoed in the space, followed by flashes of light. Something had activated the explosives. The dancing flames were unbearably bright in the dark ship. Something shattered next to me. My whole body flinched.

Loud yelling started coming up through the hallway quickly. I hid in one of the bedrooms without thinking twice about the danger. Flames were already overtaking the bed. The heat seared my eyes, forcing me to cover them. This close, the fire was. Sweat pickled my skin immediately.

I heard feet rush past me. I counted to ten. When I didn't hear anyone else, I sprinted to the connecting entryway. All I needed to do was to get through the two halls and seal the door.

I didn't notice the cold air as I hopped over the broken outer door. I stumbled, trying to clear the mass of metal. My knee hit the floor as my hands scrambled to pull myself to my feet.

A vicious hiss made my head snap up.

One of the intruders was standing at the doorway in front of me. Their black helmet hid their face. Their entire body tensed as they squared up, ready for a fight. They reached behind their back and pulled out a silver knife the length of my hand.

I didn't have any time to react.

They rushed me. In my panic, my feet struggled for purchase. They closed the distance impossibly fast. I was still on the ground.

Their knife arched outward, coming to strike my face from above. I dove forward under their outstretched arm. Our bodies collided awkwardly. I landed on my belly. I felt them stumble from the impact.

Rolling onto my back, I saw their mass coming at me. I kicked up my feet. Instantly, the weight drove my knees back. The snake pressed the advantage. They stabbed down, trying to bury their knife into my chest. I screamed, leveraging them off of me before the hit could land. They hit the ground only a foot away.

I scabbled across the floor. The entrance to my ship was eight feet away. A hand grabbed my ankle. I shrieked.

The snake had lifted the visor on their helmet. Their black eyes shone with violence. They raised a lip. Against their pitch-black maw, white fangs shone. As they dragged me closer, I saw my terrified face reflected in their eyes.

My free foot hammered into their chest over and over again. They grunted with each hit. They didn't let go; their grasp tightened. My hands clawed against the ground, desperate for something to hold on to.

They wrestled their body over mine. I went wild. My hands latched onto the arm holding the knife. I struggled against their advantage, desperate to keep the blade from plunging down.

They ripped one of my hands away and kneeled on my elbow. I cried out but kept struggling.

They tried to get my other hand to release theirs. My body bucked violently, making it difficult for them to grip my wrist.

My other hand flailed, trying to get free. My arm bent under their knee, trying to hurt them somehow. I touched something cold. My hand snapped around it, and it came loose. Not caring what it was, I pulled my arm back as much as possible and hit them.

A popping sound was almost simultaneously followed by burning heat. I screamed. Suddenly, I wasn't fighting the intruder; I was fighting to escape the pain.

They screamed and leaped away from me. I used my upper body to drag myself away from the heat. My skirt was on fire. I ripped it off my body.

I quickly glanced at the burning pile of fabric. A metal cylinder was partially obscured. I had grabbed an explosive. The thing had been attached to the alien's hip.

The intruder desperately hit their leg, trying to extinguish the fire that had spread to their suit. They shot up and spun around. They staggered toward their ship.

Three silver explosives hung along a strip of fabric around the hip. I stared in horror as the fire licked up their body closer to the cylinders.

Everything slowed down. I flipped over and started sprinting for the open door behind me. I tripped over the frame, desperate to get out of the hall. A deafening explosion rocked me forward. The heavy metal door hit the wall and slammed shut, catching my leg. It muted the screams coming from the entry.

I scrambled to see what was going on. I jumped up to look into the window. Jagged metal bent outwards into space. In an instant, a black opening appeared. My feet barely hit the ground before I jumped back up. The black gap had expanded, vacuuming everything toward it.

The intruder slid across the ground towards the hole. I lost sight of them as I dropped to the floor. When I jumped up again, they were gone. The space connecting the two ships was being torn apart.

I felt the door start to rattle. Grabbing the massive valve, I tried to turn it. The metal was heavy. I braced my feet and gritted my teeth.

“Come on, shut, damn it,” I screamed.

The metal groaned and started to twist. I felt something slide inside the door. I turned the valve until I couldn't move it anymore. My body sagged against the metal. My arms caught on the handle, keeping me from hitting the floor. I hung there, breathing deeply.

My brain started to catch up to my body. I began to sob. I let go of the handle, and my knees hit the floor. I folded in on myself, crying.

I stayed on the ground for a long time. Everything hit me. I missed my dogs. I missed my boring life. I had never experienced violence before I'd be abducted. Now, I had killed a living creature and been attacked. Was I a horrible person at my core?

The cold broke me out of my stupor. Our ship was freezing. It was even worse than before. My breath was visible. The temperature made my aches and pains intensify.

I forced myself to stand up. I paused, staring at the window on the door. Using the box from before, I looked out.

Dark, inky space extended past a ruined hall. The other ship was nowhere to be seen. Pieces of metal and hardware floated across the ragged opening. The white fabric attached to the walls waved slowly without gravity to hold them down. The movements were deceptively calm compared to the hellfire from before.

I turned my back on the scene. I didn't want to think about what had just happened. I just hoped that no one else would bother us.

Chapter Fifteen

Cece

I dragged myself toward the hospital area. The entire place was trashed. There was broken equipment on every inch of available space. Someone had ripped up all of the blankets.

I had gone there wanting to clean and patch up the stab wounds and scratches I had received. There was no way I could find anything in the mess. After staring at it for a moment, I turned and walked into the bathroom.

The mirror was broken. The privacy screen had been slashed. The door to the giant sand bath was hanging off of its hinges. My shoulders hung.

I went back into the main room. I wrapped pieces of torn blankets around my feet and picked my way over to the soaking tubs. Both of them had cracks in the basin. I turned on the water and started undressing. I needed to keep the wounds on my leg and shoulder from getting infected. If that meant using freezing water, then so be it.

As I took off my shirt and bra, something hit the ground with a ping. At my feet was the piece of equipment that I had tucked into my clothing. That felt like ages ago.

Things had gone downhill after our ship had gone through that rough patch. The rattler had been put into that strange domed chamber in the back of the hospital area. Then, the heat went out. Everyone had been frantic after that. Knowing now that they would freeze solid without it, I understood why they had been acting that way.

A few hours ago, watching them tear apart the ship had filled me with confused dread. I thought back to the conversation between the doctor and Meyer. It had been so somber. They had known what was going to happen. It was

touching and tragic that they had spent their last few moments together.

The others had been alone. My bald friend must have been in the now ruined hallway in the hangar. I hadn't noticed anything around him that explained what he was doing. The King Cobra had been in their sleeping area. And the rattler had shimmied himself into a wall, hand frozen around the little thing I was holding.

I remembered him sprinting towards the video feed room. He had been frantic to get back there. So frantic that he had used his last moments of mobility to get there.

I turned it over in my hand. I couldn't tell what it was. It was as foreign to me as the rest of the equipment on the ship. It was an iridescent blue with very intricate markings on it. My thumb passed over the black blob stuck to the corner. It didn't match any of the other parts of the square.

With the piece still clutched in my hand, I put my clothes back on. I walked over to the video feed room. I went to the section of the back counter that was black. This was the thing that the rattlesnake had used to find where to put his new parts.

I set the small square into the center of the black countertop. I touched the top corner that he had used to turn it on. I held my breath, hoping that was all it would take to start working. A blue ring appeared along the outside of the black space. I exhaled. The blue light got smaller and smaller as I watched. The ring shrank slowly. I shifted from foot to foot, trying to stay warm while I waited. The blue ring stopped on the outside of the part. It turned gold. A mechanical hum came from the other side of the room.

One of the drawers opened. I went over to it. The bottom of the drawer lifted up and to the side. Another layer lifted up and forward. Finally, a foam liner rose and stopped. In one corner was a part nearly identical to the one I had placed on the black surface.

Carefully, I plucked it out of its casing. It looked almost exactly like the one the rattler had in his hand. I flipped it over.

The back side was missing the black smear. The silver pattern was perfect.

I put it into my bra again. I didn't have pockets, so it would have to do. I eyed the hole that the rattler had made inside our goal box. It was big enough to fit his broader shoulders. The inside was dark. I didn't have a flashlight. The only one I had seen since being in space was the headlamp the doctor had used, which would be nearly impossible to find in the wreckage of the hospital area.

I wriggled into the torn-out entrance. Less than two feet in front of me was a wall. Glancing to either side, I saw that the gap followed the curve between the rooms. If I wanted to, I could crawl along the ship's curve. I filed that information away for the next time I needed a hiding space.

The area was dark. The only light was coming in from behind me. I flattened against the floor, trying to allow as much light in as I could. Then, I started looking around.

The rattlesnake hadn't been very far inside the wall. I had only pulled out his upper body. Hopefully, he hadn't frozen while crawling out of the narrow passage. I wouldn't be able to see very far down the gap.

I didn't see any loose wires. I couldn't see any section of the internal electronics that looked like it had been tampered with. I let my head bang against the floor.

I was out of options. *We* were out of options. Something was very wrong with the ship. I wasn't as susceptible to the cold as the snake aliens, but I would freeze to death if the temperature kept dropping.

I flipped onto my back. The inside of the passage was as tall as the ship. Inch by inch, I stood. I couldn't see much. It was too dark.

I went back to the entrance. Starting near the floor, I put both palms onto the wall. I could feel the difference in wires and the hard edges of electronic parts. I went impossibly slow. I paused and prodded sections that felt like they might be the same shape as the part under my clothes. I took five steps into

the wall. Then I turned around and started heading back towards the entrance.

My hands stuttered after two feet. About eighteen inches off of the ground, there was an indent. That in and of itself was unique. I had yet to feel a hole in the wall. My left hand cemented to the wall, keeping my place. I used two fingers on my right hand to trace the shape of the indent. It was only three inches wide and two inches across. Keeping my left hand on the spot, I crouched until I was inside the dim shaft of light coming in from the entrance. I pulled the new part out. It was roughly the same size.

I stood and faced the intent. Slowly, I tried to fit the part into it. It was like playing with a puzzle in the dark. The part didn't quite fit. I flipped it around and tried again. It left a small portion of the piece sticking out of the hole. I turned it back the way I had it before. I tried to press it gently into space. It fell back into my hand. I huffed out a frustrated breath. I turned it around completely and tried again. Something clicked. The part stayed in place.

I remained in the wall. I don't know what I was expecting. It felt like something should light up if it started working. I looked down the narrow passage. Nothing else was lit up. Maybe it wouldn't, either.

I felt so disappointed. I wanted this to fix the ship. I wanted the tiny part to solve all of my problems. Depressed, I crawled back out of the hole.

I went right back to the hospital area. The doctor's computer had been smashed. There was no way to see if the graph registered a temperature rise.

Careful to avoid broken glass, I picked up the brown bandages I had seen the doctor use on the crew's cuts. My shoulder and thigh were throbbing. I went back to the water tub. It felt futile to clean them with the temperature still dropping. What else was I supposed to do?

I stripped out of my clothes again. There was a small puncture on my shoulder. It was hard to see without the mirror.

When I pressed around it, I swore. The pain was bad but not unbearable.

The puncture on my thigh was shallow. The bruise around it was the most annoying part. It was already dark and swollen. Now that I was staring at it, it felt way worse. I was going to be limping tomorrow.

Not wanting to have exposed skin for long, I went to turn on the tub. My hand hovered over the tap for the hot water. I closed my eyes and turned it on.

It felt like a glacial river. I didn't keep my hand under it for very long. I forced my brain to ignore the feeling of deep apathy that threatened to overwhelm me. I focused on wetting a strip of a ripped blanket and wiping away the blood on my body. I tried to go as quickly as I could. Once I was clean, I wrapped my thigh and did a poor job of wrapping my shoulder.

After I was done, I had no energy. I shook out a few blankets and made a nest on the floor. Somehow, I fell asleep.

It was a horrible rest. The blankets barely kept me warm. I would drift off for a few minutes only to be woken up by my body shivering. I refused to open my eyes as I tossed and turned. At some point, I fell into a deeper sleep.

I woke up but didn't bother moving. My mind skipped over every horrible moment from the day before. I dug my palms into my eyes, trying to rub away the memory of that alien being sucked out into space. Finally, I sat up. If I didn't start moving, I would keep replaying the scene over and over again.

I went into the bathroom. I pointedly ignored the broken mirror. The sand sink hadn't been destroyed. It emerged from a section of the wall rather than being mounted on it. That might have been the only reason it had been spared.

I turned on the faucet, waiting for the basin to fill with tan sand. I hissed, jerking my hand back when I touched it. The sand burned.

Quickly, I shut it off. My hand hovered over it. Heat radiated off of it. Slowly, I put my hand in the sand. My hands

were so cold that the sand burned them.

I ran toward the tub. I turned on the hot water. The stream wasn't steaming like it usually did. I could tell that it was warmer. I screamed and started dancing.

Excited, I sprinted to the crew quarters. I jumped over piles of broken furniture in the hallways. My heart was in my throat as I practically tripped into Meyer's room. I barely noticed the destruction as I fell to my knees beside the spot over his hidden bed. I shoved piles of torn clothing to clear the area. I started knocking on the floor. Nothing happened. I knocked again and put my ear to the ground. I couldn't hear a reply.

I went over to the button on the wall. I pushed it. The bed didn't rise out of the floor. I slapped it again. It didn't work.

I went to each room and did the same thing. I cleared the debris off of their hiding spots. I knocked on the floor. When none of them knocked back, I tried pushing each of the red buttons. They didn't do anything.

Disappointed, I went back to the hospital area. By that point, the ship was noticeably warmer. There were no goosebumps on my arms. The water coming out of the faucets was almost scalding too.

Trying to stay positive, I decided to treat myself to something I hadn't done since I had been abducted. I took a real shower. Well, almost a real shower.

The tubs were cracked to the point that they wouldn't hold water. I went into the kitchen and grabbed one of the largest containers I could comfortably lift, and took it back to the hospital area. I took off all of my clothing and got into the tub. Using the container, I scooped water over my head. Then, I scrubbed everything. I washed off all of the grime from yesterday. I scratched my scalp within an inch of its life. Once I was done, I dried off and made a towel toga. I threw another towel over my shoulders for warmth. Then, I cleaned my clothing. The leggings looked more like ripped tights when I was done. They smelled much better, which was nice.

A hand slapped down on my shoulder. I screamed, whipping around. My hand struck out.

My bald friend got hit right in the gut. He groaned, doubling over. He didn't let go of me. He pulled me into a fierce hug.

"Oh my god," I sobbed, clinging to him. "I thought you were dead."

His body was cold against mine. I didn't let go. I held onto him and cried. He didn't move either. His tail wrapped around me stiffly. The longer we stayed like that, the warmer he got.

Eventually, he pulled back. He looked around the room, taking it in for the first time. It was easy to decipher the confusion on his face. He looked down at me and started talking.

I shook my head. "It wasn't me. Some of your kind broke in and tried to kill everyone. They destroyed most of the ship in the process."

His head bobbed back and forth in a move I had started to think of as their version of a shrug. I stepped back. I put two fingers in front of my mouth like fangs, then hissed loudly. I used my hand to pretend I had a tail. Then I reenacted someone knocking things off of tables.

He got more confused the longer I played charades. He grabbed my hand and led me out of the door. His movements were slow. I realized his body might take a while to get back up to speed.

As we walked to the front of the ship, he took the time to look at all of the damage that had been done. It was extensive. Some of the walls had holes from things being thrown at them.

When we walked into the video feed room, it was easy to tell that the heat was back on. The room was much smaller than the hospital. It felt almost comfortable compared to the areas we had just walked through.

My bald friend practically collapsed into the main chair. He typed something into the armrest painfully slow. A split screen

showing about a dozen different views popped up. He typed something else in, and each screen blinked to life.

Every section showed a different part of the ship. It was almost like seeing the CCTV security footage. There were recordings for the area in the back of the ship, the hospital area, the bug room, and every bedroom.

The videos started playing. There were small white symbols in the right corner of the whole thing. As the videos played, the symbols changed.

I watched the moments leading up to everyone freezing. I saw Meyer and the doctor's argument from a different angle. It made my stomach sour seeing it again in a new light. I watched the King Cobra fall to a knee outside of his room. Even after his body hit the floor, he tried to drag himself towards his friends. The rattler was the most anticlimactic. He crawled into the wall and just stopped moving. In the hangar, I saw my bald friend stagger out of the now-destroyed hallway. He shut the door and then fell against it.

It was hard to watch after that. None of what I saw was a surprise but seeing how close things had been made my body shake. When I watched myself run into the bug room, I finally decided I didn't need to see the rest. I put my head down and did my best to ignore the flashing lights.

Chapter Sixteen

Seethur

I looked over at Hissy again. I couldn't stop staring even as the security feed showed me shocking things. She wasn't at all what we had assumed she was.

I went back to watching what was playing in front of me. On the bridge camera, I saw Hissy walk right over to the organizer plate. Hix installed it after our first rotation in space. She placed something on top of it, turned it on, and waited. Once it had identified the part, it opened the drawer containing the replacement. Hissy walked over and picked it up. She looked at it for a moment. Then, she crawled into the hole Hix had made in the wall. She disappeared. I sped the feed up until she crawled back out.

I watched the feeds until I got to the part where I had woken up. My cold resistance had kept me moving longer than my other nestmates. It also meant that I was the first to wake up once the heat started working again. Coming back into consciousness had been surprising. As I started to freeze in the cargo bay, my last thought had been grim. I hadn't expected to wake up.

Opening my eyes and seeing the lid to my escape pod, I assumed someone had managed to drag my body to safety. I had not expected to find myself on our ship. I had not expected to watch our pet defend our ship against a treacherous nest of treacherous Thusi.

The security feed stopped when it got to the present moment. In a daze, I got out of the chair and walked back to the organizer plate. Sitting at the center of the black plate was a small power circuit. There were dozens of them throughout the ship. I wasn't sure what the exact number was. I didn't

know the ship's electronics as well as Hix. I was willing to bet this one was situated along an obscure section of the heating line.

I picked the small part up. On the back was a streak of black. It looked similar to the part I had found behind the freezer cabinet. Based on what I had just seen, I was willing to bet that the nest of Thusi had sabotaged the heating. I was hoping Hix could tell me more when he woke up.

I looked at Hissy. She was so much more than we had assumed. I had watched her hide us in our safety pods and evade detection. She had been observing us and learning the entire time she had been on the ship. She knew how to operate the safety pods, the decompression chamber, and the organizer plate.

She had acted quickly when she realized how dangerous the firebombs were. I had followed her along the security feed as she gathered them all. I barely kept from yelling when I saw her take them across the decompression chamber to the Thusi's ship.

My hearts stopped the entire time she had been off-screen. I knew Hissy had survived whatever she had done on their ship. It was still hard to watch.

That had been nothing compared to watching her fight off that frozen bastard in the chamber. She was not made for fighting. It had been Versetti's own luck that had saved her.

I went back to the captain's chair. I scanned the space around our ship. I picked up on a ship behind us. It registered that there was critical damage to its structure. The computer wasn't picking up on any living creatures on board. The ship didn't have any power. It was floating in space.

I walked over to where she was standing. I gripped both of her hands in mine. I bowed my head over them. "Thank you. Thank you for saving us. You have earned my deepest gratitude."

She made the same noises she always did. This time I heard a cadence to them that I had not noticed before. I had ignored

so many signs that she was more than just a pet.

“Let’s go wake up our nest. Then we will work on understanding each other,” I dropped one hand but kept the other clasped in mine.

I led her to the crew’s quarters. We went into Vesex’s room first. I walked over to the emergency button. I flipped it up, revealing the thumbpad underneath. “This is the release switch,” I explained. I knew she couldn’t understand me, but I wouldn’t treat her like an animal anymore. She wasn’t. I bit the tip of my finger and pressed it into the small pad. “They’re keyed to our biometrics. We’re the only ones who can activate them. You couldn’t have brought the beds up.” She had tried. That was huge for me.

The floor over the safety pod opened. Vesex’s bed rose slowly up. Royal Susix were large by nature. They required a lot of heat to stay active. After going under, Vesex would need time to warm up before he started moving again.

We pulled Hix up next. He was nearly as large as Vesex. After expending so much energy healing, he would probably be the last member of the nest to get on his feet. Once I had everyone above the floor, I would check to see if the healing chamber was still functioning. The damned Thusi had thrashed everything they could get their hands on. There was a good chance it was damaged beyond use.

Seph and Huzzar were the last ones I pulled up. They were smaller. Their bodies were more susceptible to heat changes. It was a blessing in moments like this. Seph was already twitching by the time I got Huzzar into a more comfortable position.

Seph groaned as I pulled his helmet off. His eyes blinked slowly, trying to wake up. “What the veck happened?”

I helped pull him up. “Our heating was sabotaged, and we all went into hibernation.”

He bent forward, working out his stiff muscles. “Oh yeah, I remember now.” He looked around. “How did I get into the

safety pod? The last thing I remember was the temperature dropping suddenly.”

I laughed without humor. “I could try and explain. You wouldn’t believe me.” He opened his mouth to argue. I cut him off. “Don’t worry. Once everyone is awake, I will show you the security feed. Hopefully, we can let Hissy explain for herself after that.”

That reminded me. I looked back. Hissy was hanging by the door. She was wringing her hands impatiently. “Come on over, Hissy. Seph is up and could use the attention.”

At my nod, she walked over. I pat the bed next to him. She sat down and grabbed his hand.

Seph let out a long groan. “Oh, that feels so good. She is so warm.” He practically fell into her, trying to wrap his arms around her.”

I pushed him upright. “You might want to ask her before you start stealing her warmth.”

He gave me a confused look but turned to her, “Hi, Hissy. Did we scare you? Come here.” He held his arms open.

Hissy lunged forward, wrapping her arms around him. Seph rocked her back and forth. After a moment, he unzipped his suit, leaving him in regular clothing.

He sighed, “That’s better. Now, I can get warm.”

“Aw, I’m missing out on cuddling with the heat source,” Huzzar slurred as he stumbled into the room. He didn’t pause as he fell on the bed, half onto Hissy.

Hissy opened her mouth and made a huffing sound. She brushed her hands through his messy braids. Huzzar let out a long hiss.

I left them to raid the med bay. The Thusi rogues had smashed all of the items on the countertops. Luckily, Seph hadn’t been able to reorganize after we had exited the Graveyard. It meant that most of our medical equipment was locked away in the cabinets. They were practically

indestructible. I could see where they had been struck. None of them had broken.

I didn't bother cleaning up anything. I picked my way over to the first aid cabinet. I grabbed as many heat packs as I could carry. I needed everyone up and functioning as quickly as possible. We were too vulnerable. We needed to make a plan soon so we could fix our ship and get back home before someone else attacked.

I also wanted to get to the bottom of what, or who, Hissy was. I needed my Prime to do that. And I needed Seph to help if Vesex approved my plan.

I went to Vesex and slapped a few heating pads along his body. His fingers twitched as I activated them. Hix didn't move when I turned them on. I went back into Vesex's room.

It only took a few minutes for him to start stirring. I stepped next to the bed. His body jerked, trying to jump up. I put my hand on his chest and pressed down.

"Easy," I hissed. "They're safe. We're all safe."

His body fell back. His breathing was labored and heavy. "What happened?"

"I don't have the full story, but the temperature dropped suddenly. We didn't have as much time as we assumed. From the security footage, it looks like a nest of Thusi knocked out our heating. They boarded the ship and almost succeeded in killing us."

Vesex's hand shot out blindly. He reached under his bed, searching for something. His body sagged in relief. He pulled the Crown out from its hiding spot. "They didn't get it," he breathed. His eyes opened to slits. "How are we still alive?"

"Hissy," was all I said. He looked confused. I shook my head. "I need to show you the security footage. I've been waiting for everyone to wake up." My tail twitched. I couldn't predict how Vesex would react to what had happened. He was obsessed with the nest's safety. This would be a shock.

He gave me an incredulous look but held his tongue. "Who is awake?" I told him. "Give me a few more minutes, and I'll

be ready to head to the bridge.

I went to check on Hix. He was lying in his bed groaning. His arm was thrown over his face.

“I feel like I fell out of a tree,” he complained.

I chuckled. Hissy had practically yanked him out of the ship’s wall and then shoved him onto a med bay bed. I would be surprised if he weren’t covered in bruises.

He peeked out from under his arm. “Did I fix the heating?”

I shook my head. “You solved the problem and were about to replace the broken part when you froze.”

He groaned, “I was hoping I had done it. I can’t remember a thing. My brain is not working right now.”

I went over to help him sit up. “You’ll start remembering things once you get warm. Do you think you could walk to the bridge?”

He shook his head slowly. “My legs feel like rocks. I can barely stay upright.”

I wheeled over the bed Hissy had used to move him. Between the two of us, we managed to get him on it. I pushed him into the hall. Everyone was out there already. Huzzar and Seph were stretching out, trying to warm their muscles. Vesex was braced against his door.

Hix looked around at the state of the ship. “What in frozen Thesius happened here?”

“We were boarded.”

“By pirates?” He yelled.

I shook my head. “By a nest of vecking Thusi.” I held my hand up. “Don’t ask. I don’t know much, and once you see the security footage, you’ll know as much as I do.”

Hix stared at me. He swore viciously. “I vecking remember. Someone shorted our heating line. One of the scorch marks on the hull was from a weapons-grade electronic disrupter. It blended in with the damage we took in the Graveyard.”

We all stared at him, shocked.

“How do you know that?” Vesex asked urgently.

Hix’s tail vibrated. If he were warmer, it would have been going mad. “When Seethur and I went out to check the hull, there was a random scorch mark at the front of the ship. It wasn’t near any of the other damage we had sustained. It wasn’t close to any of the other burns we had gotten during the electrical storms. I would know,” he growled. He had been connected to the ship at the time. He had been intimately aware of what had happened to the ship. He made a disgusted face. “Something about it was strange. It didn’t look like any other marks we’ve gotten flying through the Graveyard. They’re always long, black strikes that drag across the hull. This mark was a perfect circle. Like someone had vecking shot at us.”

Vesex’s tail struck the ground. He looked at me sharply, “Show me the footage.”

We all crowded into the bridge. Vesex took the captain’s chair while the rest of us found spots around him. I pulled up the feed from yesterday and queued it to the moment Hix and Seph froze.

“Before I press play, I want to say that what you’re about to see is,” I struggled to find the right word, “crazy.” I looked over at Hissy. She was fidgeting anxiously. “When I woke up, Hissy was in the med bay surrounded by broken equipment.” Seph swore. He was going to lose it when he saw the damage. “I was confused and alarmed. So, I came here to find out what had happened.” I shook my head. “I have more questions now than I did before. One thing I do know is that Hissy saved us. I want everyone to remember that while we watch this.”

My nestmates were staring at me with a myriad of emotions. It was all underlined with confusion. I pressed play and then went to stand between Hissy and the rest of the nest.

It wasn’t any easier to watch a second time. I got angry that someone had come onto our ship and violated our home. It was rage-inducing to know that they had orchestrated the entire thing.

I saw things I had missed before. The nest had gone straight for our safe. The one we had Sal make specifically for the Crown. They knew exactly where to find it.

The moment Hissy had run into the fesik's room, one of the Thusi had been turning the corner. She had been so close to getting caught. They would have smelled her instantly if the other nest had taken off their helmets.

Seph gasped when he watched one of the invaders stab Hissy's hiding spot with their knife. He got up and started fussing over her. She knew what he was trying to do because she pulled her towel to the side. On the ball of her shoulder was a bandage. When Seph tried to pull it off, she shrugged out of his grip.

I glanced at Vesex. He watched the interaction with predatory intelligence. He was seeing Hissy in a new light.

When the Thusi nest started throwing firebombs all over the ship, Huzzar made a panicked noise. It only got louder when he saw Hissy pick them up. They were notoriously volatile. It was common for them to explode from mishandling. It was what made them excellent destructive devices.

“What are you doing?” Seph yelled at the screen when Hissy crossed through the airlock. I wasn't sure what had happened on the other ship. She left with a bucket full of firebombs and came back without it, so I could guess what she had done with them. The room was tense as we waited for Hissy to walk back into view.

I saw a few shoulders sag as she entered the airlock again. The relief was short-lived. The room went silent when the Thusi blocked her path. Our nest erupted into shouts and hisses the instant he rushed her. Only Vesex remained silent.

We split our focus between the camera in the airlock and the one in the cargo bay as the firebombs on the Thusi's belt went off. The explosions damaged the connector between the two ships, creating a hole into space.

Things went quickly after that. The vacuum killed the Thusi. It destroyed a lot of the inner structures of the airlock too. Luckily, the area had been designed to withstand catastrophic events. The internal door was heavy for a reason. It acted as a backup measure.

I didn't watch the rest. Seeing Hissy break down again was too hard. I didn't care about her fixing the ship. It wouldn't answer the pressing questions I had. Only Hissy could do that.

When it was over, Vesex shut off the screen. Everyone stood in silence for a few minutes. Vesex was the one to break it.

He turned around in the chair and pinned Huzzar with a look. "I want you to tell me everything surrounding how you found," he stared at Hissy for a moment, "this thing."

Huzzar told us about breaking into the Petriole King's throne room. He detailed the cage she was in and how she had responded to him. Listening to how she had kept him from being found after he broke a vase, I felt stupid for dismissing the behavior. That, more than her jumping into the river to save him, should have tipped us off that she was not some mindless animal. None of the animals we had encountered had that level of deceptive reasoning.

After Huzzar finished, Vesex stared at Hissy. His hood flexed and relaxed constantly. It was the only sign that he was agitated. He turned to Seph. "I want you to inject her with a translator."

Seph's jaw dropped. "We only have one. I have it in case one of our neuro-comms becomes corrupted."

Vesex nodded once. "I want you to use it on her."

Seph gave me a loaded look before turning back to Vesex. "The process is not comfortable. We won't know if it will even have the desired effect. If it doesn't work, I'll need to remove it, or else her body could reject the implant."

Vesex's expression didn't change. "Thank you for detailing your concerns. I believe the risks are worth the possible outcome."

Seph hissed out a sigh. “I’ll need to survey the med bay. This might not be possible. If the injection equipment was damaged, there’s nothing we can do right now.”

Seph grabbed Hissy’s arm and went to take her to the med bay. Huzzar followed them. Vesex, Hix, and I hung back.

Vesex’s head dropped back. “What did he bring onto our ship?”

Hix shook his head. “I don’t know, but it’s sentient. I would bet my tail on it.”

I agreed.

Vesex turned to me. “How extensive is the damage?”

I shrugged. “I haven’t had a chance to go through the ship. Based on what I saw on the security feed, the airlock is ruined. The fesik room might be trashed. I’m not sure if any of them survived exposure to the cold. We probably lost a lot of the merchandise we bought. I won’t know until I have a chance to clean up.”

“How did those vecking bastards manage to knock out our heating?” Vesex asked Hix.

“If my guess is right,” Hix began, “the weapon they used is military grade. It targets a ship’s electronic system. They’re accurate and subtle. They overload power circuits slowly as the energy passes through. They hit our ship right over a heating circuit. When we reconnected our power supply, the circuit began to malfunction.” He lifted a lip, “I would be willing to bet that they also shot our computer system to keep it from registering that there was a problem.”

“How were they able to do that? We didn’t pick up on any ships in the area.” Vesex questioned.

Hix shook his head. “I don’t know where they did it. The only time we weren’t searching for ships was inside the Graveyard. As for how they were able to do it? They would have needed to have access to our ship’s schematics.”

“Which means the Serex Nest has shared our blueprints,” Vesex surmised. His body drooped, exhausted. “We need to

have a very serious meeting about the future.” He sighed.
“Let’s go see what Seph has managed to get together.”

Seph had cleared one of the beds. The floors were clean of debris around it. He had a small tray with instruments on one end of the bed. Huzzar was sitting next to Hissy on the other end. Seph had pulled a broken chair over to the bed. There was a pile of utensils and eating implements on it.

Seph glanced up from his preparations when we walked in. “I’m almost ready to implant the translator. I’ll need someone to hold her while I do it. She can’t move during the procedure.”

I went over and picked her up. I set her onto my lap. I didn’t wrap my arms around her just yet. I kept my body lax so she wouldn’t guess what we were planning.

Seph prepared his needle. Before neuro-comms became popular, Susix used translator chips to communicate with other aliens. They were considered inferior now. Some parts of the universe still use them.

Seph started to talk to me. He avoided looking at me to keep Hissy from catching on to what we were doing. “Seethur, I need you to keep her still. The injection should only take a few heartbeats. The translator could be damaged if she moves, and we don’t have a replacement.”

“Just count me down, and I will make sure she stays still,” I assured him.

He kept his body hidden behind Huzzar as he cleaned the translator. He walked around the backside of the bed, so he was coming behind Hissy. Huzzar stepped in front of her. He swung his tail in a lazy pattern. Hissy followed the movement. I felt Seph stop near me.

“Three, two, one,” he whispered.

I snapped my arms around her body. My tail reached up and slapped over her forehead. She tensed, trying to break free. My body constricted around hers. Seph struck. He jabbed the needle into a spot near her ear. He hit the plunger flange, injecting the translator. Hissy’s body went ridged. I held her

tightly until Seph had cleared out. Then, we all scattered, giving her space.

She jumped off of the bed. She rubbed her ear, making angry noises. She glared at Seph. She got louder. Seph didn't say anything. He just waited.

We all stood around as she calmed down. Her hand kept rubbing the injection site. Slowly, she got quieter. She was still grumbling when she came back to the bed.

Seph picked up one of the metal dishes from his pile on the chair. He held it out, "Bowl." He pointed at it. "Bowl." He repeated it a few more times.

He handed it to Hissy. One of the strips of hair above her eye arched. She turned the bowl over and then shook her head back and forth. Seph tapped it again and said, "Bowl."

Hissy made a strange noise. Seph said bowl again. Hissy made a noise similar to the one she had said before. We stood around while they did that over and over.

The translator worked well, but there was a learning period with new languages. Considering that the computer hadn't identified her species, it was a good assumption that the translator would need to build a new vocabulary.

"Bowl," Seph said for the tenth time.

When Hissy said the word this time, we heard, "Bowl."

Everyone jolted. Hissy looked shocked. Her eyes were wide. Seph smiled at us. He picked up a spoon and repeated the process. Hissy caught on quickly this time. The translator worked faster too.

After only seven times, the translator caught up. Hissy held up the utensil and said, "Spoon."

Seph jumped up with a whoop. They went through the entire pile of kitchen equipment. Each time we gained a new word, Hissy looked more excited. Huzzar was buzzing with energy. Hix's tail shook near constantly. Vesex stood back with his arms folded. His hood flicked open occasionally.

When all of the items had been named, Seph tapped his chest. “Seph. My name is Seph.”

He nodded to Huzzar, encouraging him to introduce himself. He followed Seph’s example and touched his chest, “My name is Huzzar.”

We all introduced ourselves. Then we did it again. After the third time, Seph pointed at Hissy.

She touched her chest and said something. Then she did it again. We all strained, waiting for the translator to catch up. She tapped herself again, “My name is Cece.”

We all rocked back on our tails. We were frozen with shock. There had been a portion of my mind that had expected this not to work. That I was hoping she was sentient.

Seph cleared his throat, “Hi, Cece.” Her name hissed out of him.

Tears gathered in her eyes. She closed them, putting a hand over her mouth. Her body shook once. She dropped her hand and looked into Seph’s eyes, “Hi, Seph.”

Thank you!

First off, thanks for getting this far. I appreciate everyone who took a chance on this book. If you have an opinion: good, bad, or sassy, please leave a review. I really do read them all.

I want to thank my editors. We get better every time we work together. I hope we keep getting the chance to grow more.

Finally, I'd like to thank the real superstars: our daycare. The last three years have been difficult managing my family, my regular job, and my hobby/fun-time job. One of those had to get placed on the back burner when our childcare fell through, and the readers can guess which one it was. Having reliable childcare for the last few months has made an enormous difference. I want to thank all the incredible women who cared for my hooligans, so I didn't have to split my time so ruthlessly.

About the Author

Amelia Rademaker is a writer from Seattle. Growing up listening to scary stories in the woods led to a lifelong interest in fantasy, reading and things that go bump in the night. Currently, she lives in the South with her husband, her son, two cats, and massive dog.

Other books by Amelia Rademaker

The Wolves of Black Bird Series

Rejected

Resented

Reclaimed

Redeemed (TBD)

Susix

Susix

Susix Book Two (TBD)

Stay Tuned for a Snippet from *Rejected*

Chapter One

Grace stopped what she was doing. She couldn't help it. It was an involuntary response every time she caught *his* scent in the air. Grace stood still, eyes closed, in the middle of the sidewalk trying to pinpoint what made Jack Taylor smell so damn good.

It could have been his aftershave. No one else in the small town of Black Bird used his aftershave. It could have been the sawdust that was always lingering on his clothes. It could have been that wild smell that permeated through everything else. Whatever it was, it added up to one thing in Grace's mind. Mate.

The one person that was destined for Grace.

"Hey, crazy, how about you stop daydreaming and help me with these boxes?"

"Sorry, Anne," Grace ducked her head embarrassed that she had been caught with her nose in the air.

Anne Kane, Grace's best friend, just shook her head and walked into her boutique. Grace was helping Anne part-time while Anne looked for a permanent assistant. Her last one had moved to a different town. The two women were supposed to be bringing in new merchandise but Grace was frozen where she stood, box in hand, looking for the source of the distracting smell.

The bell over the door of Chic Chick rang as Anne walked back onto the sidewalk.

"He walked by while you were in the back. You missed him, Grace." Anne sighed, exasperated. "Now, can we get on with business? I want to get these dresses up before lunch."

Grace picked up another box from Anne's car and followed her inside.

Rows of clothes hung on galvanized steel pipes that curved through the single-room store. The exposed metal, coupled with the antique white hutches, gave the store a rustic feel. Anne's ability to pair modern and old-world styles were what made her Main Street shop a success. Grace may have helped build the clothing racks and paint the walls, but it was Anne who kept selling out of merchandise.

Without a word, the two women started opening boxes and shaking out dresses. They had done this so many times in the last four years, that they had it down to an art. Anne pulled out the steamer while Grace started making room to hang the metallic and jewel-toned dresses.

The weather was cooling. The snow was coming and the holiday season was just around the corner. The shiny dresses Anne had picked out would be perfect for office parties and fancy dinners. Hanging in the front window, they could catch the light and entice people to come inside on their lunch break.

It also gave Grace an excuse to keep an eye out for Jack. In case he walked back this way again.

"I thought you had a surefire plan to corner Jack yesterday," Anne said, breaking the silence.

Grace barely contained a growl, "I did."

She had bribed old man Johnson at the lumber yard to call Grace when Jack arrived to pick up his shipment of wood that week. What Grace hadn't anticipated was that old man Johnson's loyalty to Jack was greater than his love for butterscotch brownies. The old coot had taken the brownies but never called Grace.

That type of solidarity was typical when it came to Jack Taylor though. Jack had only lived in Black Bird for a year, but somehow, he had gained more loyalty from the town than Grace ever had. And Grace had lived here her whole life! Yet she was a second-class citizen compared to Jack. The last twelve months had hammered that point home.

"You would not believe how cunning that man is and how much people like him," Grace grumbled. "Hell, I've only

managed to talk to him once and I'm already in love.”

Anne shook her head in disbelief. “How has he been able to avoid you for this long? The town is so small the school is K-12.” She leaned around the dress she was steaming to purse her lips at Grace. “Only you could get mated to a man who can hide like a chameleon in a town of less than five thousand.” Anne cringed. “To be mated,” she amended.

That was the problem in a nutshell. Somehow, Jack Taylor had roped the whole town into helping him avoid Grace. Not that he had done it knowingly. They'd helped him without being asked.

When he had moved to Black Bird last year, Grace had been a part of the welcoming committee. The instant their hands touched it felt like lightning had struck. The hair on the back of her neck stood up and Grace's wolf had howled. Grace had seen Jack's eyes widen in surprise. She had been sure he felt it too, but he had dropped her hand like it was a snake and had gone out of his way to avoid her since.

For a while, Grace let him do his own thing. She assumed it could be stressful moving to a new place. Not that Grace had ever moved. She heard people complain about boxing up their houses often enough though. Meeting your fated mate on top of that must be overwhelming. But when she started making an effort to meet with Jack, she couldn't find him. It was only after the tenth time of “Just missed him” that Grace started to suspect he was avoiding her.

“He's meeting with Ben and the other Enforcers to talk about a group of rogues that are making their way here,” Anne finally said.

The dress in Grace's hand slipped from her fingers as she whipped her head around to see Anne's expression. Anne was pointedly focused on steaming the wrinkles out of a gold sheath dress but Grace could see the tension around her friend's eyes. Anne was worried.

Rogues were groups of wolves who didn't have a territory. They had been kicked out of their own Packs or left to avoid the law. Rogues were half-feral destructive forces.

Considering Ben Thompson was Black Bird's Alpha, and Anne's boyfriend, Anne would know if there was a reason to be worried. Ben scheduling a meeting with the Pack's Enforcers did not bode well either.

"Are they here for us?" The question dropped to a whisper on the last word.

In the last few years, the American Packs had become volatile. With no central leadership to police interactions between Packs, people were taking advantage of that. Territory wars were going on all along the West Coast and the smaller, more isolated Packs were being preyed on.

That scared Grace. Black Bird wasn't big and it wasn't well allied. A rogue Pack of wolves could sweep through and decimate the territory.

No one could prepare for rogues. They weren't like other Packs who organized direct attacks. Rogues were groups of lawless lunatics driven crazy by their dual natures. They didn't strategize or maneuver in any way that could be predicted. They attacked. They gave themselves over to their animals and slaughtered everything in their path.

The thing that scared Grace the most was that they had no self-preservation. It didn't matter if the fight was one against ten, they fought. And they kept fighting even as their lifeblood drained out of them. There was no defense against that. One rogue wolf could take out three Enforcers because he was too enchanted with the bloodlust.

Grace hadn't heard anything about the Packs around them being attacked but with the increasing aggression, it was only a matter of time. No one outright said it, but the town was nervous.

"No," Anne's voice was clear, definitive, "they're just a group of rogues that a few Alphas have seen passing through. They haven't approached anyone and they haven't been violent. Ben's just," Anne let out a breath, "being cautious. You can't be too cautious."

Grace nodded. No argument there.

Attempting to lighten the mood, Grace bumped Anne's shoulder as she went to grab the next stack of pressed dresses. "How would our illustrious Alpha feel if he knew you were giving out his schedule to strangers?" Grace teased. "Word might get around that you have loose lips."

Anne snorted. "I would rather have the town calling me loose lips than a loose woman. Also, considering you were planning on hunting Ben down to ask him if he knew where Jack was, I am sure he will thank me later." Anne cocked her eyebrows tempting Grace to deny it.

Grace huffed at being found out. To be fair, she had pulled that move so often that it wasn't as subtle as it used to be. And Anne had reason to get upset about it. Grace had crashed a few dinner dates between Anne and Ben trying to find Jack. Grace couldn't be too upset at the bite in Anne's tone.

"You just have trouble sharing Ben's time," Grace said playfully. Not that Grace could blame her. Ben was a hunk. He was tall and built, with thick black hair. Having known him her entire life, Grace could safely say that he was one of the best men on the planet.

Grace punched a price tag into a dress with too much force and the gun jammed. Throwing it down in frustration Grace snarled, "I'm so pathetic, Anne!"

"I know, honey," Anne stopped steaming clothes and gave Grace a sad look, "but if you can't be pathetic about your mate, what's the point?"

It hurt that Anne was agreeing with her so quickly. Grace sank into a chair.

"Being pathetic is one thing, but I'm turning into a creep! That man doesn't want anything to do with me and I'm stalking him all around town." Grace sniffed.

It was time to throw in the towel. If Jack had wanted to get to know Grace, he had had ample opportunity. Jack acted like he didn't even want to be around Grace. If Grace walked into the diner, Jack walked out the back. If Grace turned down the

same grocery aisle, he would drop his basket and hightail it out of the store.

She didn't even know why he was doing it. This was the main reason she had started her militaristic campaign to corner him and call him out. In the last few weeks, she had started gathering intelligence and planning her ambushes. Grace was going crazy just trying to get a minute of her mate's time and he was doing his best to deny her.

She sniffled louder.

"Oh sweetheart," Anne walked over. "Don't even go there. It's not you." Anne wrapped an arm around Grace's shoulder. "The man probably has some rare brain tumor. He's trying to save you the grief of having to be mated to an invalid. Or, more plausible is that his penis is tiny." Anne wiped a tear off Grace's cheek. "He's a hero for not subjecting you to his tiny dick. We should throw him a parade." Anne jumped back throwing her arms wide. "We could put banners in every storefront and we could make a float depicting his minuscule package. Mrs. Henderson's Pomeranian could pull it through Main Street," Anne winked.

Grace laughed weakly. "Based on what I overheard Becky Jameson say at the bar last night, we might need Clydesdales to pull a parade float of that man's junk."

Anne pulled her lips back in disgust. Anne hated Becky Jameson. It all began when they had worn the same dress to junior prom.

"Well, that girl dated Cory Tate for years. I'm sure in comparison, Jack's mini weenie looked like the Rock of Gibraltar."

Cory Tate had landed himself on Anne's bad side after he "accidentally" mistook Becky for Anne at the junior prom and had gone home with her. Anne couldn't take a breath to insult Becky Jameson without throwing a barb at Cory Tate too. It was as sure as an amen after a prayer.

"I don't know why he doesn't want to be my mate. That's the problem. The man is involved in everyone's life in this

town. He helps with Pack security, visits the old folk's home, he found Mark Boone a job. Yet for some reason, I can't even have a single conversation with him." Grace threw her hands up. "I can't even make a good excuse for him because I haven't ever talked to him!" A tear fell down Grace's cheeks. "Why doesn't he want me?"

This was the final blow to Grace's self-esteem. Growing up in Black Bird was hard for a half-breed wolf. It also didn't help that her mom was infamous. Grace's mom loved her dad so much that she had broken up with her high school sweetheart, who also happened to be her mate, and married Grace's dad. They had been madly in love. Grace's mom called her dad, "My heart's mate." And after her dad passed away suddenly a few years ago, her mom had passed on quietly only a month later. They just couldn't live without each other.

While Grace loved her parents, the town felt otherwise. They could not forgive June Harding for not mating with Richard Pierce and they certainly could not forget that she had done it all for a human. The wolves in town were barely tolerant of the humans, let alone humans who married eligible females from the Pack. Throwing Richard Pierce over for Nathaniel Copeland, a human had gotten the entire family blacklisted.

Grace was lumped in with the witches in town, Black Bird High School's rivals, and the IRS. Not many people passed up the opportunity to screw with Grace. Thankfully, when Ben became Alpha things settled down. Only for them to start all over again when Jack moved to town.

Grace wasn't known for being melancholy. She tried to be upbeat about life, but her wolf was confused why they weren't mated and Grace couldn't stop thinking that it was her fault. It was the recipe for a very emotional reaction.

"Let's go," Anne declared getting up from the chair.

Grace wiped the tear stains off her face and put her shirt in order. Without saying a word, Grace followed Anne out the

front door. Anne didn't bother locking up, so Grace knew where they were headed.

Dale Markman's bakery was only busy two times a day: before dawn and before school. The sun was already up and the kids were in school, so the bakery was empty. Dale was bent behind the glass display counter restocking from the early morning rush.

Dale was a thin man, thinner than would be expected for a person who made donuts all day. He was just starting to show his age too. There were crow's feet appearing at the corners of each eye and a smattering of gray in his hair.

Hearing the overhead bell ring, Dale arched his back trying to work out a knot.

"Morning ladies, getting some work in before the day starts?" Dale smiled, his eyes wrinkling even more at the corners. Grace liked Dale. He was kind and he worked hard. Everyone else in Black Bird might obsess over gossip, but Dale didn't pay any mind to it. He hadn't shown favorites when Grace's mom had married her dad instead of her high school sweetheart and he hadn't gotten involved in the Jack Taylor fiasco.

"We sure are. I don't know about Grace, but I could use a pick me up." Anne rubbed her hands together excitedly. Anne didn't even like donuts. She was here purely to drag Grace out of the dumps.

"I just put out some huckleberry-filled ones." Dale pointed to a line of fat-fried dough leaking purple jam. Anne ordered two.

Grace was looking over the display, waiting for Anne to finish paying, when she heard the door open. Glancing over her shoulder, she barely bit back a groan. If Dale Markman was a saint, then Pearl Pierce was the devil. She was in her eighties and was always up in arms about something.

Last year, she had tried to get the community center shut down when they threw a Halloween carnival. Everyone rolled their eyes at the irony of a shifter thinking Halloween was

going to corrupt the children. The community center stayed open but the Halloween party was a little lamer that year. If Pearl liked a person, she was vocal about it but nowhere near as vocal as if she didn't like a person. Grace just happened to be a person Pearl didn't like.

Pearl was also the mother of Richard Pierce. Her mom's almost mate. From the moment Grace was born, she had been on Pearl's shit list. And that meant that Pearl Pierce worshipped the ground that Jack Taylor walked on.

"Oh dear, they are letting all kinds of folks in here," Pearl gasped, theatrically sniffing her nose.

Anne turned back around and rolled her eyes. It was no surprise that Pearl hated Anne as well. Ever since Anne and Ben had started dating, Pearl had been going on and on about the sanctity of mates and how only loose women kept company with men whom they weren't fated for. Grace had the speech memorized since it was the same one Pearl howled at the Copeland family whenever the opportunity presented itself.

"Yeah, Dale, aren't you worried about having bags of bones around the food?" Anne said deadpan. "The health inspector can't condone that."

Dale covered a laugh with a cough. Grace smiled but kept her head down, not wanting to draw the old woman's wrath.

"A home wrecker with bad manners, what a surprise," Pearl cooed. "It's to be expected from the town's mutts." Pearl smiled, obviously proud of her insult.

Grace didn't react to the bait but she could see Anne's hackles rise. Anne wasn't the calmest wolf in the best situation. Being around Pearl was not the most calming situation. Grace stepped forward to pull Anne outside before things escalated.

"Oh my goodness," Pearl exclaimed, clutching her hand to her heart. "I only smelled two wolves when I walked in here. I thought we were alone."

Grace nodded politely but didn't say anything as she ushered Anne toward the door. Pearl stepped aside to let them pass. They were almost outside when Pearl threw back her final spear.

"The town is doing Mr. Taylor a favor by keeping you away from him."

"Pearl," Dale warned.

Grace felt Anne tense under her hand.

"She says things to cause problems. No one pays attention. Let's just go," Grace whispered, trying to push Anne out the door.

"Listen to what she's telling you, Ms. Kane. Grace is the town expert when it comes to no one paying attention." Pearl cackled.

Grace's heart froze and she felt her cheeks get hot. She tugged Anne harder knowing it was only a matter of time before she started crying and she wanted to be out of sight when it happened.

Anne jerked free, fire blazing in her eyes. For a second, they shifted yellow. She took a menacing step towards Pearl. The woman had the smarts to hurry back.

"This town is full of fools too old or too dumb to do anything but ruffle feathers." Anne pointed a clawed finger at Pearl. "Watch your tongue, you old bitch, or I might have to rip it out to teach you some manners." With a snap of teeth, Anne turned to walk away.

Grace hurried to catch up to Anne. She could practically see the steam coming out of her ears. When they walked past Chic Chick, Grace asked Anne where she was going.

"This has gone on long enough. We are confronting that son of a bitch right now and settling this once and for all," Anne's voice dropped an octave while she raged.

"What are you doing?" The shock of Anne's anger dried Grace's tears. Anne had a short fuse but she usually only huffed and puffed. She rarely acted on her anger.

“Ben asked me not to interfere. ‘This is between mates.’” Anne imitated Ben’s voice. “But this is bullshit. We can’t have cowards in this Pack. It’s time for that man to face the music and talk to you.”

Anne’s hand shot out forcing Grace to keep up with her march down Main Street toward the diner. It was just after the breakfast rush. As they got closer, Grace could see a few people still sitting at the booths. One group, in particular, drew Grace’s eye.

Ben had commandeered the entire back portion of the diner. He was surrounded by his Enforcers. Grace could see him pointing at something on the table. It was the dusty blonde hair of the man across from him that got Grace’s heart beating.

His back was to her but she could see the collar of his plaid shirt under his shoulder-length hair. He must be planning on going straight to his woodshop after the meeting. He only wore his thick plaid shirts if he was going to be working. Just seeing the back of his head filled Grace with a nauseating combination of dread and excitement.

“Anne, he is going to sprint out the backdoor the second he smells me,” Grace wheezed. Her heart was beating so hard, she could barely breathe.

“I know.” Anne’s eyes narrowed. “So, let’s use that to our advantage.”

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Thank you so much for reading a snippet from *Rejected*, the first book in the *Wolves of Black Bird* series. If you're interested in the next book or seeing other projects I'm working on, check out any of the links below.

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