



INTERGALACTIC DATING AGENCY

CRUSH

WIFE-MATES FOR THE DRCS

ELSA
JADE

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**CRUSH
WIFE-MATES FOR THE ORCS
BIG SKY ALIEN MAIL ORDER
BRIDES
INTERGALACTIC DATING AGENCY**

Elsa Jade

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The Omega Reclamation Crew is in trouble. After the loss of their homeworld and generations spent in the cold darkness of space, fewer eggs hatch every year—and now only males. Losing hope, the ORC asteroid mining ship DeepWander has one chance to make a deal at the Luster, an astronomically infamous gathering of salvage and retrieval mercenaries. But the orcs need dates to the big bash...

Welcome to the Intergalactic Dating Agency!

Crusher Teq was hatched for one task: breaking space rocks. To save the DeepWander, he'll crush with his four bare hands, if necessary. When the Big Sky IDA sends delicate Earther females, Teq knows he's too big and rough to take a wife-mate. He vows to keep all his hands to himself—even after one soft, alien kiss threatens to ignite his i'lva: the mystical light of orc legend.

With her young son at risk, Adeline Barlow had only one thought: get as far away from their painful past as possible. She just hadn't realized quite how far that might be. As an

alien mail order bride, she might finally find a happy home among the orcs—maybe with the mighty crusher with his big hands, gentle touch, and deep, dark gaze?

But weird whispers in the night warn of betrayal, and it seems dating and mating are more explosively dangerous than they ever believed. Now a fortune—along with their future—is slipping through their fingers. The orcs and their wife-mates must hold on tight or they'll lose the DeepWander and their last chance at a love brighter than the stars.

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Chapter 1

“Our fortune has come to us at last!”

The pronouncement rang through the alcoves and columns of the *DeepWander*'s gather-hall, and Teq should have roared along with the rest of the orcs. The Omega Reclamation Crew had been extracting and salvaging its way across the lesser galaxies for three generations now, and all that grueling work and peril was finally paying off.

Or *would* pay off, as soon as they found the right buyer for the aforementioned fortune.

So why did he have such a bad feeling about this?

Teq didn't even *do* feelings. As the crew's chief crusher, he'd lost all feeling except for the unending rattle of the hammers and grinders under his command, every other sensation permanently numbed. And he would've preferred spending this time smashing something to bits.

But his cousin, who'd been marked apex while still in the egg, had called them together to declare their turn of fate. Mag had the right and duty as apex—not to mention the sheer size, strength, and savagery—to point their path, and if he said this was their way through the darkness of deep space, Teq would be right behind him.

For the moment though, he stayed slouched in one of the farthest nooks, all four arms crossed over his thorax. The tense stance strained the utility sash looped around his chest, and the bulge of his pectoral emphasized the glyph carved into his skin marking him as crusher. From that vigilant distance, Teq watched his brethren.

Most of the gather-hall was even darker than space; the center of the ship was designed to look like the ancient caverns of their homeworld rather than an asteroid mining vessel. But in honor of this proclamation, the thick pillars carved from the plasteel walls had been gilded with silverglow, and by its light, the orcs' blue-bronze hides gleamed almost metallic.

“Although we’ve found our fortune, what we really need is galactic credits,” Mag continued. He waited for the wave of wry chuckles to rise and lapse. “For that we need a buyer. So I have procured an invitation to the Salvagers Luster.”

He paused again for another ripple of response: uncertain grumbles this time. The silverglow glinted on suspiciously rolling black eyes and pointed lower tusks thrusting out in consternation.

“It’s true no orc has ever attended the Luster,” Mag continued. “To the rest of the universe—by slag and by sludge, even to other miners and sifters—the Omega Reclamation Crew is nothing. We may as well not exist.” He flared the upper scales of his carapace, inciting an instinctive threat display in a few of the orcs nearest him. “This is finally our chance to claim our place beyond the emptiest reaches of space.”

Another roar from the crew, but through his antennae, Teq detected the half-heartedness hidden under the tough scales. It was one thing to plunge chained explosives into an icy volcanic moon or wrangle a sungrazer comet out of its decaying fiery orbit; it was something else entirely to be rejected. The Omega Reclamation Crew had never warranted even the briefest acknowledgment from followers of the Luster. To breach the inner sanctum of the grandest galactic prospectors and scavengers...

But if Mag said they must engage with the Luster luminaries, Teq would follow his apex into the maw of death itself.

Which they might be facing if they couldn’t get hefty credits for their latest find. As if dealing with the high-rolling, sanctimonious Luster vrein and his people wouldn’t be bad enough. No one respected orcs enough to give them the time of local solar coordinates, much less cut them in on any of the lucrative Luster Station connections and contracts.

“We will take our place in the Luster,” Mag was saying. “But before we get there, we could use a bit of shining up ourselves. So our sweet Amma has found us wife-mates.”

Mmm-whaaat?

Slowly, Teq straightened away from the wall, glaring in disbelief at the wizened orc female who trundled up beside Mag. *Wife-mates? For the orcs?* Mag hadn't told him any of *this* part of the plan.

Even before they'd left their decimated homeworld behind, wife-mates had become more myth than reality. With the slow, cold collapse of their planetary core, more and more clutches had hatched mostly males. The few emerged females—Amma had been one of the last before the orc ships escaped their dying planet—and those who passaged later hadn't been enough to meet the demand for wife-mates. In the last generations, barely enough of the artificially manufactured and cryogenically preserved eggs survived to hatching, and the incubation grottos had gone silent and empty.

Just better for an orc to tell himself he didn't need a wife-mate at all.

Where had Amma and Sil found females to bond with their desperate crew?

“Once we sell our fortune, every orc who wants a wife-mate will have a chance. But until then, the Intergalactic Dating Agency is sending a handful”—Mag held up one six-fingered hand—“of females from a place called Earth. Amma, will you tell this tale?”

As old Amma stumped to the edge of the dais, Teq tuned to the orcs around him. Murmurs of curiosity and sighs of longing ruffled his antennae.

In a nook nearby, standing with the rest of the survey and trial squad, Dorn said under his breath, “The place is called Dirt? That's promising. Of all things, orcs require dirt and rock.”

That wasn't all though, Teq mused. Once, his people had done more than extracting and salvaging; they'd been gardeners of minerals, singers of stone, philosophers of ancient hollows. But raw materials torn from crude ore were more in demand than beauty and dreams.

Which was just how the universe was, he reminded himself. Dirt and rock were at least plentiful and reliable.

Amma gesticulated above the crowd. Even from the dais with her top two arms lifted high, she was still so small the orcs in the front row had to duck politely under her gesture.

“Praise the silent dark!” she intoned.

“And the shine below,” they responded. Teq juttled his tusks lest he bite through his tongue. What had the shine done for them lately?

“The Big Sky outpost of the Intergalactic Dating Agency has quite the reputation for sending the finest Earther ladies to seek life-mates,” Amma said. “But nowhere else in the universe will they find orcs!”

More cheering, perhaps a bit more hopeful than before; little old Amma had always kept them going with her affection, wisdom, and yezo—the fermented cavern algae that doubled as an extraction solvent. “They will be your dates to the Luster, proving that the *DeepWander* is a strong, steady, and prosperous ship, worthy of the best contracts. However...” She peered around at them, her black eyes glinting in the silverglow. “Some of you look like tailings jettisoned out the aft pipes!” Amusement—some of it genuine, more than some of it uncomfortable—swept the room. “Dorn, when was the last time you buffed your tusks and gilded your carapace?”

“Just waiting for your whisper, my Amma!” he called back, inciting hoots and hollers.

She clacked her worn-down tusks. “And you, Pars and Iffo, could you recite the life-mate vows?”

No amusement this time, just some whispers, as Pars and Iffo ducked their heads, ruefully sheltering in the hard shells across their shoulders like little Amma’s words were falling rocks.

But how could two asteroid-crackers, whose most pressing plan for the future was boosting off fast enough after they laid their charges to not blow up with the rock, be expected to

memorize the romantic meanderings of long-dead orc lyricists?

“And you, Teq?”

Her prodding inquiry would no doubt continue in this vein of poetry and personal hygiene, but Teq had no interest in hearing the question. “No,” he blurted.

A few nearest him gave him hard looks. While he had a well-earned reputation for no-nonsense plus skull smacking as needed and was given his personal space accordingly, everyone was protective of sweet old Amma.

Especially Mag, who was giving him a decidedly not sweet look. “No?” The echo was as menacing as a deep rumble from a deserted tunnel. “No what?”

Teq hastened to fine-tune his response—not usually a necessary skill for a rough crusher like him. “No thank you. I won’t be needing a wife-mate from Dirt as a date to Luster or anywhere else.”

“More for the rest of us,” Dorn said with a jiggle of his carapace, which, as Amma had noted, looked a little dull even in the silverglow.

Not that Teq cared about Dorn’s dull hide; it wasn’t like Teq was interested in the supercilious assay as a life-mate. They might share a ship, but nothing about them was compatible.

Still, Teq gave Amma a respectful antennae flick nonetheless. “You are the matriarch of this crew.” He tilted toward Mag. “And you the apex. As always, I crush on your command.”

But he would not claim a wife-mate.

No one could make him do that.

Though Amma gave him a thoughtful look, his words seemed to mollify Mag. “Our wife-mates arrive soon, so oil your hammers and drills.” The apex sank back onto his dais seat as the crowd roared again. “Let’s give these lonely Earther ladies an orc welcome they’ll never forget.”

Why, to Teq's antennae, did that sound like a warning?

Once they were dismissed from the gather-hall—though many stayed, whispering, wondering, and maybe wishing—Teq made his way through the ship to the secondary ore processing bay. The bay had been locked off since they found their fortune, putting a serious crimp in their ability to onboard more raw material. Not a problem at the moment, exactly, since the *DeepWander* was making full speed, burning precious fuel, toward the site of the Luster rather than doing the one thing that had kept what remained of their people alive: picking through the rubble of the universe for anything of value.

But maybe he was just feeling a little rough around the edges himself at the moment.

Vug, what a terrible time to realize he *did* still have feelings.

The ship would be slowing only long enough to connect with the IDA transport to transfer the Earther females. He needed to get control of himself before that.

At the bay door, he pressed one hand to the access panel. Though he was senior crew, the lock chimed a request for a second hand, then a third hand. At least it didn't ask for the fourth, which was locked in a fist.

Not that he would mind crushing something. That was all his hands were used for.

Finally, the hatch unsealed and he stalked into the antechamber. Before him, the bay was huge, bigger than the gather-hall and still only half the size of the main processing center. Normally he would pause here to don safety and protective gear. These days, even the hardest-headed orc wore equipment to preserve life and limb. The fate of their planet had taught them that sometimes evolution wasn't enough to keep them safe.

So maybe Mag and Amma weren't wrong to bring in otherworld females.

But that didn't mean *he* had to claim one of them.

Today, the bay was silent and still, powered down except for a central ring of lights and scanners surrounding their found fortune.

He wasn't one of the crew's prospectors who identified potential yields. He wasn't an assay who assessed the value of their finds. He wasn't the apex who made the final choice on their targets. He was just a crusher. So he didn't blame himself for still not believing the misshapen, gray lump in their secondary bay actually *was* a fortune.

Standing in front of it was Mag's brother, slender shoulders hunched, the oddly tapered, fluted edges of his carapace scales catching the lights. For an orc, Sil wasn't much. And for an apex's brother he was...even less. About the same size as the rock they'd dragged in, actually. It wasn't easy to live as a small orc, and to make matters worse, Sil didn't work salvage or processing.

Teq came to a halt beside him. "Hasn't said a word, eh?"

"Not yet, but it seems to me..." Trailing off, Sil grunted under his breath. "Oh. You are teasing."

"Somewhat. And only because I'm so anxious about your brother's surprise that my antennae retracted into my skull." Teq lifted his lip around one tusk to show he was joking again.

Somewhat.

"He announced the Luster? And the wife-mates?" Sil half-closed his eyes. Instead of the common all-black orc eyes, evolved to concentrate the meager light of their homeworld's caverns, his were a moonstone gray. "How'd it go?"

"I think the crew is more nervous about the females than challenging for a place in the Luster." Teq tried to hold back the tone of disbelief—and disapproval. "Did you know about this before? What made Amma think of buying otherworld females?"

"We didn't *buy* them." Sil gave him a chiding look. "The IDA takes only willing brides and thoroughly vetted mate matches."

“Not so very thorough if they accepted this crew,” Teq muttered. “Have you seen our galactic credit line?”

“There’s more to life and love than credit, Teq.”

Love? They hadn’t been talking about *that* at all.

“The Earther women know our situation,” Sil continued. “They have their own reasons for coming, but together we will find our place in the Luster and the universe.” He returned his attention to the fortune they’d hauled aboard. “Now if I could just figure out this rock.”

Sil had all the inspiration and initiative to have become a crystal carver. But the orcs didn’t have artists anymore. And the crew wouldn’t have their ship anymore either if they didn’t *figure out* some credits for their account.

But Teq knew he wasn’t going to convince anyone this was a bad idea, not with the lure of wife-mates and a place in the Luster. He’d just have to keep his feelings to himself.

And if that meant crushing his feelings along with the ore... Life and the universe would be better that way.

Chapter 2

This was a terrible mistake.

Gathered with the other Big Sky would-be brides in the common room of the Intergalactic Dating Agency transport to watch their approach to the alien ship, Adeline Barlow wondered if it was too late to turn around.

How far away was Earth? On their journey, they'd sat through so many classes and she was sure she'd heard that figure, but she'd never been good with numbers. They'd been learning so much—galactic finance, interstellar law, cosmic theology. It was worse than all of high school and college finals smashed into one space cruise. And there was a reason she'd dropped out of Vassar after one overwhelmed semester.

“Mom? Mom. How much longer? Are we almost there?”

Well, there were two reasons she'd dropped out. Three, if she counted her ex.

She put her hand on Ollie's head to stop him from bouncing into the other women. He'd know exactly how far away Earth was, but then she'd get a mini lecture on the mechanics of space travel, Einstein's theory of relativity, and probably alien biology just for fun.

Alien biology for fun.

Oh, why had she thought that?

Biology for fun on Earth had been her first terrible mistake.

“Mom?”

With effort, she buried her worries. Ollie wasn't a mistake; he'd been her silver lining when all the fool's gold was stripped away. She smiled at him. “Soon, owlet. Be patient.”

Pushing his glasses higher on his stubby little nose, he snorted. “My patience is spaghettified.”

She ruffled his fine brown hair, trying to remember her cosmology—not to be confused with cosmetology, like astronomy versus astrology, as she'd been told by a certain

very impatient seven-year-old. “Spaghettification is when gravitational forces, like a black hole, unspool material, even molecules, into a spiraling string of atoms.” She frowned thoughtfully, tapping one fingertip on her chin even though that light pressure sent a warning ping through her tensed jaw. “And I think there are meatballs involved? Maybe garlic bread?”

“Mah-aaaahm...”

“Aaaaahhhh,” she echoed. “Oh no, are you being spaghettified right now? I better pull you back together!” She hugged him close to her side.

“Mom, I told you and told you, nothing can escape a black hole.” He clung to her for one sweet moment, then tugged away. “Okay, I don’t want to miss the *DeepWander* with my own eyes.” He ran to the observation port, the window framing only blackness at the moment, ignoring the interactive touchscreen. Her little owl had always been more interested in what he could see for himself, not what other people told him.

Not what other people had tried to make of him: a prop, a justification, a weapon used against her. In fact, the only reason the IDA’s Big Sky outpost had allowed a single mom with a minor child to leave Earth was because of the harm caused by his own extended family.

Worries flooding back, she watched him regaling June with space facts. The other would-be bride had become a good friend on the journey, and not just because she seemed to have no end of interest in space facts. June claimed to be in a perfect place to become an alien mail order bride because she was from a tiny rural Nebraska town and knew most of the songs in *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers* by heart. Her optimism for this new start to all their lives had calmed some of Adeline’s fears.

For a while.

Why was it all flooding back *now*, when there was no way to escape?

Because there was no way to escape. Because being safe on the IDA transport with the other women had been like a mini vacation from her anxiety, and now that was over.

Except that wasn't entirely true; the IDA had said they could come home anytime they liked. As if any of them had homes. Why would they have become alien mail order brides if they had homes of their own?

"Hey, don't be mad at them. June was dying to know that space smells like burnt toast, and she's so lucky Ollie was right there to tell her."

"Sorry." Adeline smoothed her expression into a smile at Kinsley. "I'm not mad at Ollie or June. Or anyone." At least no one onboard. "I was just..." What?

"Say no more." Kinsley smiled back. "I get it. You don't have to go on."

But she did have to go on; they all did. Go on the alien ship, go on with their lives, go on with mates from another species. "Are you as excited as June and Ollie?"

Kinsley's smile widened. "Of course. Who wouldn't be excited to find themselves a dozen galaxies away from Earth and about to fall into the many, many arms of a horny alien to be their dates to some sort of cosmic blue-collar ball?"

"The orcs have tusks, not horns," Adeline murmured. Okay, maybe Ollie came by his lecturing honestly. "And two extra arms isn't *that* many." If a creature with that strange silhouette had stalked through her nightmares once or twice, its skin shimmering sometimes blue, sometimes bronze like a beetle... Well, she'd had worse nights.

As for the rest of it, the ball was the least of her worries. She'd had to attend plenty of intimidating social events when she was still a child herself, and worse while she was previously married, and she'd never had the faintest promise of someone willing to pull her out if things got tough.

But she wasn't quite sure what to make of Kinsley's rhetorical question. Although the woman had been friendly enough since they'd all first met in Sunset Falls, Montana, at

the Big Sky IDA outpost, she didn't share much personally. By her peekaboo accent, Adeline guessed she was from New England somewhere, but when June had asked, Kinsley had only said, "All of that is behind us now."

Which was true enough. Unless they turned around.

"I see it! I see it!" Ollie's piping voice rang off the common room walls, instantly silencing the quiet conversations among the rest of the seven women. "It's the *DeepWander*. We're here!"

Adeline exchanged wide-eyed glances with the others: Anne, Maria, Mary Louise, and Carmen, who had all become close companions by proximity and potential, if not yet lifelong friends. They'd be the only humans among the orcs.

They all rushed to the viewport next to Ollie and June.

She'd seen plenty of spaceships, of course—she wouldn't have been a good mother to Ollie if she hadn't—everything from Star Wars to NASA. Once she learned that aliens were real and alien mail order brides were real, she'd seen pictures of real spaceships, then finally the IDA transport in real life. But this... This looked alien.

While the *DeepWander* had all the sleek, high-tech lines she'd come to expect from science fiction and function, there were also strange angles, dark spears bristling in all directions. The spines glistened darkly in the lights of the transport, like one of the crystal-growing kits that Ollie had requested last Christmas—their last Christmas on Earth.

Her heart stuttered. Not at the sight of the alien strangeness, but at the memory of that last horrible holiday, hiding in a motel, that crystal set the only thing she'd been able to afford besides a Happy Meal.

Determination seized her. Their next Christmas would be good, dammit. Whatever happened next, she would make a happy life for her son.

She straightened, glancing around at the other women. "Shall we go to the hatch to welcome our new maybe mates?"

They glanced at each other, as if making sure they were all ready.

June nodded first. “Let’s do this.” With a smile that trembled only a little, she solemnly bumped her knuckles against Ollie’s when he held up his fisted hand, and they both flared their fingers wide, like little stars against the glittering shadows of the *DeepWander* dominating the view behind them.

All together, they marched down to the transport loading dock while the ships aligned and stood in a loose fan just beyond the hatch. They were all dressed in outfits she hadn’t seen before on this journey; she imagined they’d all saved their best for this moment. Would the orcs have done the same? Were the aliens equally nervous? But they were the ones who’d initiated this exchange. Did that give them all the power?

A faint pneumatic hiss sounded like mocking laughter as the expanding corridor bridged the distance between the two ships until a gentle metallic clang resounded through the hull, not quite a jolt. A cheerful chime announced the sealed connection.

The hatch opened to a lighted hallway, and cool air drifted over them. The breeze tugged gently at the cowl neck of her nice but not too nice, first-date-appropriate, single mom floral blouse—that she’d decided to pair with her best butt-fitting, high-waisted jeans and “holy fuck what have I done I’m fleeing through an alien spaceship with my child on my hip” cross-trainers.

“It does smell like burnt toast,” June whispered.

“I told you,” Ollie whispered back.

With one more glance at each other, the women started down the corridor. A matching doorway stood open on the other end.

“Why is it so dark over there?” Kinsley murmured. “Don’t like that at all.”

“Are we sure we’re at the right ship?” Maria asked in a tiny voice.

“You can’t rendezvous across a few million light-years without both sides knowing the coordinates,” Carmen said with Ollie-levels of certainty that Adeline assumed translated to some amount of accuracy.

“Orcs don’t see the same way we do,” he announced. “Maybe they just forgot to turn on the lights.” He took a step forward, just beyond her reflexive reach. “Hey,” he called. “Us Earthers use electromagnetic wavelengths from four to eight hundred nanometers. Otherwise sometimes we’re afraid of the dark. Some of us, just sometimes.”

“Ollie,” Adeline put a no-nonsense clip in her voice. “Come back here.”

At the end of the hall, the black square bloomed with a shimmering silver glow.

Ollie glanced back at her with a big smile. “See? Now you don’t have to be scared. It’s gonna be an adventure!” He spun around again and raced down the hall toward that beckoning light.

“Oliver!” Gritting her teeth—the IDA had given her a minor surgery they assured her would fix her TMJ pain forever; too bad they didn’t know Ollie—she hustled down the hall after her son, squinting against that sudden light.

Just as his bloodcurdling shriek rang out.

Chapter 3

At the piercing cry, Teq leaped forward to grab the hatchling, swinging the small one away with one of his lower arms. Instinctively, he spread the outer shell of his carapace to shelter the young being from whatever had frightened it.

The hatchling stared up at him with white-ringed eyes, and Teq returned the look with the same bewilderment. He'd known that the aliens would be...well, alien, but what a peculiar little creature he held. So squishy.

He tilted his head. "Greetings, Earther hatchling."

"Greetings, crusher."

Teq's antennae twitched in surprise that the alien hatchling had noticed the glyph etched into his thorax. "Are you injured?"

A mighty blow reverberated against his carapace. "Let him go!"

As powerful as the attack was, of course it couldn't be worse than a tunnel collapse or micrometeoroid strike. Still, rather annoying. He glanced over his shoulder.

And then looked down, down at the enraged Earther female. From the IDA spec sheets he'd reviewed once they'd been told about this absurd emergency wife-mate plan, he'd known the Earthers would be small, but this one barely came up to his lower shoulder—even though she was bristling with fury. "I thought he might've fallen into the slymusk."

"Put him down. Can't you see he's terrified of you?"

The accusation stung. *He* was terrifying? *He* wasn't the one running around, screaming, and bogging with somewhat creepy, googly eyes. Not to mention being squishy.

He dropped the hatchling at once, and it would've fallen if the female hadn't grabbed it and swung it up into her own arms—of which she only had two. Despite her lack of appendages and her slenderness, at least compared to an orc, she seemed startlingly strong. Teq shouldn't have felt anything

much through his carapace, but the place she'd touched throbbed tenderly. He resisted the urge to rub at the spot.

“Not scared of *him*,” the hatchling said in its piping voice. “Of the...slymusk? I wanted to pet it but then it tried to grab me.” He held out one hand—a mere five digits waving about—to display the gelatinous goo stuck there.

The female caught the waving hand around the wrist. “Oh my god. Is it poisonous? How do we get it off?”

Despite her apparent distress, her voice was lower than the hatchling's, with a husky quality that vibrated through Teq's antennae.

“Slymusk excretions are not toxic,” he assured her. “They only interact with some minerals, and you *did* ask us to turn on the lights.” He motioned with his antennae toward the silverglow on the walls.

The hatchling craned away from the female to follow his gesture. “That ginormous slug thing makes the light with its mucus? Oh wow, that's so cool.”

“Yes,” Teq agreed distractedly. “The bioluminescent traces are cold.”

The same could not be said for his own ichor. The pulse through his body was surging high and heavy—and very, *very* hot.

Impossible. This couldn't be happening. He'd never felt anything like it, not even when the *DeepWander* had been attacked by a marauding ship shortly after their most recent collection. The orcs had fought off the pirates with only minor damage, but the heat of battle had been exhilarating.

This was different. It was...

Sometimes we're afraid.

He scowled. Orcs were never afraid. Not of struggle, certainly not of the dark. They couldn't afford to fear. But this...

It was the i'lva—the bonding fire.

Like the scorching geothermic energy that churned in the cores of planets and moons, the i'lva burned up from the depths, powerful and relentless. Such magma could reshape everything it touched, originating new land, blazing pathways for the most precious of minerals and gems, igniting the building blocks of life.

Or it could tear apart everything around it—crumbling the roots of mountains, exposing the delicate darkness, turning the vulnerable to ash.

At least according to old orc poetry.

Taking a slow breath, as if mere air could squelch the i'lva, Teq averted his gaze from the female, who was wiping the hatchling's hand with her tunic, and took another step back. Even in his consternation, he hadn't failed to notice how she'd flinched away from him when he scowled. Why had she joined the Intergalactic Dating Agency if she was afraid of aliens?

Fortunately, he didn't have to deal with any of this. Once they'd realized—thanks to the hatchling's call—that the *DeepWander* hadn't properly calibrated the wavelengths of electromagnetic radiation, Sil had sent a slymusk to light up the hatchway, and now Mag and Amma were officially welcoming the Earthers. As they all exchanged pleasantries, Teq skulked to the back of the gathered orcs, taking the opportunity to rub his knuckles over the spot on his carapace where the female had touched him.

It didn't feel damaged. Did the alien females have some previously unidentified toxin in their dermis? Maybe the IDA was wrong about the biological compatibility between their species.

Or maybe.... The hatchling's mother had accused the slymusk of being poisonous. Was that a ruse, a wily misdirection to distract the orcs while the Earthers ransacked the *DeepWander*? After all, the orcs had just fought off a pirate attack. Maybe this was a subtler attempt to take their newfound fortune. According to the IDA contract, there were supposed to be six potential wife-mates. Instead, there were seven, so already this endeavor was suspect.

Teq scowled again. Of course Mag and Amma wanted to seize a future for the *DeepWander*, but what if they'd been tricked? For all their orc toughness and defenses, those two were essentially dreamers; they needed protection from their hopes.

Teq would not be blinded by unfamiliar and unnecessary wavelengths of light—or feelings.

He narrowed his eyes, focusing his antennae on the one female who'd touched him. It couldn't be the i'lva. Orc poetry was as dead and lost as their planet. Had she marked him in some other way?

As a crusher, he was taller than most of the other orcs, so he was able to stay in the background but still keep watch as Mag and Amma offered introductions all around. The female's name was Adeline. Teq subvocalized the word in his throat, and the syllables reverberated through his thorax in an unnerving way, like when his soundings identified a hidden chasm, explosive gases, or other danger deep in the stone. Such flaws could destroy expensive machines or even kill an orc. Was Adeline such a menace?

The little Earther didn't *look* dangerous, although he supposed she could be hiding explosive gases somewhere. Like the other females, she was slight compared to the orcs, even Amma. Her eyes were wide, though not as large or faceted as an orc's, and a hue of brown Teq associated with coffee, one of the few authorized exports from Earth. It was an absurdly expensive beverage with a mild stimulant, much sought after in the civilized galaxies. The many keratinous filaments on her head were a few shades lighter than her eyes. The long strands seemed to not be in her conscious control, sliding restlessly over her shoulders in the drafts of fresh air that flowed through the corridors. His fingers—all of them—twitched with a matching restlessness as he wondered how those strands would feel...

No, remember, he didn't have feelings.

But he would watch her closely, because he wouldn't let anything negatively impact his ship or crush his crew.

The hatchling was her son, Oliver or Ollie, a nomenclature she alternated between based on criteria he could not quite pin down. She was the only one of the newcomers with a hatchling, and although he had the sense that none of the females were officially in charge, when Mag asked if they were ready to transfer their belongings and release the IDA transport, all the Earthers looked to Adeline to answer.

After a pause that was likely no more than a moment but seemed to stretch on for a lightyear, she nodded. “We are very happy to meet you and to be here,” she said in that husky voice that thrummed along Teq’s antennae. “Let’s get on with this adventure.”

Ollie made a vigorous whooping noise. And for no reason Teq could explain, that sound resonated within him too.

As most of the crew dispersed to their duties, Teq lingered. Mag had assigned a few of the orcs—those who had most enthusiastically agreed to read the IDA handbook on the care and feeding (and mating) of Earther females—to show the newcomers around. The hatchling was talking to Amma with very large parabolic gestures, and Sil was speaking with Adeline and another of the Earther females. Teq stiffened at the worried and confused stances pinging back to him, so he strode over.

“What’s the problem?” he demanded.

The Earthers jolted at his abrupt presence and even more abrupt words, and Sil gave him a chiding look. “No problem,” he said mildly. “Kinsley here was just never fitted with a universal translator.”

Teq narrowed his eyes on the Earther female. She was the tallest and largest of the bunch, but still fragile compared to an orc. “The IDA let you off planet without a translator?”

“We were just explaining to Sil,” Adeline said in a voice even more repressive than the one she used on her hatchling. “Our departure from Big Sky was a bit...chaotic due to some recent changes there, and perhaps some of the details were missed.”

Details like a thorough vetting? What if the biological compatibility was wrong too? Would that explain the lingering sensation in his carapace where Adeline had touched him?

Teq rumbled low in his throat at all the questions that couldn't just be crushed into oblivion.

Adeline crossed her two arms in front of her, her gaze going hard as polycrystalline diamond drill bits. "Don't grumble at us," she said sternly. "We're here to get to know each other, to see if this...dating might benefit us all, so trying to scare us is a terrible first step."

Sil let out a sound of amusement. "Teq scares us sometimes too," he said in a muffled aside, as if letting them in on a secret. "He's a crusher, and sometimes I think he can just glare at rocks and make them fall apart."

"I am not trying to crush anyone here," Teq said when Sil twitched his antennae meaningfully. "I will try to be less intimidating when I did not intend to frighten you."

After another long moment, Adeline slowly released the tight grip she'd held on herself. Much to Teq's relief, since he'd been strangely distracted by the way she changed shape when she wrapped her arms around her body. It wasn't just movement in the soft folds of fabric that the Earthers had wrapped around themselves; the curving flesh under her clothes morphed too. Orc bodies were too hard and tough for such shifting. Was all of her so squishy?

She finally gave him a slow nod. "And I'm sorry I grabbed you earlier. I saw you holding Ollie and I...I panicked. I shouldn't have let my feelings overcome me like that when you didn't *intend* to be terrifying."

He gazed at her. Was her wording a shrewd acknowledgment that he was reserving the right to be intimidating when he *did* intend it? "Your hatchling is vulnerable and squishy, and the protective instinct is hard to control," he allowed magnanimously. "Besides, I barely felt it."

And he was only half lying.

Sil gave him a curious look then flicked one hand. “I will take Kinsley to the lab and see what I can rig up for a translator until we get to the Luster for something better.”

“A space laboratory!” Ollie scampered up to his mother, wrapping an arm around her. “Can I see it too?”

Adeline put her hand on his head, as if she didn’t want to let him go. “Maybe later would be better.”

“I’ll go with them,” piped up another of the Earthers. She’d been introduced as June, Teq remembered, which was a small word for the smallest of the Earther females. “It’s not like we can get lost now.” She flashed her tiny square tusks and let out a huh-huh sound.

“Mom,” the hatchling said, peering up at her. “Is something wrong? You don’t have to be scared of the dark anymore since they turned on the slug light.”

“You’re right, owlet. Go ahead, but you listen to June—and Sil too.”

“I know. I will.”

Slowly, Adeline released the hatchling who grabbed June’s hand instead, and the two tagged along behind Sil and Kinsley, leaving Teq and Adeline alone in the corridor.

As if proving the hatchling’s point, a slymusk crept past them. In the smear of bioluminescence, Adeline’s dark eyes reflected the silver as she gazed after her friends. “I brought him this far,” she murmured. “To freak out now would be ridiculous, right?”

Teq shifted from one foot to the other. “Are you asking me?”

“Not really.” She let out a very long breath. “Sorry again that I freaked out on you.”

As he looked down on her from his greater height, he found himself again distracted. The tunic she wore was woven with threads that included a hint of metallics, like a vein of precious ore threaded through a mountain. It outlined her generous contours in a way that kept snagging his focus. Obviously she

and the other potential wife-mates had gone out of their way to make themselves appealing, just as many of the orcs had done, following Amma suggestions to buff and shine their tusks and carapaces.

Teq himself had been too busy reading up on the Intergalactic Dating Agency to do the same, and now he felt dusty and drab by comparison.

She crossed her arms again, changing shape under the pretty glitter of the tunic in a way that made it all but impossible to concentrate. “Is this as awkward for you as it is for us?” She did one of those smile things that the IDA handbook warned might seem threatening to some species.

“In some ways no,” he said. “Because at least we are still in our home. In some ways...” He tried to mirror the smile thing, although his tusks got in the way. “In some ways worse, because we are obviously desperate to have you, which leaves us less options to negotiate.”

She did a thing where she changed the shape of her mouth, which intrigued him, her lips together and pooching to one side. “Negotiating. I didn’t think of it like that. But I suppose you’re right. We’re trying to figure out how to get to know each other, which is the reason we are dating and attending this Luster ball together.”

“This is our chance to extract a good life from the void,” he said. He watched her closely to see if his candor would change how she looked again. Would she be frightened off by the truth? Would she try to take advantage?

She only bobbed her head in a way that signaled acknowledgment. “It’s the same for most of us too, I think. We’re here—far from home, as you noted—because this is our chance too.”

When she gazed up at him, the silver glow seemed brighter in the sheen over her dark eyes. Was she telling the truth? Should he try to take advantage to make sure these Earther brides hadn’t agreed to this farce only to steal the orcs’ newfound treasure, leaving them alone and adrift in the heartless darkness of the cosmos?

But he didn't know Earthers well enough to guess their intent. He knew only what he'd read in the handbook.

She was nibbling at her lower lip in a way that made him wonder if he should offer her some of the Earther-appropriate foodstuffs that had been added to the *DeepWander*'s supplies. But when he opened his own mouth parts, what came out was, "May I kiss you?"

Chapter 4

Adeline froze in place as if the lethal cold of space had instantaneously flooded every cell in her body. “May you... what?”

The huge crusher stood up taller than he already was, but at the same time, he flattened back the feathery whiskers of antennae that had made him seem even taller. “Kiss? May I kiss you? I read about it in the IDA handbook, and it seemed to suggest that such a behavior would be perhaps expected on a first date. If I understand the concept, we would place our mouths together in a way—”

“I know what a kiss is,” she interrupted. Now the icy chill gave way to a scalding deluge in her face. She hadn’t blushed this hard ever—over the mere *mention* of a kiss. “But the handbook isn’t quite right that it’s expected on a first date.” She looked away.

As soon as he’d said the word kiss, her gaze had locked on his mouth. Those tusks...

Of course she’d seen pictures of his species. Her first impression had been of a scarab beetle, with the extra limbs, antennae, and the shell-like carapace, plus the skin that seemed to change from bronze to blue depending on the slant of light. Past that, though, she’d noted without letting her brain spiral away with her that orcs were more or less humanoid shaped—and the IDA rep had assured the brides-to-maybe-be that they were biologically compatible with orcs in all the ways that mattered.

She tried not to frown as she remembered those words now. “All the ways that mattered” might’ve been doing a lot of heavy lifting in that explanation.

Did kissing matter? When she’d told herself she could definitely date an alien in order to flee Earth, she’d sincerely believed she would have no problem with all that entailed. Maybe she hadn’t really considered what *all* meant.

But she'd been wife once to a man who'd had it all, and look where that had gotten her. Maybe *all* didn't matter any more than kisses did.

She realized she'd been quiet much too long when Teq pivoted on his heel. "Come," he said. Oh god, if the IDA handbook had explained what *come* meant in an intimate relationship... "Let me take you to the galley," he continued, assuaging that particular worry. "You must be very hungry and probably tired, and even if you're not, you'll want to know your way around the ship."

"Yes, please. That would be wonderful." She tried not to wince at how simultaneously pathetic and stiff she sounded. If these orcs decided she wasn't compatible or interested, they might send her back to Earth and then—

No, that part of her life was over, just as she'd told Teq. She could never go back. She wouldn't, not when it could mean losing Oliver.

"Wait," she called. "Teq..."

As soon as she'd said please, his long legs had already carried him partway down the corridor, but he turned, the bottom edge of his kilt flaring out with his sudden response. From his little twitch of surprise at the distance between them, she guessed he was realizing that his kind and hers weren't instantly compatible in some basic ways either.

But they met again in the middle of the gap, and she dragged her attention up from some thick and, um, surprisingly handsome thighs to look at him.

He wasn't *actually* horrible to look at anywhere, she decided. The elements that she'd thought of as bug-like were really just...different. When she'd first showed Ollie the holographic image of her maybe future husband's species, he declared orcs "so cool."

"Like a knight in shining armor," he announced. "If scarab beetles were knights."

She had stopped believing in knights in shining armor outside of Ollie's storybooks.

Of course, she hadn't believed in aliens either.

She forced herself not to blush again as she gazed up at Teq. "I don't usually kiss on the first date," she told him. Not that she'd had many first dates. "But today is a day of firsts. And since we're all trying to get to know each other..." Wow, and she'd thought this was awkward before. "Well, if you still want to..."

He looked down at her, those feathery antennae quivering in a way she couldn't quite interpret. She knew from the IDA handbook that the sensory organs were very sensitive, used for a sort of echolocation. When he tilted his head, the antennae stayed still. "Are you saying you want to kiss me?"

She hadn't meant to take it quite *that* far. But considering she'd come much farther in leaving Earth... "Yes," she whispered. "If you want to kiss me back."

He squared off to her as if this really were some sort of transgalactic negotiation. "I want," he said decisively. "But I do not want to frighten you. You'll tell me what you like?"

How sad that she'd had to come such a long distance for any male to ask her that. She'd meant for the sarcastic thought to shore up her quivering nerves, but instead, some part of her softened a little. As Teq had said, the orcs had signed up for the IDA just as the women had. They were all in this together.

Somehow they both took another half step, although his might've been a little farther just because of his long legs. "You'll have to lean down a little," she murmured. "Since I forgot my stepladder on Earth."

A strange, low sound emerged from him, more like a vibration, and she realized he was amused. "Shall I kneel to you?"

Oh. Hmm. That image reverberated in her in a strange way too...

Slowly, she raised her hands, spreading her fingers to either side of the sash across his chest, just above the hard, bare planes of blue-bronze skin, not quite making contact. Of course, she'd already noticed that he was mostly naked; the

orcs wore only a sort of kilt wrap around their lower body, which seemed more like a place for pockets rather than any particular attempt at modesty, and that combo sash/utility belt. It was clear the IDA was accurate about orcs being humanoid enough. And having “two sets of bilaterally symmetrical upper limbs” meant double the bulging pecs, so...

She glanced up at him through her lashes. “May I touch?”

“Is this part of the kiss?”

“If we want it to be.” She swallowed hard. “Um. In the spirit of extraterrestrial exchange and intergalactic curiosity?”

“Please.” There was that thrum in his voice again, but not amusement this time, she sensed. Something deeper.

She let her fingertips descend gently. It wasn't really a shell, she decided, although the skin was tougher than hers. It felt like leather maybe, just slightly yielding, not cold but warm. Such a protective hide made sense for the species that evolved in rocky caverns. If she might've accidentally said something unflattering back on Earth about bugs, Ollie had pointed out that their own relatives were basically less hairy monkeys, so fair point.

With her palms resting on the hard breadth of Teq's torso to steady herself, she lifted to her tiptoes. He angled downward to again meet her halfway. The fearful tusks framing his wide mouth were far apart enough that she didn't even feel them. But as her eyes drifted shut, she didn't fool herself that she was kissing a human male.

The pulsing thrum under her hands was too fast and furious, and to her shock, her own heart raced to follow along with the tempestuous beat. When he wrapped his arm behind her shoulders, she leaned in farther. Some part of her—a part more unbelievable than anything she'd experienced since arriving at the Big Sky Intergalactic Dating Agency outpost in Sunset Falls, Montana—longed to meld with that wild pulse.

Some distant part of her—maybe the part she'd left on Earth?—sent up a warning flare. This wasn't her, couldn't be her. She'd *never* indulged such a reckless urge.

And once again, where had that gotten her? Though she'd had big dreams once, even if she couldn't quite remember what they were, she'd had to shrink to survive. Now, she might be small compared to Teq, but she was making her own way to the dreams she'd forgotten.

Skimming her hands higher, she clenched her fingers over his shoulders where the tough skin thickened into scales that caught the silvery light. With a rasping noise, he wrapped another arm behind her.

And she was flying.

Wait, not flying, he'd just anchored one of those lower arms under her backside, lifting her higher. Her lips parted under his in surprise, and he deepened the kiss.

Oh, those tusks were scary, but his mouth was soft and gentle, unlike the rest of him, coaxing her wider yet, as if wild and reckless was what he wanted too. She tasted him, cool and a little mineral-y, like very expensive sparkling water, but with a hint of something darker and rougher. Her head was whirling as if she'd been launched into space without any protection at all, and she broke the kiss with a gasp.

They gazed at each other, and this close, she saw herself reflected in his faceted black eyes. She looked...thoroughly kissed.

He didn't try to hold her, instead easing her carefully to the ground. But when she swayed as he released her, he kept one lower hand at her elbow.

Lips throbbing so hard it was all she could do not to reach up and touch the swollen flesh, she gazed at him wordlessly.

He tilted his head, antennae wiggling with what she would've sworn were nerves. "Did I... Was that kiss within standard deviation of normal Earther dating ritual distribution?"

Her tender mouth felt like it didn't even belong to her as she smiled. How long had it been since she'd been genuinely charmed? "I think I probably shouldn't have joined the

Intergalactic Dating Agency if I couldn't handle a little deviation.”

He made that vibrating noise again that was an orc chuckle. When he dipped his head toward her, those alien eyes glinted at her. “It is intrepid of you to come so far.”

Had anyone ever considered her intrepid? She very much doubted that; certainly she'd never thought it of herself. She started to wave off the assessment, then paused. It *was* brave, wasn't it?

“I haven't thought about it much,” she admitted. “I just... went for it.”

He tilted his head again, the same way he had when he kissed her. “Why *did* you join the IDA?”

There was a hint of incredulity in his voice, she thought, but maybe that was to be expected. After all, the orcs had opened their home—such a fragile bubble of breathable air in the vastness of space, despite the rocks jutting all over—so of course Teq wanted to know the sorts of things that wouldn't show up in a dating profile. “I wanted a new life for myself and Ollie,” she said, and that was the truth, if not the whole truth. “Discovering the IDA was like nothing I'd ever thought possible.” And that was very true.

Teq looked down at her. “From what I understand, it's possible because Mag paid quite a lot for the opportunity.”

That suggestion was less charming, and she bristled a little. “I'm not sure if you're implying anything,” she said, putting a definitive edge to her own voice to make it clear that he better not be implying anything, “but the IDA made very clear to us that if anyone chooses not to continue with dating and, um, mating, it's *over*.”

He stalked beside her in silence for a few steps. “And the IDA didn't imply that you all would be compensated in some other way?”

Now she was definitely glaring at him. “Dating first, mating maybe,” she said firmly. “No one here is a rent-an-Earthgirl.” She was beyond glaring, and moving full-on into

angry. “If all I wanted was cold, hard cash, I would’ve kept my mouth shut and stayed on Earth.” She knew her mouth was running away with her—not so different from when she kissed him, actually—but she couldn’t stop herself. “I know this crew isn’t rich. But wealth doesn’t guarantee happiness or health or even safety. Our planet is suffering because some of our people think money matters most of all.” She and Ollie had suffered for the same reason, which wasn’t anyone’s business but she couldn’t stop the deluge of rageful words. “I chose the orcs from the IDA profile book because it specifically said your people had to leave your home, and I thought you of all people would understand...” She finally managed to silence herself, her fingers tightened into fists, the tension radiating all the way up her arms and into her jaw.

“Understand what?” That edge had left his voice, but in some ways the gentleness made her more suspicious.

So she just shook her head. “It doesn’t matter. Your IDA profile said the orcs need someone to be their dates to this interstellar ball. That’s why we’re here. If there’s a chance of something more, that will be up to each couple. Or throuple or whatever.” Damn, she couldn’t keep blushing like this.

After a moment, Teq flicked his antennae. “That is all true.” He hesitated a moment, then added, “I did not mean to anger you with my questions.”

“I’m not angry,” she said. “Okay, not just angry. I’m confused. Why are we here if you don’t want dates and maybe mates?”

He hunched all four of his shoulders. And though the abashed stance didn’t make him smaller, his contrition seemed genuine. “Mag and Amma decided it was time to challenge how the Luster consortium sees us. They say it’s about being perceived as reliable and decent. As if being matched to puny, squishy people such as Earthers would make us seem less crude and monstrous.”

Crude and monstrous. He was saying something about his people that she’d thought to herself, silently and judgmentally.

But... “Squishy?” she said, caught between outrage and laughter.

Teq lifted his hand, all six-times-four digits flexing. “Soft and yielding,” he clarified. “Fragile and unthreatening.”

Deciding outrage was the more appropriate reaction, she scowled at him. “Just because we’re...squishy doesn’t mean we’re weak,” she informed him. She had not left Earth so far behind just to hear such bullshit again. Not even from her own mind and certainly not from any male.

“But it’s what the Luster consortium will believe,” he argued. “They will think that if we can fulfill needy females such as yourselves, then our contracts will be reliable and strong too.”

“That’s silly,” she sputtered.

“So is thinking that aliens from so far apart might somehow come together,” he pointed out.

It shouldn’t upset her so much, not when she’d realized long ago that all her relationships had been transactional. Still, the strain sank into her muscles, all the way to bone.

She might make a new life on the *DeepWander*, but in too many ways, this was what she’d wanted to get away from—and Teq was too much like the man she’d left behind.

Chapter 5

He'd made a mistake. Teq realized it, just as he realized that Mag would rip off one of his arms and beat him over the head with it if he didn't make things right with the Earther female.

With Adeline.

But what could he say? He'd badly fumbled his interrogation about why the Earthers had signed up for the IDA, only to basically confess that the orcs had the same mercenary motivations. He wanted to explain, but he couldn't reveal their new fortune—assuming that the Earthers weren't spies who already knew about it—just to assuage her suspicions.

“I can't have feelings,” he blurted.

Adeline took a little stumbling step, and he reached out to steady her, which she accepted for another step before turning away. “Feelings? I don't understand. The IDA made it seem as if your species had the same basic sensory requirements, more or less.” She gestured at the slymusk oozing past them on the wall, leaving a trail of silverglow behind. “I mean, we knew you evolved underground in caves, but you still use enough light that us Earthers would be able to live with you. If you think this won't work—”

“It's not all orcs,” he corrected. “Just me. Of all the crew ranks, I believe a crusher's place is too dangerous to consider taking a wife-mate. So I always knew I'd never feel the i'lva.”

She looked up at him, a pucker of skin between her strangely mesmerizing eyes. “I'lva? What's that? I don't remember that word in the IDA handbook and my translator isn't giving me anything either.”

He might've regretted mentioning it at all, except maybe it would give the other orcs a better chance with the Earthers. “Sometimes I think the i'lva is just one of our myths,” he told her. “It was said that once upon a time when our people would meet their life-mate, the i'lva would ignite within them, like a light that would always guide them home through the

darkness.” Though he meant to speak as clinically as a handbook, his voice shook, and he looked away from her. “I don’t know if it was ever true. When our environment destabilized, the changes in temperature and biochemicals meant almost no wife-mates were hatched or transitioned. And the stories of the i’lva just faded to the dark.”

Their steps had slowed in tandem as he told the story, and although they could hear the murmur of voices from the galley ahead, for some reason they paused in the hallway just out of sight.

Adeline was looking toward that liveliness, but then she glanced at him again, and the lights and the shadows added facets to those odd Earther eyes. “On Earth we have stories of true love too,” she said. “Unlike you, I did believe them. Sometimes I wish I hadn’t.” She looked down at her two hands, where her fingers were linked tightly together, and he wondered how much harder it was to hold on with so few hands and fewer digits. “But I did believe, and at least I got Ollie out of the deal. But maybe feeling isn’t all there is. Maybe...” She glanced up at him again, partly hidden behind the fringed lashes. “Maybe it’s as you say, better not to get lost in feeling. We have all this technology, right? The IDA’s matching algorithms, spaceships, breaking hunks of space junk into a living.” The curve of her mouth—the lips he’d just pressed against his own—seemed a little sad to him, despite the sensibility of her words. “We can still survive without risking our hearts, right?”

“This is so.” When she jerked her head up and down in a decisive affirmation, he did the same, though the Earther gesture made his antennae wobble awkwardly. They turned in tandem to join the others in the galley.

He had said she was intrepid to come all this way, and now he knew she was also wise to realize the dangers of wanting too much.

So why did the wild pulsing of the i’lva still burn through him?

When they joined the others in the galley, he forced himself to hang back as she hurried forward to reunite with her hatchling.

Ollie flashed all his little teeth at her, waving a fistful of foodstuff at her. “Mom, look! It’s an alien hot dog! They made it especially for me. It’s synthesized bug proteins.” The hatchling gave his mother a strange sort of look, with the little arches of hairs above his eyes wagging up and down above the corrective lenses. “But, like, synthesized from *actual* bugs, not like, you know, *other* sorts of things you might have *called* bugs before you knew them better.”

Teq couldn’t quite make sense of what the hatchling was saying, but Adeline gathered Ollie against her side. “And are you trying the orc food too? We are their guests, so it’s polite to sample a bit of everything.”

Ollie made a face that wrinkled the respiratory organ in the middle of his face; squishy Earther features were capable of a dizzying array of fluctuating expressions. “There’s an algae salad, kinda like the slymusks eat, but maybe you’d like that more than me.”

She laughed and squeezed him with her arm. “Show me what else you’ve tried.”

Mag had been circling the room, the other orcs making way for their apex as was proper, but he stopped at Adeline’s side. “Tell us what you like and what you need,” he urged. “Because we hope you’ll soon feel like more than guests.”

When Adeline did the smile gesture at Mag, Teq looked away, his carapace suddenly feeling too small and tight. He flattened one hand over the crusher glyph etched into his thorax, right above his primary circulatory organ. *The dangers of wanting too much*. He’d just told her he couldn’t feel, so why was he feeling *this*?

Reluctantly, he slanted another glance at the Earther female and his apex. Mag should choose Adeline for his wife-mate, and Adeline would do well to return Mag’s favor. They looked right together, both of them moving with that smooth confidence of those who knew their place and their value, their

outer layers unmarked by the labor of hard rock. The salvagers and miners at the Luster couldn't fail to be impressed.

Teq wanted to leave the cheerful bustle of the galley behind him, plunge into the depths of the nearest asteroid and lose himself in some unstable tunnel. But there was no distracting danger to be found at the moment, not when they were focused on wooing these Earthers to carve out a reputation at the Luster.

That was what mattered, and he didn't need to have any feelings about that at all.

But somehow, as the gathering continued, he found himself lurking just beyond Adeline's sight, like a crumbling comet fatally caught in the gravity well of some enticing star. He watched how she gave her focus to her hatchling and to Amma with the same smile; saw the way the other Earther females deferred to her; detected when that smile altered subtly around Dorn and some of the other orc males; marked that she carefully tried all the feast laid out for the new arrivals...but went back for more of the dewdrop whorls. The bite-sized confections were decorated with filigrees of caramelized sweetness encasing a chewy, melting inside.

Not nutritionally optimized—and more like three bites for a certain Earther's less mighty yet still strangely alluring mouth—but sometimes, as Amma said, in a hard universe, something soft and sweet was warranted.

Vug, he was worse than a void-viper. The deadly slithering creatures that infested poorly kept ships sometimes also lurked in the inferior asteroids they harvested for scraps. He'd be industriously crushing along and then suddenly venomous vermin would be trying to gnaw through his carapace. He didn't want to be lurking and slavering. It was embarrassing.

He forced himself to turn away.

And almost stumbled over Amma.

She looked up at him. "So you've chosen."

He reared back. "What? No. I've not... I will not be choosing. I can't, as you well know."

Though the threads of her antennae had become sparse with time, her focus on him was still sharper than any of the tools he wielded against the rock. “Did you tell that to the i’lva?”

He’d noticed that Adeline instinctively closed her eyes when she was being evasive, but orcs couldn’t hide, even in the dark. “The i’lva is a myth, lost with our world.”

“The i’lva doesn’t come from the stone,” Amma said softly. “It comes from you.”

Holding his antennae vigilantly stiff, he said, “Then it won’t be coming at all. I feel nothing.”

“You can’t ignore the i’lva,” she warned. “If you don’t share its light, the bonding fire will consume you from within, leaving you empty.”

“In the fractures is where the most prized crystals grow,” he pointed out.

“You are not just a hollow in the rock, Teq.”

“Maybe not. But I can dream.”

“Maybe you’re just hungry.”

At the piping voice, Teq looked down to find the hatchling.

Amma laughed, the wilted scales of her carapace vibrating with her amusement. “Teq is very hungry,” she agreed, slanting a sly look at him through the cloudy age-haze over her black eyes. “He needs something sweet and heady.”

Ollie looked down at his clenched hands then unfurled his five fingers toward them, displaying the dewdrop whorl, as big as his palm and slightly mashed from his grip. “I got the last one,” he said solemnly. “But I’ll share with you.”

Teq just gazed down at him, nonplussed, until Amma finally gave him a nudge. “I taught you how to share, didn’t I?”

Chagrined, Teq lowered himself to one knee, although he still towered over the hatchling. “I thank you for this gift.”

“Well, really it was yours first anyway,” Ollie pointed out. “So you were sharing with me. We can share together.”

Teq twisted the dewdrop in two, but before he could place his half in his mouth, another voice interrupted. “There you are, Ollie,” Adeline said.

Teq’s throat closed up, and the two pieces of dewdrop felt like void-vipers in his hands.

“The dewdrop is Mom’s favorite,” Ollie announced, confirming what Teq had himself observed. “She said it reminds her of baklava.”

Teq couldn’t help but glance at her. Was she longing for home so soon? Without a word, still on bended knee, he held out one half of the dewdrop to her. She glanced sidelong at him, the tip of her tongue flicking out to her lips, as if she could already taste the sweetness.

“Oh, the two of you were sharing,” she said hesitantly.

“I already had lots—some, a few,” Ollie quickly corrected himself. “Anyway, it’s your turn.”

Amma put one hand on his shoulder. “There will be many more new and exciting and tasty things to come,” she told him, although Teq suspected the old orc didn’t mean just desserts. “But this has been a long day for you, eh? Teq, why don’t you show them to their new quarters?”

He gave her hard antennae, and she kept hers fluttering, as if the missing threads meant she didn’t know he was perturbed.

So what else could he do? He gestured with the least of his hands. “This way.”

While Ollie said good night to the Earther women and waved, maybe a little shyly, at the orcs, Adeline watched indulgently. “He’s taking this so well,” she murmured.

“A testament to your care and upbringing of him,” he said.

She glanced at him. “Thank you for that. Sometimes I’ve had to wonder...”

He waited a moment, then another but she did not go on. “You wonder if the darkness and dangers of space is the right choice.”

She made the Earther laughing sound that was becoming familiar to him, but it was rougher than before, with a jagged edge. “Oh no, I’m very sure leaving Earth was the right thing to do.” She replaced the harsh sound with a wavering breath. “My ex-husband, Ollie’s father, threatened to take him away from me.”

Teq straightened to his full height, half flaring his carapace defensively. “We will not let that happen.”

Adeline looked up at him, her gaze flickering over his shape which must seem so alien to her, but instead of flinching again, this time she smiled, and it was neither hesitant nor sweet but fierce. “Thank you for that too. But for all his riches and connections, Robert wouldn’t have been able to get a spaceship. Also, he’s dead.”

Teq tilted his head. “Did you kill him?”

She clamped her hands over her mouth, and he wasn’t sure what the gesture entailed, but her eyes glinted with what he suspected was more ferocity. “Is it terrible to say that I wish I could say yes?” she mumbled past her fingers.

“No, not terrible. Orcs are very protective of their hatchlings too. Anyone who tried to separate a hatchling from us would find themselves circling a black hole without a ship.”

She let her hand drop. “My ex was...not a good man.”

“But you were his wife-mate?”

“It was expected,” she said with a twist to her soft mouth. “Sort of like you orcs have social and occupational distinctions like crusher or apex or assay, on Earth we have tax brackets. Robert’s family and mine were alike in a way that seemed to make the dating and mating inevitable. He wasn’t any happier than I was, but when eventually I said we should divorce—end our contract—he became very angry.” Her hand fluttered up again, as if defying the gravity of her self-control, her fingers covering her cheek in deflection.

Teq couldn’t keep the snarl from his voice. “He hurt you.”

She straightened her spine in a way that promised a lethal crushing. “He never touched Ollie. At least he never did that.

But after Robert hit me... It had to be over. Oliver couldn't grow up thinking that was okay, not ever." But then she averted her gaze. "I did everything I could to get away, followed all the rules, just like I always had. But there was really no one to help me, and I felt so alone."

"You did get away," he pointed out.

She shook her head. "He made a mistake, and hurt some people, financially this time. And they had the power to do what I couldn't. He went to prison. It wouldn't have been for long, but he put his hands on someone else there—and they were not as weak as I was."

Teq was silent for a long moment. He had been in danger many times but never in a situation where he didn't have some power over the outcome. "That must have been difficult for you and for Oliver, even if you gained your freedom."

"Robert's family wanted to see more of Ollie. I never liked that they encouraged Robert when he got involved in those shady deals, but I thought I should share some time with Oliver since I knew how distraught his parents were, losing *their* son. I couldn't even imagine that myself." She shook her head. "But then they threatened to take Oliver away from me, saying I was so wrecked by Robert's death—emotionally and financially—that I could no longer be a good mother." She made a noise in her throat even angrier than his. "When I found out about the IDA, I didn't even care that it sounded impossible, I only wanted to get away."

Teq gazed down at her. "You may be small and squishy, but you are very strong."

She was laughing as Ollie rushed back to her. "What's so funny?" he demanded. "Did Teq tell you a knock-knock joke or something?"

"No joke," she said. "I'm just laughing because...because life is funny sometimes."

Finally, she ate her half of the dewdrop. Teq did the same.

And though nowhere in the crusher handbook—not that such a thing existed—did it say he was in charge of anyone's

new life, Teq guided them solicitously through the *DeepWander* to their quarters and made sure they knew how everything worked before retreating to the door.

“Should you need anything...”

“We just hit the call button there,” Ollie said, repeating the instructions Teq had provided.

Teq found himself glancing at Adeline again. “Yes, that.” He wanted to say more, and they all had universal translators so anything he said should make sense. And yet somehow, it was all muddled up within him, so he just tilted his head and stepped backward into the empty hall.

Chapter 6

A big hand with too many fingers reached for her, splaying between her breasts. Was it holding her up...or down?

And which did she want it to be?

Her heart pounded under the hand, and she twisted restlessly.

“Mom? Mommy.”

The urgent little voice jolted her out of sleep, banishing the nightmare.

Or was it a fantasy?

Gone now, for sure. “Ollie? What’s wrong?” She pushed up onto her elbow, starting to rise from the nest-like cushions that was apparently an orc mattress, but he was already at her side, having let himself into her room from his own separate bedroom across the hallway of their apartment-style quarters.

“I had a dream.”

“Oh, owlet. C’mere.” She twitched back the covers, and he hopped in beside her. “Was it a bad dream?”

Snuggling into her shoulder, he nodded. But then he paused. “Or no. Maybe? I don’t know. I heard something. But I don’t know what it was, so maybe it wasn’t bad.”

She kissed the top of his head. “Too many dewdrops maybe?”

“*You* ate the last one,” he reminded her. “With Teq.”

“That’s true,” she murmured.

Maybe that explained the big alien hand in *her* dream.

Refusing to continue down that path, she mused, “Should we get a nightlight?”

“Just like home?”

“Just like.”

Once upon a time when our people would meet their life-mate, the i'lva would ignite within them, like a light that would always guide them home through the darkness.

How much of fear was simply not knowing?

Ollie fell asleep again almost immediately, his quick breaths gusting right in her face and his little body supernova hot despite the alleged climate control. After he rabbit-kicked her a few times, she decided no way was she getting back to sleep.

Carefully, she disentangled herself from his sprawled limbs—how had one little boy managed to take over the orc-sized cushions?—and eased out of the bed. At the door, she glanced back again, feeling the thread of her love stretching between them. Even when she silently closed the door (Ollie had been a little disappointed that it was only a sliding accordion door operated by hand, not something “cooler” considering they were on a spaceship) that thread remained, anchored in her heart. She guessed it would stretch across the universe if it had to.

The main open space of their new home was basically a living room and kitchen combo, both much smaller than she'd lived with before and also much bigger than she would've expected on what was essentially a submarine in space. But honestly, it was bigger than she'd been able to afford on her own after leaving Robert; one of the points his family had used to try to shame her into letting them take Oliver.

As if.

Instead of being squared off, the corners in the rooms were rounded, and the walls lightly textured. The finishes were more comfortable for the orcs' echolocation, Teq had told them. And Ollie had asked if he could get the extra sense when his eyes and ears stopped growing and he was able to also get the minor surgery to correct his nearsightedness. She wondered if tusks would ease or exacerbate her TMJ issues.

She checked the “clock” by the front door. Almost “morning” of her first “day” in her new home, so certainly that justified breaking into her emergency coffee stash, one of the

few items she'd brought from Earth for herself. Since day and night didn't mean much when there was no fixed star, Teq had explained the orcs kept a three-period circadian cycle of work, rest, and something he called uroondu which the communication implant in her head refused to translate but sounded like a combination of siesta, recess, and tea time.

"Surviving in outer space isn't always easy," he'd said. "So Amma revived the ancient orc ritual of uroondu to relax and revive the crews between jobs."

"Do you play games?" Ollie had asked.

The big crusher hesitated. "Some do. What games do you play?"

"I like ghost in the graveyard. I'll teach you, if you teach me an orc game."

Teq had glanced at her so quickly she almost missed it. "We have much to teach each other."

Which wasn't an answer, she'd noted. The IDA had specifically noted that the orcs welcomed single mothers, and that they "hoped for more offspring" eventually. But at the thought of Oliver playing ghost in the graveyard by himself—no one to search for, no one to find him—worry had spread in her again like an aching bruise. As an only child herself, she knew how hard it could be to always be alone. Had she been wrong to escape with Oliver when this might be worse?

And *why* had she told Teq about her sad past? She'd come here for a fresh start and a better future, and the reasons why didn't matter.

She'd already checked out the small kitchen last night while Ollie brushed his teeth, so prepping a bit of breakfast was easy enough. During the welcome party, Mag told them most of the orcs chose to eat communal meals in the galley.

"It can get lonely out in space," he'd said.

Amma had spread all four arms (and wasn't that going to take some getting used to?) in a gesture that encompassed orcs and Earthers alike. "And that's exactly why we're all here now, isn't it?"

With a grunt of dissatisfaction at her endlessly circling thoughts, Adeline grabbed the datpad they'd all been given at the start of their journey. She sent a message to June's device inviting her for coffee, being careful to tag the delivery as non-urgent so as to not bother the other woman if she was still sleeping—or if she was sleeping with someone else.

That's exactly why we're all here now, isn't it?

Maybe the only thought more disconcerting than being lonely was being in someone else's arms.

Someone else's four arms...

The datpad chimed softly. <coffeeeee be right there>

Adeline smiled. In some ways, June seemed too young and unworldly to be an alien mail order bride. How could she have already decided Earth wasn't for her? She'd even admitted that the Greyhound from her town to the Big Sky IDA outpost had been her longest, most interesting trip ever. But then sometimes Adeline would catch a glimpse of something else in the other woman's eyes, and she would remind herself no one could know what was in anyone else's heart.

She'd made that mistake already and never again.

When the door pinged, she went to let June in. "Good mor...ning," she finished with slightly less enthusiasm when she saw Kinsley too; she'd just never really clicked with the other woman. "Come on in. Coffee's ready, and so is what I'm calling the orc version of a breakfast burrito?"

Echoing her greeting, the two women followed her to the living room.

"Where's Ollie?" June asked.

"Still sleeping. In my bed." Adeline shook her head. "He said he had a nightmare."

"Poor kiddo," Kinsley said. "Probably just on edge from all the excitement."

Heading for the counter where she'd left the coffee, Adeline forced herself not to bristle as she pulled out a third mug. She knew Kinsley wasn't questioning her parenting, just

stating an obvious fact. On the IDA transport, they'd all discussed—sometimes overtly, sometimes less so—their hopes and trepidations. Kinsley hadn't shared any fewer details about her old life than Adeline herself had.

Everyone was entitled to personal issues they might not want aired out, not even in space.

“You said you had a nightmare too, Kinsley,” June said with her usual ingenuous sympathy as Adeline distributed the coffee. “That’s why I found you wandering around on my way here.”

Kinsley grimaced and touched her head behind her ear. “Yeah. The translator Sil gave me is only temporary until he can get something better at the Luster. Last night—or whatever we’re calling the hours they turn down the slug lights and everything goes creepy quiet and dark—I was getting some weird...echoes, I guess. Like whispers.” Clearing her throat, she dropped her hand. “It’s nothing.”

June patted her shoulder before taking a deep slurp. “Oh so good,” she moaned. “What happens when we run out?”

“We drink foczest, which is apparently the cheap, legal stimulant of choice in civilized galaxies,” Kinsley said. When they looked at her, she shrugged. “Gotta always be looking ahead.”

Adeline took a sip of her coffee. “I guess that’s why we’re here.”

By the time she'd served up the burrito and the three of them concurred it wasn't half bad, Ollie wandered out of the bedroom. At some point after she'd gotten up, he'd stripped out of his pajama top, and only the lightweight flannel bottoms drooped around his scrawny, little-boy butt.

Yeah, she already knew he was going to be asking for an orc kilt.

“Morning,” he grunted as he hugged her then spun on his bare heel and trudged back to the bathroom.

Kinsley chuckled. “I think I dated him once.”

“It’s hard when you can’t have coffee yet,” June said repressively.

Reluctantly amused herself, Adeline prepped a fourth breakfast. When Ollie returned—hands and face still a little damp from washing, she was proud and relieved to note—he looked perkier though still shirtless. “Teq wants to learn how to play ghost in the graveyard,” he announced to the other women. “We need more people. Do you want to play with us?”

“Ah, that wasn’t exactly what Teq said,” Adeline cautioned.

But June was already nodding. “I’ll play. But I warn you, I used to be really good at hiding and catching people when I was the ghost.”

Ollie beamed at her. “Cool. I’m really good at screaming.”

Kinsley shuddered. “I’d rather not do ghosts right now, thanks anyway.”

Unreasonably piqued that the other woman wasn’t entranced with her son but also a little worried for her, Adeline frowned. “Are the whispers that bad? Maybe you should go back to Sil and have him remove the translator until we get to Luster Station.”

Kinsley shook her head. “I don’t want to be lost out here, not knowing what everyone is talking about.”

“Sometimes I don’t know what people are talking about either,” Ollie supplied helpfully. “So I just ask them.”

Kinsley gazed at him, then sidelonged a glance at Adeline. “Must be nice that people in your life are so nice.”

Again Adeline had to squelch her exasperation with the other woman. “I’ve always wanted Ollie to know that the world can be a kind place when we are kind.”

A faint smirk quirked Kinsley’s lips. Which Adeline noticed were slicked with a deep red lipstick first thing in the morning, so as much as the woman said she wanted to know what other people were saying, it seemed like she wanted

those people paying more attention to *her* mouth. “Is that why you left Earth? Because it was such a kind world?”

June was watching them both with an air of anxiousness. “We all wanted something new? Didn’t we?”

After a heartbeat of silence, Kinsley nodded. “Something borrowed, something bold, something new, and something...” Abruptly, her sharp gaze wandered away from them. “Something...”

“Cold,” Ollie whispered. “So cold. So dark. I don’t want to sleep anymore. I want...”

He slumped to the floor in a heap of star-studded flannel.

“That must’ve been very scary for you,” Sil told Ollie as Adeline forced herself not to pace around the small but horrifyingly well-stocked infirmary. She’d already accidentally glanced around at the various drawers and—thanks to the translator implanted in her head—had read asphyxiation, severed limb, toxic dust inhalation, crush injury...

She forced herself to look away at that last one. Teq called himself a crusher. Had he ever been in this room with that drawer open, hurt and scared?

Ollie, looking very small on the orc-sized exam table, shook his head. “I wasn’t scared,” he objected. “It’s just that I went to sleep for a second even though I wasn’t sleepy.”

Adeline bit her lip hard enough to taste blood. Her baby had passed out, not from a tiredness or excitement or anything else; he’d fallen unconscious for some other reason.

Sil glanced at Kinsley who was perched on the very edge of one of the other five exam tables—six total! Which left Adeline fretting at just how dangerous space mining and salvage actually was. “I wasn’t sleepy either. In fact, I’d been up awhile and just drank some coffee. But I did get dizzy.” She shrugged, scooting ever closer to standing. “I feel fine now.”

Sil eyed her. “According to the IDA handbook, the gesture you make with your shoulders”—he imitated a shrug—“could mean many things, from uncertainty to dismissal to prevarication. Which one do you mean to convey?”

Kinsley gave him a hard look, then looked down at her hands, clenched in her lap. “I don’t know what to tell you. I was thinking about that wedding saying, and then those other words just...”

When she trailed off, Adeline prompted. “What you were saying, and what Ollie said, about it being cold and dark and you not wanting to sleep anymore. What was that?”

Without looking at them, Kinsley touched the temporary translator behind her ear. “I told you I was hearing weird echoes.”

Adeline clenched her jaw again, wincing at the pain that reverberated up into her own skull. “I have a universal translator, and I didn’t hear anything.” She glanced at June. “You?”

June shook her head, brow furrowed in concern. “Nothing,” she said apologetically. “No echoes, no whispers, no nightmares.”

Kinsley squared off to Sil, all but bristling, and at the moment Adeline appreciated the other woman’s blunt prodding. “So where is the voice coming from?”

The orc lifted all four of his shoulders in an obvious attempt at conveying...something. “When we signed the IDA contract, the Big Sky outpost sent over an extensive medical template for Earthers, adults and children, as well as records for all of you individually. I have some experience with overseeing med services onboard as part of my duties, and according to what I can tell, just as the IDA promised, most of your biological systems are similar to ours. And the scanners say everything is fine.”

“It’s not fine,” Adeline objected between gritted teeth. “This didn’t happen before we got here.”

Sil tried another shrug which was smoother but no less infuriating. “Keep a datpad with you and activated,” he told Kinsley, and Ollie perked up at the thought of having extra screen time. “It can note any anomalies that it perceives, and you can update it with your own experiences as needed. Unless you would rather be fitted with an automated tracker?”

Kinsley shook her head hard. “I’ll tell you if it happens again.”

“And I won’t let Ollie out of my sight,” Adeline said.

“Mom,” Ollie objected. “Kinsley and me are fine. Also, I can’t ever be the ghost if you always know where I am.”

She swept him off the exam table, hugging him close. “You are more than fine, you’re the best,” she told him. “And I’ll always want to know where you are.”

“Mom,” he protested again, even as he snuggled into her.

Sil met her worried gaze. “Even a good change can be disruptive,” he murmured. “I’ll keep looking for an answer, but give yourselves some time. That’s what our date to the Luster is meant to be: a chance for us to have fun and get to know each other.”

Kinsley let out a snort that probably should have earned her a remedy from the respiratory distress drawer.

“So can I play with the datpad now or...” Ollie peered up at Adeline with imploring eyes.

With a defeated sigh, she handed over the device.

“We can get you another one,” Sil told her. “So you don’t have to share.”

“Sharing is important,” Ollie said, even as he clutched the datpad to his chest.

Adeline shook her head. “We’ll be fine with this,” she told the orc. “We don’t need to be glued to a screen 24/7 or however long time is out here, not when we have the whole universe ahead of us.”

He nodded back. When Kinsley quickly hopped off the exam table to follow them, Sil cleared his throat—and coming from an orc it was a rather intimidating sound. “Kinsley, do you mind staying for another moment? I want to run one more test on your temporary translator, see if we can get rid of those echoes.”

Kinsley slanted a glance at Adeline and then back at the orc. “Sure,” she drawled slowly, although she sounded anything but sure.

June’s attention bounced between them as well before she followed Adeline and Ollie out of the infirmary. Although she didn’t go far. “Maybe I’ll wait for Kinsley,” she said in a fretful voice. “She seems lonely and sad sometimes.”

Ollie nodded. “Probably because she hears those whispers too, and it says it’s sad and lonely.”

It was everything Adeline could do not to clench him tighter. “Let’s not dwell on whispers, okay? If they talk to you again, we can...” They could what? Was sticking her head in the sand—or out the airlock or whatever—going to fix the problem this time? It hadn’t before. “Let me know if Kinsley or Sil has anything else to say,” Adeline said to June. “Ollie and I are going back to our apartment so he can play on the datapad for a while.”

They went their separate ways, and even in what she knew was the relatively small confines of the ship with many souls aboard, Adeline too felt as lonely as she ever had.

Ollie was more than happy to play on the little computer while she set about exploring the rest of their apartment. It had more storage than it had looked like at first, and various supplies already laid in, which she appreciated. As clever as the universal translators were—when they weren’t generating ghosts out of the ether—she suspected some of the context just didn’t translate, and she was eyeing the labels on the food packaging uncertainly when the door chimed.

“Who is it?” she said just loud enough for the door to hear.

“Crusher Teq requests entry,” the door informed her.

For a moment, she wanted to refuse. Their kiss had been... surprising, and this morning had already had enough uncomfortable surprises that she wasn't sure she wanted to add anymore. But she couldn't exactly claim to not be at home; like, where else would she be?

Stifling a sigh—and squelching the little kick of her pulse—she called, “Let him in.”

The door folded aside to reveal the big orc. Even though the ship was sized for his people, his wide shoulders filled the frame. As if he sensed her ambiguity—or maybe felt some of it himself, despite his claim to not have feelings?—he stayed where he was, sort of lounging, his upper shoulder braced against jam and all four arms crossed over his chest.

“I heard you had some trouble,” he rumbled.

Yes, that kiss had bothered her far long than it should have, disrupting her dreams... Heat swept through her. “You mean Ollie.”

When he straightened abruptly, his tensed antennae brushed the top of the door frame. “Is there other trouble?”

“No, no,” she hastened to reassure him, then hesitated. “Other than these food labels. Dare I ask, what are” —she squinted at the package, just in case that would make the universal translator burp up some other explanation —“Nebular Niblettes?”

“They make a lot of nutritionally balanced meals optimized for various carbon-based species like ours, color coded so you can get the right mix.” Pushing away from the door, he sauntered toward her. Passing Oliver in the living room, he greeted the boy who grunted vaguely in reply, more entranced with the alien tech in his hands than with the alien Teq right in front of him.

She'd had the alien Teq in her hands...

Had she really kissed an alien on the first date? She accidentally licked her lower lip, tender where she'd bitten it earlier. They hadn't even *had* a date, for heaven's sake. Not even a one-night stand, more like a one-particular-moment-in-

the-infinity-of-space happen-to-be-standing-next-to-you-so-let's-kiss half swoon.

Ridiculous.

She realized she'd been quiet way too long, gazing up at him where he'd stopped barely an arm's length from her.

Of course, his arms were long so he wasn't *that* close. Why was her heart beating so hard? His antennae were vibrating, just a little, she wouldn't have noticed if she wasn't looking at him so closely—whyyy was she looking at him so closely?—and oh god, did that mean he could *hear* her heart pounding?

She gulped, realizing that *even more* time had passed in her dithering silence.

“Would you like to have some with us?”

Oh no, what had just come out of her mouth? Worse than a first-date dinner or one-night-stand breakfast, so much worse than a single get-to-know-you drink; she'd just basically asked him to stay for lunch. Only husbands and daddies stayed for lunch!

Teq was just watching her, those antennae quivering. “Wouldn't that be more trouble?”

Was he...teasing her? She took a slow breath. She was freaking out for no reason. The IDA had set them up but with very clear boundaries. People had stomped her boundaries for so long, she'd just forgotten she could have them.

“Ollie is going to be hungry as soon as I tell him to put down the datapad, so if you stay, you can hear about what happened this morning.” She tried for a smile. “Although you may be finagled into a video game or something.”

For a moment, she thought the big orc might make a run for the door. The way he shifted his weight would've made her laugh if she wasn't so nervous herself.

“Adeline,” he said. “I should not have...spoken of the i'lva when I know I am not...not able to give you what you've come for.” When she didn't reply right away, he added in a rougher tone, “I cannot kiss you again.”

How. Utterly. Embarrassing. She kept her smile in place, like her face had gone as stiff as orc scales. “It’s just lunch. We’ll use our mouths for... nibbling.” Oh great, now she was thinking about eating out, how that wide mouth would fit around her long-ignored lady parts, those tusks forcing her thighs wider... “And chatting,” she added hastily, her face absolutely burning. He must think she was losing it. She cleared her throat. “Maybe I just need some more time to come to grips”—*long, strong fingers holding her aloft while they kissed*—“with the realities of dating and”—*don’t say mating again or you will probably jump him*—“whatnot, so if you aren’t looking for more, maybe that’s a good place for me right now”—*in your bed maybe?* Oh shuuuut up, anxiety brain.

After a moment where she wished she might spontaneously combust and not in a sexy way, Teq took the food pack from her slack hand.

“You are wise to take your time to go slow and make good choices,” he said. “It is the same when working with space rock. Choose well, guard closely, and reap the treasure.” He wagged his antennae. “Let me make lunch. These food packs are edible and nutritious, but with some tricks they are also delicious.”

Which was how she found herself sitting, maybe for the first time, on the opposite side of her kitchen counter from where lunch was being made.

She glanced over her shoulder to check on Oliver. “So I assume Sil told you what happened this morning.” When Teq inclined his head in assent, she went on. “It was so strange. Both Ollie and Kinsley said they heard the same whispers.” She lowered her voice, not that she thought Ollie would be distracted from his game. “I thought it was just a nightmare from too many dewdrops and too much excitement.” She looked up at the alien male, wondering if he could understand. “I don’t care about treasure. All I want to do is what’s right for Ollie. And maybe I’m afraid...”

He waited for her to go on. When she didn’t, he put down the array of packages he’d been pulling from storage drawers

to turn to her. He unfurled one long-fingered hand toward her, and after the briefest hesitation, she put her hand in his.

“Deep space mining can be hazardous and lonely,” he murmured in that low voice. “We thought that is all our life would be, but now Mag and Amma have brought you Earthers. And this is something new and different and, yes, maybe something to fear.”

She gazed at him. “You? Fear us? But you’re so”—she waved her free hand vaguely—“um, big and strong.”

He squeezed her fingers and released her, turning back to the food packs. “Most of the asteroids we mine are bigger and stronger yet,” he mused. “So is loneliness.”

He combined the packs together, laying the empty packaging in front of her to show her which was which. “Shall we eat?”

Chapter 7

Teq couldn't believe what he was doing. Not the cooking; he'd always enjoyed experimenting with the food packs even when the nutrition content meant just tipping it into his mouth was good enough. But to offer life advice to an alien mail order bride? One he had no intention of pursuing, like a priceless asteroid that would spin off into the dark without him.

He placed food for all of them at the counter, slightly less for the hatchling, as Adeline oversaw Ollie's ablutions. The hatchling explained that he hadn't actually been playing video games, but rather looking up what kinds of beings laid eggs in space.

"But I can't really find anything," he said, disappointment in his voice. "Everything says it's too cold and dark for babies. Mom, are you going to have a space baby?"

Adeline's utensil clattered to the plate. "Space...babies?" Heat bloomed under her skin on the wavelength that called to some primitive part of Teq's cave-dwelling ancestors. "Oh, owlet... Is that what's giving you nightmares?"

"Geez, no," Ollie said. "Babies aren't scary. And if we gave them growth injections or something, I'd have someone to play ghost in the graveyard with." He cocked his head. "Although if we made the baby too big, that would probably be scary."

Adeline murmured something reassuring to her hatchling, but Teq's mind—like a wayward asteroid—had wandered off at the thought of space babies. Why was that thought gutting him like a void-viper's fangs? The hope of another generation of orcs was exactly why Mag and Amma contacted the IDA. His antennae quivered as if from the reverberation of hatchlings racing through the quiet halls.

"I will play ghost in the graveyard with you," he said.

Ollie and Adeline both looked at him.

"Oh, you don't—" she started.

“Cool,” Ollie said louder. “Usually we would have to wait for nighttime. But it’s always dark in space, right?”

“Unless you are orbiting a star,” Teq noted. “Then it’s always day. At least on one side of the ship.”

Ollie laughed. “I love space.”

When Ollie raced back to his quarters because “I gotta get something,” Adeline said softly to Teq, “Really, you don’t need to do this. I know you aren’t looking for...for feelings.”

“It’s time for uroondu anyway,” he said. “But also, I am a crusher, and part of that means I am in charge of protecting this ship, not just during collection and extraction, but always. If there is something strange happening to your hatchling, I will stop it.” He lowered his voice. “And if something is trying to make him afraid, I will make them know six times the fear.”

She gazed up at him, the stark dread in her eyes stabbing through him. “You think someone is doing this to Ollie on purpose?”

“You and your hatchling are safe on the *DeepWander*,” he swore. “I will see to that.”

He thought maybe she would refuse to leave their quarters, but when Ollie raced back with a small sack in his arms, she said nothing.

“This is my special adventure backpack,” Ollie explained. “Mom made it for me cuz she said if we ever had to leave home because of an emergency like an earthquake or a flood or...or anything, we would be okay and could help other people too.” He looked up—and up—at Teq. “I guess that’s why we’re here, huh? Because we had to have a special adventure, but we can also help you cuz Mom knows all about big fancy parties like the Luster. She’s practically a princess, ya know.” He rummaged through the pack. “Okay then. Got my flashlight. Let’s play!”

After Oliver explained the rules of the game, Teq suggested the gather-hall as the graveyard where they could hide and hunt in the many nooks—while still being safely contained.

Oliver agreed with enthusiasm. “I’ll be the ghost first,” he said when they reached the hall. “You and Mom will have to find me, and then I have to catch you before you make it back to home base. I have the datpad in my special adventure backpack, so you can call me, just in case you aren’t good at finding. Once you know how to play, we can see if June wants to play too.”

“We will do our best,” Teq promised.

When he darted off, Adeline took one step after him. But she was already stopping even as Teq reached out to snag her hand. The memory of her mere five fingers pressed into his bigger hand still lingered from before lunch, and he wasn’t sure why he needed to reinforce that sensation.

“I will not burden him with my worries,” she whispered. “I will hold all the fear and ugliness apart from him. The only ghosts he will ever know are the friendly ones.”

“He can’t get lost,” Teq murmured. “We are on a ship in the middle of space.”

“I know that. Believe me, I know,” she said. “So why can’t I convince myself?”

“If it would help, I will take you with me the next time we spacewalk to an asteroid.”

After a startled silence, a breath of that Earther laugh emerged from her. The sound tickled his antennae, and the spark in her dark eyes was like the warmth of a distant star getting closer. “I’d be terrified,” she said. “But I would like to see what you do, or maybe more like see what I’ve gotten myself into.”

“It’s worth seeing,” he assured her. “To catch a rock that’s been tumbling through space for eons, to reveal the treasure inside it. And even if there’s nothing, seeing in all that darkness an infinite number of chances to try again.”

She blinked up at him, the corner of her mouth curling. “Why, Crusher Teq, I believe you are a little bit of a poet.”

He tilted his head. “All orcs are a little bit poet. What else can you do in the dark?”

Again, that strange, enticing heat flashed across her cheeks. “What else... Oh, we can look for a ghost, I guess.” She scuttled off in the direction her hatchling had gone, calling, “Twelve o’clock midnight! Hope I see a ghost tonight!”

Bemused, Teq followed.

It wasn’t hard to know where Oliver had gone, of course, considering his heat trail lingered and he was whispering, “Don’t be scared. It’s not that cold and dark anymore.” Teq’s chest tightened at the thought of the hatchling trying to comfort himself, even though he’d chosen to hide. He wanted to go to the little Earther right away, to add his bigger voice to the reassurance.

But that wasn’t the point of the game, was it? They were practicing to be clever and courageous and committed, all good orc attributes. So he followed the rules and pretended he didn’t know where Oliver was, the same way Adeline mused aloud, “Where could that pesky ghost be? Maybe it’s invisible. Maybe it floated all the way to the sky...er, no, not that far, probably.”

As they searched through the nooks and crannies of the salvaged stone, her voice echoed in the empty hall.

Empty?

Teq grabbed her hand again, not just because he wanted to touch her. “Adeline,” he said softly. “Stop.”

She peered up at him. “It’s just part of the game.” But then she fell silent, eyes widening in concern. “What is it?”

“Oliver isn’t in the hall.”

“What? But we said this is the graveyard...” She gulped back the last word.

“Apparently someone isn’t playing by the rules.” He kept hold of her hand. “Come.”

“We have to find him!”

“I will.” He tugged her quickly through the hall. The gather-hall had many access points—as any place to gather should have—which meant Ollie could have slipped out

anywhere. Since the heat trail of the hatchling's little body had faded, Teq checked the datpad on his lower wrist. "He's in one of the service corridors." The corridors provided access to the ship's systems and weren't sized comfortably for orcs, but for a little Earther... "It is a good hiding place."

"There will be no hiding from the long talk we are going to have about following the rules," she growled.

"It's a special adventure," he reassured her.

"This is a working ship," she countered. "I can't even count the number of ways he could get hurt."

Since that was true enough—and worse, the datpad signal showed Ollie moving toward the processing bays with, of course, all the heaviest equipment—Teq didn't answer, just sped up. When Adeline started to fall behind his longer stride, he swept her up against his side, anchoring her there easily with two arms.

She made a little noise but didn't object, and he was achingly aware of her softness, holding her so carefully.

How could she be so bold, venturing into the dangers of space, when she was so soft?

To distract himself from the sensation, he grumbled, "How does one little hatchling move so quickly?"

"Welcome to the mysteries of parenthood," she muttered back. "Sometimes you wonder if they're *trying* to find every danger." Her arms were so short and supple compared to his, but when she tightened her grip around his neck, he thought she might choke him. "I wanted him to never worry, not be afraid like I was. But not like this."

"He can't get into the ore processing area," Teq reassured her. "There's a special code. So he'll probably just be waiting outside the door." As they raced around the corner, they saw the bay access gaping wide.

"There is another code to get through the inner door," Teq added.

But the inner door was slid open too, with the darkness of the bay full of heavy equipment beyond. Adeline struggled against his hold, and reluctantly he put her down, careful to stay right on her heels as she bolted into the bay.

“Oliver!” Her cry echoed in the empty darkness.

Teq cursed under his breath. If the fortune had gone missing...

He did not want his earlier suspicions about the Earthers to be true.

Perhaps Oliver was not a hatchling. Maybe he was a very tiny saboteur, his partners in crime cleverly manipulating the orcs' longing for wife-mates and family, for a chance at a better life, a shared life.

The fortune was right where he'd seen it last, dull under the lights. And though Oliver was standing right in front of it, his small, fragile shape silhouetted by the glow, Adeline never so much as glanced at the valuable rock as she swept him into her arms. “Oliver Sebastian Barlow. You are in big trouble, mister. You were supposed to stay in the gather-hall.”

He patted her cheek. “I'm sorry,” he said sweetly. “I heard someone else say they wanted to be the ghost to play with us. So I came here to find them.” He craned his neck to look over his shoulder. “I told you it's not cold and dark and lonely anymore.”

Teq followed the hatchling's gaze, but there was nothing in the empty bay. Nothing except the rock.

“Oliver,” Adeline said slowly, “who are you talking to?”

He waved one small hand. “My new friend. That rock.”

“Asteroid fragments don't talk,” Teq said.

Oliver squinted at him. “Are you sure? Have you met them all?”

Adeline made a little noise in the back of her throat that didn't quite sound like an Earther laugh. “Oliver, don't be rude,” she said through that little quiver.

“He’s not being rude. The rock was talking. I heard it.”
Kinsley appeared around the other side of the asteroid chunk.

Teq stiffened. “How did you get in here?” he demanded. And how had he missed her presence? He’d been too focused on Oliver. “Did you unseal the hatches?”

He knew his suspicions were right when Kinsley looked away from him, her jaw cranking to one side. “I heard something calling from in here.”

“So you broke into a secured facility?” Teq crossed all his arms over his thorax. He’d seen how Adeline wasn’t entirely comfortable around the other Earther female. “This is how you honor the IDA contract of connection and communication?”

Kinsley hunched, making herself smaller. “I had to,” she whispered. “I had to make sure I wasn’t...losing it again. Anyway, it wasn’t that hard.”

“What is it saying now?” Adeline asked Ollie.

He squirmed to get down, and she let him slide to his feet, although she kept a hold of his hand. “It’s not really words. But it’s so happy to not be alone anymore.”

“Rocks don’t talk,” Teq repeated obstinately.

Ollie shrugged. “I guess some rocks do.”

Teq tapped out an urgent message to Mag, then switched to the ship’s internal scanning system. The *DeepWander* wasn’t the most advanced model available—and they’d had to do many of the repairs and mods themselves—but he’d have to insist on another safety and security upgrade now that they had the Earthers aboard. And he made an extra note to himself about Kinsley saying she’d had no trouble accessing the bay; that shouldn’t have been possible, at all. The scan beeped its completion, finding no incursion, no leaks, no anomalous signals.

He took a step closer to the stone.

Adeline grabbed his arm. “Teq. Be careful.”

He paused, more from shock than the strength of her grip, which wasn’t nothing. Had anyone ever cautioned him before?

Maybe Amma had, but he didn't remember. While he'd come out of the hatchling grotto sturdy enough to clear slag, it had been obvious he was tuned to the composition and flaws of stone in ways to make a strong crusher. And he'd thrown himself into the work, sometimes literally.

After a breath of hesitation, he put one hand over hers. "I said you would be protected on the *DeepWander*. I break many things, but not that promise." He eased away from her.

Because if anything broke here, it might be his focus and restraint. Given his tough hide, how could her soft fingers leave such a mark, invisible yet enduring?

But the reminder of the potential dangers of the unknown changed his course, and he ushered the Earthers out of the processing bay. He made sure to secure the access doors with his personal encryption. He would know if anyone tried to break in again.

Mag was striding up with Dorn and three others. "Teq," he called. "What is going on?"

"Kinsley needs an escort to her quarters," Teq replied. "We can discuss the protocols later, but she breached the secondary ore processing bay, potentially endangering a hatchling."

Jerking her head up, Kinsley stared at Oliver, then Adeline. "I'm so sorry. I didn't mean—"

Adeline flicked her fingers, silencing the other female. "We'll talk later too." Though her tone was as cold as the shadow side of an asteroid, she squared off to Mag. "Kinsley made a mistake, but Earth is a closed world, and per the IDA contract, if you have any disagreements with her, including legal, moral, or personal concerns, you may not impose your own penalties but must let her go back."

Kinsley straightened in an awkward movement, her eyes wide with alarm. "I can't—" But at another gesture from Adeline, she settled to her heels.

Mag twitched his carapace, obviously aggravated, but his tone was even when he said, "You need not worry. We would never harm a guest, not even one who tried to steal from us."

Over Kinsley's objection of "I didn't! Not this time!" he continued, "Dorn, Reji, take her back to her quarters and make sure she is safeguarded."

Flanking the smaller Earther, the two orcs looked huge, and Teq felt a pang of uncertainty. Did all the Earther females *feel* so small? Kinsley had only been responding to whatever message the rock was emitting, the same as Oliver. Although she'd broken through their locks to do it.

Adeline was typing on her datpad. "Kinsley, June and Carmen are on their way and will stay with you until...until we figure out what's happening. None of us should be alone."

The other female nodded, although she did not raise her gaze, as the trio left.

"I don't know that she meant any harm," Adeline murmured to Teq.

"'Not this time'?" When he repeated the Earther's ambiguous concession, Adeline sighed.

But Teq couldn't reassure her, not when he had to explain the situation to his apex—and anyway, he was troubled himself.

If the orcs lost the fortune before they even got to the Luster...

Maybe all the Earther females would be going back to Earth.

Chapter 8

Adeline's jaw ached while she watched the orcs talking amongst themselves. She was worried for Ollie, worried for Kinsley, worried for what would happen next. Dammit, she might even be worried for a chunk of rock? How much fretting could one body hold before her jaw just clenched itself into a black hole?

She forced herself to not clutch at Ollie, but she didn't let him go too far either, and when Teq gestured for her son to approach, she was right on his little heels. Nobody questioned her boy without her right there.

But the big crusher dropped to his knee with the same calm kindness he'd shown ever since Ollie had stuck his hand in the slymusk and she'd screamed about it. He'd said he wasn't looking for any sort of bond or feeling, which was a pity because he was so good at it.

He tilted his antennae toward Mag. "Ollie, can you tell our apex what you told your mother and me?"

Oliver repeated everything he'd already told them about hearing whispers and following whispers. But this time he glanced over his shoulder at the rock, that even under the bright lights didn't look like anything more than an orc-sized chunk of concrete. "It's being quiet now. I think it's afraid of all of us."

"Maybe Oliver heard it because he's a child, and not so... unnerving as the rest of you." She glanced among them with a meaningful look.

"Are we so frightening to you?" Teq asked in a soft voice.

"What are you planning to do with the rock?"

Teq's tusks jutted, and it was Mag who answered. "Chop it up and sell it at the Luster."

Oliver let out a little cry of dismay, although Adeline wasn't sure if it was his own sentiment or the rock's.

Teq glanced at the datpad on one of his wrists. “It registers with an energy field,” he murmured. “But not anything we’d normally be scanning for, not anything we’d hear.” He twitched his antennae.

Adeline frowned. “Are you saying the rock is alive?”

“I wouldn’t have said that rocks could talk either. What is your definition of alive?”

She wouldn’t answer that, not after the last few years she’d had. Maybe she would’ve registered as a dead space rock herself: cold, distant, nothing left to give.

Except these space miners had posted at the IDA that they still had use for someone like her.

Teq looked up at her. “Could Oliver try to speak to it again?”

“Sure,” Ollie chirped, jumping forward.

But Teq put out one long arm to stop him. “Let’s hear what your mother has to say first.”

They both peered up at her with almost identical beseeching expressions, though one was her familiar little boy and the other was an alien male.

She swallowed hard. “We’ll go together,” she said, hoping neither of them heard the quaver in her voice.

She couldn’t let them see she was afraid of a rock.

Teq programmed something on his datpad and the three of them returned to the giant hangar and approached the thing.

She had thought the glints on the rock were mostly the bright lights of the bay, but as they changed perspective, she realized the sporadic shimmer was coming not from the surface of the rock, like when grains of sand in concrete caught the sunlight, but at least partly from within. And there were more of the twinkles now than before. “What sort of rock is it?” she murmured to Teq.

“The surveyors weren’t entirely sure. It was partly embedded in a reconstituted rubble asteroid we were

harvesting for metals and water. It scans mostly as a stony chondrite with some silicates and organic polymers. But there are also completely novel allotropes of carbon atoms arranged in crystal formations with unknown impurities.”

“It’s a diamond,” Ollie whispered. “Bigger than me.”

“Exactly the sort of thing goes for big credits at the Luster,” Teq agreed.

Adeline studied the rock, as if she could peer into the translucent bubbles like tiny windows. “But if it’s alive...”

“Obviously that changes everything.” Teq answered without hesitation, but she thought she caught a note of resignation in his voice, as if the change wouldn’t necessarily be good.

The IDA intake coordinator has been very clear that the orcs were working-class, seeking wife-mates as equal partners, not consorts. That distinction had suited Adeline perfectly at the time; she was done with the illusion that the luxuries of her life hadn’t come with an unpayable cost. But if the crew of the *DeepWander* had been relying on this windfall, she could understand Teq’s disappointment.

“Those little sparkles,” she murmured. “It’s beautiful.”

Ollie giggled. “That made it happy again.”

She smiled wryly at the rock. “My name is Adeline. And this little one is Oliver, my son. And this is crusher Teq. Who won’t be crushing you.” She slanted a glance at him.

His big shoulders—all of them—lifted and fell on a soundless sigh.

Ollie cocked his head. “It doesn’t really speak English or orc. It’s more like...feelings.”

“That’s why I’m not getting anything,” Teq muttered.

Adeline nibbled at her lip thoughtfully. “The IDA handbook on orcs said your antennae are very sensitive. Maybe you just need to fine-tune a little.”

He stilled—and that stillness made her pulse skip. “Perhaps. For now, hopefully Ollie can translate.” He glanced down. “Oliver, can you ask it what it wants?”

Ollie shook his head, nodded, and shrugged all the same time. “It just doesn’t want to be alone anymore. It wants to be with us.”

“There will be many more beings at the Luster,” Teq said. “It would be very much not alone there.”

Since he only muttered it, Adeline decided she didn’t need to respond. And she wasn’t even going to mention Mag’s comment about chopping it up “Ollie, the rock said it was sad about the cold and dark. Does it need more light and heat?” She tried to project the feeling of warmth and illumination, gesturing at the lights—as if a rock had eyes and could see her—then wrapping one arm around Ollie and the other around Teq, giving them a little squeeze as if that would demonstrate.

Ollie put his arm around her, and after another moment, Teq did the same, making them an awkward octopus of not-aloneness.

“Light and heat, yes,” Ollie said. “And maybe a little water?”

“Rocks need to drink,” Teq said in a disbelieving voice.

“It wants to shine for us,” Ollie explained.

While they’d been talking to the rock, Sil and a few more orcs had arrived, and Oliver went through the whole explanation again. When he was done, Adeline said firmly, “That’s enough for now.”

To her surprise, Oliver didn’t object. “Roxy is tired too.”

“Roxy?”

“That’s going to be its name,” Ollie said.

“Rocks have names,” Teq said with another sigh. “And feelings.”

Oliver tilted his head, in what she was coming to think of as a very orcish gesture. “Everyone has feelings. And when Mom

said our names, it wanted a name too.”

“What else is it going to want from us?” Mag asked in a low, ominous voice.

She hadn’t wanted much, Adeline reflected as she led Oliver away, leaving the orcs to their found and lost fortune. When she left Earth, she’d wanted only to be far away. But who—besides Oliver apparently—could say what a wandering space rock would want?

It wasn’t until they left the processing bay that she realized Teq was a half step behind her. He could be very unobtrusive when he wanted to, for all his size and width.

“This is even stranger than taking aliens as wife-mates,” he murmured.

Considering she’d jumped with both feet at the idea of alien dating once she’d discovered the IDA, despite having not even known aliens existed, Adeline found herself unreasonably miffed at his assessment. Just because *he* didn’t want an alien wife-mate... “It seems to me that the universe is a very strange place,” she said tartly, “with plenty of room for the unexpected.”

He paced beside her in silence back to their quarters. When Ollie wandered into the living room, pulling out the datpad, Adeline blocked the doorway, keeping Teq on the outside.

She partly closed the door, letting her keep half an eye on Ollie while she glared at Teq. “You knew something was out there, calling to him. And you let him follow it.” Her stomach and jaw were cranked so tight she thought she might break. “You used my son. And I told myself no one would ever have the chance to do that again. I should take him and leave, right now.”

After a tense moment, Teq took a step back, dipping his head. “I didn’t know the rock was calling. I thought that, were I in his presence, I would hear what he heard and could stop it. I promised that you and he would be safe, but I’ve failed you.”

Her body felt as hard as his hide, his words bouncing off her cold skin. She was just supposed to be okay, as if nothing

had happened?

But... Nothing bad *had* actually happened. Yes, Oliver had slipped away from them, but she'd been there too. And Kinsley had been the one who unlocked the bay, apparently; although it should have been better secured. And really, it was just a pet space rock... But her son could've been hurt, or worse.

The universe was strange and beautiful—and dangerous. How could she do the right thing—how could she even *know* what the right thing was?—when everything was so new and confusing? How far did she think she could run from her fears?

You don't have to be scared. It's gonna be an adventure. Those had been Ollie's last words before he ran onto the *DeepWander*.

The breath shuddered out of her, the defensive coldness cracking. "He's everything to me, Teq. I can't lose him. Maybe you won't understand since you don't want to feel anything." The last of the air left her on a harsh laugh. "That must make life so much easier."

The big crusher angled his head away, gazing past her. "No. I think it doesn't." Without explaining more, he straightened. "I need to return to my apex."

She gritted her teeth until they ached too. "Are we confined to quarters like Kinsley?"

He stiffened another degree. "No, of course not. And she will be released as soon as we can confirm she isn't a spy or a thief."

Though she didn't particularly want to be fair, Adeline said, "I don't think she intended to steal the rock or endanger Ollie. But judging from her questionable skills and her reactions, I'm not sure she is completely innocent of other things." She shook her head and stared hard at the orc at her door. "Whatever happens, I remind you of the IDA contract."

For a heartbeat, he didn't reply, but then he said, "If we cannot fulfill our vows to you, we must let you go."

She nodded once and pivoted back to the room. As the door closed silently—not even a quiet whoosh; so not cool, as Ollie would say—she forced herself to not go back, to throw herself into his arms and beg for comfort as if she were still a child herself.

She couldn't go back, and some promises could never be kept.

After a patient discussion about following the rules of a game as well as the rules of one's mother, they ate dinner, and Ollie declared it almost as good as Teq's. Later, as Adeline settled Oliver in his bed—they could at least start in his own bed—he blinked up at her. “Roxy will be okay, won't it, Mom? Teq won't crush it, will he?”

She wanted to reassure him. That had always been her first instinct, of course, even as things had gotten worse with Robert and his family. But Oliver had been younger then, and platitudes had been all she had. “I don't know what will happen,” she told him. “But we will do our best. That's what we always do.”

He nodded, but behind his glasses, his eyes, so like hers, narrowed with the first inkling of doubt that what he was promised would always happen.

Yes, his eyes were maybe too much like hers.

She kissed his forehead, lingering for a heartbeat but not so long that he would absorb her worry. “Sweet dreams, owlet. Your pet rock can talk to you during regular business hours.”

He giggled under his breath, a peaceful sound that still ripped open her heart, then he rolled to his side with a deep sigh, falling off to sleep before she even reached the door. She held back a sigh of her own. Maybe she hadn't done such a terrible job if he could still fall asleep so easily, after everything.

She propped a few containers from the pantry against his door that would tumble and wake her if he left his room. She

couldn't leave the datpad with him; he wasn't *that* good a little boy.

Just as well she brought the device with her, because it pinged as soon as she collapsed onto the sitting cushions in the living room. June's image flashed on the screen, and she toggled the connection.

"You okay?" she asked immediately.

June nodded. "Kinsley is still locked in her bedroom—I mean she locked herself in there; the orcs didn't do it—and she's refusing to talk to me about what happened. We're okay. I don't think the orcs would do anything to scare or hurt us." She pulled the screen closer to her face and whispered, "You don't think they would, do you?"

"I think don't grit your teeth or it will give you TMJ disorder." When June just gave her a dubious look, Adeline sighed. "Oh, I think they'll abide by the IDA rules. So Kinsley didn't say why she reacted so strongly to the idea of going back to Earth?"

June shook her head. "We all have our reasons, but she's not sharing."

Adeline bit back an annoyed grunt. Maybe the cagey Kinsley and recalcitrant Teq would be a good pair: no sharing allowed. "Well, if she wants to be on her own, there's no reason for you to be there. You're not in trouble."

June gave her a little smile. "Kinsley did come out long enough to give me a bar from her precious stash of chocolate. So she's definitely bribing me to stay." The smile faltered. "If she really tells me to go, I will. But just because people say they want to be alone doesn't always mean it's true."

After asking how Ollie was doing, June reported that she'd checked in with the other Earther women and none of them had heard the rock. "From what I've been able to put together, the orcs really thought they'd found a grand treasure," she explained. "It's why they brought us to be their dates to the Luster—because they thought they'd finally made it." She let out a gusting sigh. "Man, do I know how that feels."

Before Adeline could comment on making it, the front door pinged a request for entry.

June's eyebrows went up. "It's late."

Adeline knew her cheeks flushed again. "They better not think I'm going to wake up Ollie to talk to a rock," she grumbled.

"Go get 'em, mama." June closed the connection.

Of course it was Teq standing there. And suddenly *go get him* took on a new meaning that sent even more blood rushing to her cheeks.

He hesitated there. "If I'm bothering you..."

"I wouldn't have opened the door." She stepped back. "What's up?"

For an instant, his gaze flicked to the ceiling before she guessed his translator explained the idiom. "I just wanted..." He tugged at the pouch sash across his chest, as if the wide band was choking him. "I thought I should check on you."

Caught between curiosity at his tension and lingering unhappiness, she finally gestured to the sitting cushions. "Can I get you something to drink?" Despite her complicated feelings, he looked wilted in a way that made him seem...well, not small, but somehow more her size.

"I have to get back to the bay," he said. "Sil is still running tests with the assay team, and I don't want to leave them there. It's going to be a long night."

Sympathy piped up before she could censor it. "I can make you some coffee, if you think the caffeine would help your energy level."

His antennae perked. "Earther coffee? I've heard about it. It's listed as a stimulant with some addictive properties, and possibly some aphrodisiac effects."

"I don't know about that. Unless it's falling in love with more coffee." She went to the kitchen area. "I'll start a cup. It's quick and you can get right back."

She made a cup of tea for herself—something from the orc stash labeled clearly enough ‘fermented leaves for brewing’—and joined him on the orc version of a couch. His big body pressed into the cushions, leaving her elevated above him.

“Thank you,” he murmured, accepting the mug. He took a drink, and his antennae flared so wide she could see between each feathery strand. “Slag and sludge, *this* is what the galaxies rave about?”

She chuckled. “It’s an acquired taste.”

“Acquired at great expense usually, which I fear may be beyond the orcs at this time.” He cradled the mug in all four hands, his head bowed, antennae drooping.

“We all knew that your crew was not rich,” she said quietly. “The IDA is very clear that they facilitate partnerships, not gold-diggers or sugar daddies.”

“We do dig for gold sometimes. But I understand your meaning. Still, if we show up at Luster Station without the fortune we’ve been teasing, our reputation will be tarnished, making contracts more difficult to come by, and delaying or even damaging permanently our chances of joining the consortium.”

She eased back in her cushion. “Tell me more about why the Luster is so important to you.”

For all his comments about the flavor of the coffee, he took another drink and then another, as if to wash down something even less palatable. “It’s what our apex wants,” he said in a stoic tone. “Or perhaps I should say rather it’s his obsession. For reasons he will not explain to me or anyone—maybe Amma, but she is not sharing either—Mag believes that a dedicated berth at Luster Station will be our new home, even as we work the deep space sectors.” He stared at his mug. “Only Amma remembers our homeworld. The rest of us were hatched from stasis here on the *DeepWander*. All we’ve known is this journey through the dark, capturing bits of lost rock. *This* is our home now. Yet for some reason, that’s not enough for Mag. Right after we found that strange stone, he contacted the vreign of Luster Station and demanded an invite,

claiming the promise of a fortune such as they've never seen. And then he immediately contracted with the IDA for...for you." He lifted his gaze to hers. "He risked everything. And now I think we will lose it all."

She swallowed hard, and the orc tea was faintly bitter in her throat. "When you say lose everything..."

Teq looked away. "I caught a glimpse of a private communication that makes me think Mag consigned the *DeepWander* as a surety that we would have a slot during the main auction."

A terrible chill swept through her, erasing all the warmth of the tea. Just her luck to have escaped an embezzler's family to end up on a gambler's ship. Or maybe it wouldn't even be his ship much longer.

And then where would her home be? What bed could her child call his?

Worry had been her constant—and only—companion for so long, but it seemed exhausted now too. "I'm sorry," she murmured. "It's so hard. When my father handed me off at the wedding to his business partner's son, I felt like I lost my home. But at least I had a planet." She reached over to set her hand on Teq's elbow. In some ways, it didn't matter how many elbows he had, just more places for her to offer what she could of consolation.

He finished his coffee and set the mug aside, and although he'd said he needed to get back, his big body seemed to sink deeper into the cushions, canting her slightly toward him. "I don't think I would've realized—or perhaps I should say acknowledged—how hard it was until..." He looks down at her hand. "Until you." He glanced up at her, and from this close distance, she was mesmerized by the glint of light across the facets of his big, black eyes, not the simple reflections of the human pupil, but something else, something coming from within like bioluminescence, far away but maybe more tantalizing because of it, as if drawing her closer...

"It wasn't my intent to make things harder for you." She gave his elbow a gentle squeeze before releasing him. "A

connection shouldn't hurt more than being alone.”

Barely had her skin parted from his before he was reaching out to capture her hand again. “Not your fault,” he said gruffly. “According to Sil, you Earthers may have just discovered a previously unknown life form. What an astonishment.”

“Ugh. Ollie’s pet rock.” She grimaced. “And that’s making things harder for you too.”

“The orcs will survive. We always have.”

She’d told herself that plenty of times, each time fearing she was losing more and more, slipping farther away from whatever dreams she’d once had. But... Had she really ever had dreams of her own? She’d gone from barely more than a child herself to married to the worst sort of childish man, only to have her own child, beloved more than life or dreams. And here she found herself, in the darkest nights with this alien man and his mesmerizing sparkling eyes...

She reached out, her palm hovering just beyond the curve of his tusk. And for once, that fearsome tooth seemed not menacing but the promise of protection, a weapon she might wield against the true dangers of the universe. “Your eyes...” she murmured. “They glow so bright.”

The harsh exhalation of his breath gusted across the sensitized skin of her inner wrist. “I can’t control it. The i’lva. It’s a signal in your presence. Just ignore it.”

She leaned a little closer, and the light in his eyes flickered softly, not unlike the rock, isolated in the ore processing bay, whispering to itself and any other ears that might hear.

What was this mighty crusher refusing to say?

“Maybe...” She felt as if she were reaching out in the dark, uncertain what lay just beyond her fingertips. Would it bite her? Drag her down? “Maybe for just a little while we don’t need to be so alone. We can feel what it’s like to be here while the rest of the universe spins on its way.”

“Adeline.” Her name was little more than a whisper in the dark.

“Not for forever,” she hastened to reassure him. “Even the universe won’t last forever. Not even for a night. Just for now. Just for this moment.”

She leaned a little closer over him, then paused, half of breath from contact. So, so close, the fractured lights in his eyes were whirling galaxies, but it didn’t make her dizzy. Instead, she felt as though it all moved around her, that at least for this heartbeat she was the center of his universe.

Too much, too much. No wonder he feared such feeling.

“Or you can ignore me,” she whispered.

“I think I’d rather kiss you.” He tilted his face up toward her, his mouth opening under hers.

With a breath, she threaded her arm behind his neck, aligning their mouths perfectly like a long-lost ship coming home.

Maybe it was ridiculous to have come this far to find something so simple as a kiss. But maybe no one was promised happiness, no matter where they were born or hatched, whatever their credit score or galactic credits. Maybe she’d done exactly the right thing, faking a taste for adventure as she pointed toward the stars.

Because the lingering tang of coffee—once one of the few pleasures of her mornings besides seeing Ollie’s smile—had become something else: the taste of Teq.

Their lips finally parted, she sighed in satisfaction—well, satisfaction and a little sexual frustration. “That was...quite a kiss,” she murmured. “You are really crushing it.”

His eyes glinted at her. “I surmise that in this meaning, crushing it does not mean I am too big for you. It means I have mastered the kiss.”

“You are good, very good,” she agreed, and she couldn’t stop herself from stretching out against him, partly alongside, partly over him. His body was hot and maybe a little hard. But she’d read romance novels about hot and hard and, yes, masterful...

“I would kiss you more,” he rasped. “More time, more places.”

Her eyes flared wide. Now she was definitely feeling a little hot. “More...places?”

“I’ve been reading the IDA handbook on Earther females and the handling thereof. Kissing can be more than mouths.”

“Oh,” she said faintly. “Yes, that is true.”

“In the interest of interspecies collaboration, will you show me?”

She hesitated. Did she want to be handled? By so many hands? A little hot and heavy groping here in this alien beanbag was one thing. Adventure was great, but she didn’t want there to be too much discovery. “Oliver is asleep in the other room,” she started to rationalize, then paused again.

She would do anything for her child, *had* done impossible things, but just as she’d never wanted to blight his innocence with her fears, so she would not blame him for her apprehension.

And maybe she was finally done with clinging to her own naivety. Her lack of worldly experience had left her a pawn in other people’s plans.

This was her chance to be otherworldly.

“Let’s go to my room.”

In a single, surging movement he stood from the cushions, lifting her with him.

She might’ve gasped in surprise—and maybe a little delight—but he brought his mouth down on hers again, harder this time, his tusks pressing into the skin of her cheeks, and though she closed her eyes, not quite swooning, but not not swooning either, she could almost imagine that those fierce weapons were her own.

It was just pretend. And maybe she was too old now to play pretend, but the thought gave her a boldness she’d never thought to possess. Like for now she could possess him.

Even though he was doing the possessing at the moment, all his arms wrapped around her as if he might never let her go. She wasn't asking for forever, she reminded herself.

He carried her down the hall while kissing her—no need to watch where he was going when he had echolocation—and didn't stop until they were behind her closed door. The nightlight she'd added flicked on automatically, sending a sprinkle of pale dots twirling slowly around the walls.

“Let me down,” she commanded.

His arms unpeeled, one at a time, setting her down next to the nest bed. As he took a step back, she felt as if a new her was being revealed. Or maybe not exactly new; just unfamiliar and slightly out of focus, as if she were looking through a telescope at something far away, tumbling and isolated against the stars.

But she wasn't alone right now, was she? And with Teq, she could be this brave new interpretation of herself.

Before the strange certainty wavered, she stripped, her fingers hesitating only one briefest moment on the sides of her not-best panties, because she hadn't been intending to do “more kisses” with her alien date. She hoped he didn't notice her hands trembling as she flung them hastily away and stood before him, maybe not the bravest interpretation of herself, but certainly the most naked.

He stood silent and still except for his antennae, which blurred with vibration. “You are so delicate,” he rasped. “So soft. And my hands have been crushing for too long.” All four of his fists flexed and opened wide in the same helpless yearning seething in her.

His hesitation gave her back some courage, and she took the step forward that he'd retreated. “We go as far as we want, no farther,” she assured him. She held out her hands, suddenly wishing she had two more. “Soft maybe, but not *that* delicate. I think you could touch me as you did the rock, with curiosity and care.”

“Like a fortune found.” His lower hands reached out to clasp hers while his upper ones framed her face. “Another kiss, for curiosity and courage.”

Of course the melding of their mouths brought their bodies closer, the hard plane of him pressing into her tender flesh. Her breasts plumped against his bulging lower pecs, and his big thigh alien wedged between her legs in a way that made her moan.

“That is the sound of pleasure, yes?” His hands dropped from her face to her shoulders, steadying her when she swayed.

“Pleasure, yes,” she murmured, dazed. “So hard...”

“The sensation of your flesh pierces me,” he said in a wondering voice. “The points of your breasts and between your legs...” He let out a shuddering breath. “I feel them harden, tighten...”

Oh god, yes, her nipples ached, but he felt the throb of her clit too? Of course his kind had evolved in the darkness to feel the faintest vibrations. And what was happening between her legs was by no means faint. In fact it felt like an earthquake.

“Touch me,” she urged. “With all your hands.”

Chapter 9

From the time he'd been hatched, he'd worked as a crusher: oversized, always formidable, able to find the vulnerabilities in the stone, breaking it apart to take the ice and precious minerals.

Until he touched Adeline, he hadn't realized he could use his hands for exploration, for delicate discovery.

For pleasure.

He traced the soft curves and enticing hollows of her naked body, his whole being enraptured.

"This is more than kissing," she said in a voice even softer than her skin.

But he heard the warning it contained. He was the one who had said he could not allow anything more. "I don't deserve more," he reminded her—reminding himself.

Her smile was the softest and gentlest yet. And yet it held an edge as ravaging as a diamond drill bit and a power more stunning than a hydraulic blasting rig. "This isn't about deserving," she said. "Neither of us is a prize to be won. We've both lost too much, given up too much to believe that plunder doesn't come with its own price. But this moment can be ours, if we both want it. No transaction, no compensation. Just us and whatever we want to feel." She spread her fingers across his lower thorax, and although she had neither the reach nor the number of digits, somehow he felt the sensation spread all the way through him.

That should've been its own warning, a whisper of an unpayable cost. But in this moment, as she'd said, they could carve out a little space, not cold and dark and jagged, but as soft and sweet as they wanted—or maybe they wanted a little more than that.

Because when he closed his hands on her, adjusting his strength and caress to the feedback of her response, he thought a little rough around the edges was what she liked. He tuned his touches to her sighs and moans, his antennae quivering

with wanting—needing—to know about her and her desires. It might be more than he deserved, more than he'd ever known was possible—but now feeling her was his everything.

“So soft,” he murmured, molding his hands around her breasts. “Except for these little pebbles.” He pinched them lightly, then a little harder when she arched up into the caress, demanding without words, only sensation. “And maybe not so sweet? You bite sometimes, yes?”

“Only if you stop...”

Like a hidden, deeper reflection of her breasts thrusting against him, he found the plump, plush flesh of her labia and the precious nugget of her clit. When he closed his fingers on that throbbing, her needy cry shivered through him, and he thought the echo would linger in his dreams.

With all his hands, he held her and stroked her and caressed her, and he might've been hatched as a crusher, but in this moment, he felt like a crystal carver, shaping her pleasure, polishing her breathy cries, desperate to unveil her final release, as promised in his diligent reading.

When the resonance of her breathy cries reached a certain pitch, somehow he knew. He tipped her onto her back in the deep cushions, already beaten and sweet-smelling from their play, and kissed his way one more time down her body.

“Teq...” she moaned, her fingers clenching with crusher strength on his shoulders.

He tossed her legs over the shoulders, jolting another breath from her, part surprise, part keening need.

“I would make you orgasm,” he told her.

“Yes, you will, you are.” Her fingers spasmed restlessly once more on his shoulders before reaching for his antennae. She hesitated. “May I...”

“You may.” *You are.* He could not say that part even though she was already entwined in the sensitive part of him, her sounds, her smells, the rush of the pulse of her blood.

With a touch more subtle than air, she speared her fingers through the fronds of his antennae. “Oh,” she whispered. “It’s like electricity, makes me shiver inside.”

He couldn’t quite hold back a sound of surprise. She was not orc hatched but she felt the i’lva?

Rather than ask her what she couldn’t know or seek an answer of his own, he plunged his face between her legs, fastening his mouth over her soft curls and even softer flesh below. And if he was maybe a little less refined than he might’ve wished for her, she seemed to want it more, letting out a sound and a shake that exceeded all the others, her hands wrapping around his tusks and drawing him even closer, the width of his jaws and her clenching fists forcing her thighs wider, opening all that vulnerable flesh to his hungry mouth.

And he feasted.

His tongue delved deep, so deep, as if he sought to lose himself—and instead found his fortune. Sweeter than dewdrop whorls, lighting him up inside like... No, not like the slymusk, because he did not think she would appreciate the comparison. But like the brightest, clearest gemstones born of the most violent geologic catastrophes, the simplest of atoms coming together, pouring into voids in the deepest earth, and crystallizing into shining treasure.

He had thought her soft and fragile, but she gripped him now like he was a rock she would crush into rubble, her thighs clamping around his shoulders, her fingers tightening on his tusks until he thought the bone would squeak, even the muscles hidden within her clenching on his tongue as if she might never let him go.

Intimately attuned to her, the i’lva trembled through him, threatening to seize him before he brought her to her own release. Fighting to hold on, in a way he hadn’t had to do since that one time he foolishly stepped into a crevasse and almost died, he refused to lose himself.

Then he remembered they were in space, and gravity was only sometimes an issue, so stepping off into the unknown could take one to thrilling new places.

Unable to resist any longer, he convulsed with a guttural groan, the i'lva pulsing out through him in violent waves. As the vibrations washed over her, Adeline echoed his cry, and he knew she was seized by the same ecstatic resonance of the i'lva.

They clung together, all of his arms holding her up, pulling her close as her spasms rolled on, each wave washing through him and bouncing back into her in a storm of eternal bliss.

But eventually the waves eased, although he still felt the tremors racking her, and he rather suspected the encounter would mark him forever.

His own muscles, though honed on solid rock, trembled too as he dragged himself up to align himself against her, tucking their myriad limbs to comfortable configurations. Though the *DeepWander* maintained an optimal ambient temperature suitable for orcs and Earthers, for some reason, he wanted the protection of the lightweight covering she'd folded at the end of the sleeping nest. Made of many strings, the blanket didn't really offer much protection, more comfort, like the brittle eggshell that some part of him vaguely remembered. Still, the texture of the woven pattern beneath his fingertips was pleasing, almost as much as the sensation of cocooning with her.

After another long moment, she let out a breath as the last shudder of the i'lva left her limp. "What was that?"

"I assumed you brought it," he said. "A memento from Earth."

She let out a low sound, an exhausted chuckle. "I know what the blanket is, silly. My grandmother crocheted it for me when I was a baby. Maybe not the most important thing to bring as a mail order bride, considering our limited poundage. But I couldn't leave it behind. It was meant as a promise for a new baby, a new beginning. And that's what I wanted too."

A new beginning, a hatchling...

"It's soft and beautiful, just like you. This is a good place for it." In a bed, beside him.

“Anyway, I meant what was that...” She waved one limp hand over their bodies, almost smacking him in the tusk. “That earthquake?”

He hesitated. But he could not lie to her. “That was the i’lva,” he said, managing to say it in a way that was as careless as her hand wave. “It’s nothing of consequence.”

“I thought it was consequential,” she objected. “I thought it was going to rip the ship apart, or at least me.” She let out a long, deep—and maybe he was fooling himself, but it sounded deeply satisfied—breath. “I know not all sex has to be penetrative. And I know not all penetrative sex needs to be a penis. But I swear, that went through my every molecule.” She cuddled closer to him, so apparently she didn’t mind being ripped apart. “I don’t remember reading about that effect in the handbook.”

“The i’lva is more like...Ollie’s ghost in the graveyard. Not the sort of thing that is written down in basic handbooks.”

“I suppose that’s part of the adventure.” The way she held herself against him fit perfectly into his side. How could that be when their two species had evolved nowhere near each other?

How could that be when he specifically shouldn’t think he could stay so close?

Suddenly the intricate fibers of the grandmother’s blanket felt like the sticky weave of the ravenous arachnids that set their traps in the worst parts of the cheapest space station service yards. That was no more flattering to Adeline than slymusks, and he knew it wasn’t her fault. It was his. He’d known he wasn’t suitable for this sort of closeness, this sort of feeling.

Carefully he disentangled each arm from her soft, delicious weight. For the merest breath, her hand, splayed over his chest, weighed heavier than any crushing boulder, then she angled her arm against her side, her fingers fisted over her own heart.

Tight, protective.

“You probably need to get back,” she said.

“Yes.” He sat up, making sure that the blanket stayed tucked close to her. “Mag and Sil were arguing about what we can do with the rock and the Luster.” He reached for his storage belt; he didn’t even remember letting it drop. “I don’t know what they’ll decide, I should at least make sure they don’t come to blows.”

“Let me know if there’s anything we can do to help, at least once Ollie gets some rest.” She angled herself up onto one elbow to watch him, and although he thought maybe he was starting to learn the quicksilver changes of the mobile Earther expressions, she might as well have been carved from some distant, lifeless asteroid.

The change hurt him, somewhere deep, past the tough exterior of his orc hide.

He’d done that to her, he knew. Made her feel bad. He shouldn’t have tried to make her feel anything at all.

Frustration and guilt were an ugly tremor inside him, cracking through and shattering the pleasure they’d taken together. He’d told her he couldn’t do this.

As he strode toward the bedroom door, some part of him hoped that she would reach out—that gentle, arousing hand or a word, even just his name. But she didn’t, and he deserved to be crushed. And maybe that pain would bury the agony of walking away from her.

He couldn’t believe how the touch of one soft, five-fingered hand had knocked him so deftly off his course. But he had even more pressing problems. His review of Kinsley’s break-in showed that the bay *hadn’t* been properly secured; someone had basically left the door unlocked. But who? And why? As dire as the answers might be, he didn’t have time to pursue the problem because the orcs had moved from the ore processing bay to the gather-hall, and they were still arguing over the fate of the rock and the Omega Reclamation Crew.

“We can’t withdraw from the Luster,” Dorn was saying as Teq joined the advisors crowding around their apex. “No one would ever believe us again. We’ll never get another contract.”

Teq glanced at Mag, wondering if their apex would admit that he’d staked the *DeepWander* on this brash claim. The other male stood still and silent, from his unwavering antennae to his widespread stance. And although Mag glowered at the other male for presuming to say what they could or could not do, neither did he contradict Dorn.

Sil, however, despite being smaller than the assay team leader, squared off to the other male. “If the rock is alive and aware, we can no more sell it than we can sell you. However much we’d get for you.”

There were a few murmurs of amusement but more of disapproval. The assay had an important role in the Omega Reclamation Crew, determining how much the orcs’ haul was worth—and by extension, how much *they* were worth. While Sil was basically worth nothing himself, hatched with his scrawny limbs and pale eyes.

“Do we trade for extinction instead?” Dorn gazed at them all. “That is what we may be facing—if we lose the ship.”

A low, horrified murmur swept the group, and Teq stifled a wince. While the apex ruled the orcs, it was only as a crew united that they’d been able to survive. For Mag to have gambled their home from underneath them... Apexes had lost faith for less—lost lives too, their own and others’. And Dorn had strong backing among the crew should he seek to make a play for apex.

Teq angled his stance to make sure he was behind Sil, lest any of the orcs think a moment or two of violence could replace more talk.

“We may have no options,” Mag said.

Sil spread all his hands. “In the void of space, the creature has been nearly dormant for a long time. But it had some awareness, and already it has revealed through Kinsley’s

dreams that it can share deep mysteries of space that no mining or salvage crew has ever dreamed of.”

“Such mysteries mean nothing if we have no way to pursue them,” Dorn pointed out, not unreasonably. “And how can we trust this Kinsley who broke into the processing bay and wasn’t even listed on the IDA transport manifest. And even if, as you say, the rock could aim us toward other opportunities, that too will be worth something to someone, so if we sell it, we will at least survive another day.”

There’d been a time Teq would’ve agreed with the assay. Better to keep a tenacious grip on what they had than risk it all on impossible dreams.

I didn’t even care that it sounded impossible.

So Adeline had said when she, a desperate mother alone on a closed world, had brought her hatchling to the stars.

“Crusher Teq,” Dorn called. “A simple question for you. You have scanned and inspected the rock. How many pieces could you break it into? Then I can estimate exactly how much we are leaving behind.”

The other orcs pivoted to face Teq. He’d always considered himself more at home with silent rocks than even his own crew, but maybe just this little time with Adeline and her hatchling had given him more awareness of troublesome emotions. And the sentiments seething through the gather-hall rippled through his antennae like a delicate breeze.

In a mining shaft on an airless asteroid, a delicate breeze was always prelude to an explosion.

“A simple question, but one I cannot answer,” he said after a tense moment. “I’ve never encountered a rock like this, but it seems to me its greatest value is in its wholeness.” He looked around at the other orcs. “Just as our greatest strength is our unity.”

“So we will die together when we lose the *DeepWander*?” The other assay, Reji, flanked by Pars and Iffo, moved to stand near Dorn.

All the orcs were subtly shifting around the gather-hall, choosing sides or middle ground. And Teq did not like the way the numbers were stacking.

“Enough,” Mag growled. “I am apex. I point our way. We will continue on to the Luster. And the *DeepWander* will always be ours.” He cracked the halves of his carapace together, sending a thunderous retort through the hall.

At the warning, the orcs retreated into the deepest shadows of the gather-hall nooks and disappeared.

But Teq knew better now. No matter what Mag said, their course was changing. And where it would take them, not even a wandering space rock could say.

Teq worked all the way through the next uroondu, not even breaking for the rest cycle in between, trying to find something—*anything*—in the main ore processing bay that would stand in as surety for the Luster. There was enough water to be extracted to top off the *DeepWander*’s supplies, plus a good haul of iron and nickel, as well as significant gold, osmium, and mimeticphyre. He also set aside some chunks of corundum. Aluminum atoms compressed with oxygen might not be particularly rare or valuable but they were sparkly. Not a bad yield, really.

And nowhere near enough to impress the vreign and other rulers of Luster Station.

At one point, in the quietest lull, he went to the secondary bay. He wasn’t sure what he wanted to see or hear. He stood in front of the rock, antennae spread wide.

Nothing. Just like the aftermath of his encounter with Adeline.

After he’d left her quarters, he hadn’t tried to contact her. Nor had she reached out to him.

“It was a mistake.”

Teq closed his eyes for a moment, hearing the echo of his own thoughts. He turned to face his apex. “You wanted”—and

that was his problem too, wasn't it, the wanting?—"a new life for your orcs."

"And instead I may lose it all." Mag paced a tight circle around the rock. "I should never have contacted the Luster or the IDA."

He shouldn't have. And yet...

I didn't even care that it sounded impossible.

Devotion and desperation were a dangerous mix. Adeline's only chance to protect her hatchling had sent her fleeing into space. Mag's aspiration for a better future might knock them all out of the sky.

Briefly, Teq thought of Adeline's dead ex. The anonymous Earther male deserved no consideration, not after lifting his hand against his wife-mate. But whatever impulses had driven his transgression was a punishing reminder how volatile and destructive feelings might be.

"The orcs have always survived on grit and brute strength." Teq realized he was grasping futilely with all four hands, but what else did he have?

Mag's antennae sagged. "This time, that might not be enough." He put a hand on Teq's upper shoulder, but instead of reassuring, the gesture felt as if the apex were holding himself upright. "Come. You haven't eaten or rested for too long. This might not be a problem you can slag, but I won't let you crumble into dust."

Together, they went to the galley. It was uroondu again, and many of the orcs were assembled there for the shared meal. A few were gaming together, and Sil was in one corner quietly strumming his synthetar, the myriad multicolored beams of laser light flickering under his fingers.

But Teq's focus locked only on the Earther female seated nearby. The sparkles of light bounced off the slymusk silverglow on the walls, limning her features in all the hues of the universe. The i'lva within him spun like a trillion galaxies within that universe, and if not for his supposed grit and strength, he might've gone to his knees before her. As it was,

he felt himself being drawn closer, as if the light and the music were elemental forces.

“Sil hasn’t touched his synthetar for so long,” Mag said quietly. “Maybe I shouldn’t have contacted the IDA, but the Earther females have already brought more life and hope to the ship than all the yield from all the rocks over so many lightyears.” He tilted his head to Teq. “Not to diminish your exertions, crusher.”

No, mining space debris had kept them alive, but... There was more to life than ice and carbon.

Unable to hold himself back anymore—and he wondered if any number of hands could’ve stopped him—Teq angled toward Adeline. Ollie was sitting on the floor in front of Sil, swaying slightly with the music. The lenses he wore made his eyes almost as large as an orc’s, as if the hatchling was becoming like them.

When Teq stopped just outside their little orbit, Adeline glanced up at him. She didn’t smile, and the laser light reflecting from her dark eyes sliced him to the core.

After a heartbeat where he wondered if all his ichor would bleed from him, the i’lva pooling in a molten slag at her feet, she twisted her knees to one side, opening a place on the cushioned bench beside her. She tapped her fingers in that space.

He hesitated another moment—he needed that time to try to shove his guts back into his carapace—then settled next to her. The benches were orc-sized, but somehow his shoulders pressed against hers. He could put one arm or two around her...

“We’ve missed you,” she murmured. Then she quickly revised, “You haven’t been around.”

Ah, she did not have a void-viper’s fangs, but he felt the strike through the unarmored area beneath the arm he didn’t put around her. It sank deep. “I was hoping to find something of value in the tailings from our last salvage.”

“How did it go?”

He tried out the Earther shrug, mostly as an excuse to let himself bump into her again. “What we can sell and what will impress at the Luster are not the same.”

“I’m sorry.”

They were both quiet for a moment, listening to the drifting melody of the synthetar.

“It sounds a little sad,” she said. “The music, I mean.”

Teq kept his voice low so as not to break the spell. “It’s an old orc song. It was written by the last crystal carver, before reaping and selling raw materials became more urgent than singing wistfully about rocks.”

“Are there lyrics or just the tune?”

After a moment, he recited, “*Through the deeps we wander,
Far beyond the coldest stone.*

*Yet cast we songs afore us,
To find our way back home.*”

Sil glanced up at him and tilted his head, so with a sigh, Teq sang the next verse too.

*“Galaxies may crack and fall,
And darkness mark our bones,
But we’ll join hands across the void
And find our way back home.”*

As the sound of the synthetar faded away, Sil held the instrument out to Ollie. “Would you like to try?”

The hatchling jumped up with alacrity, reaching out. “I wish I had more fingers like you.”

Sil vibrated out a laugh. “You’ll just make your own kind of music.”

As the two huddled around the instrument, Adeline let out a slow breath, even more plaintive than the song. “I’ve made a mistake.”

Teq stiffened. “Our kisses—”

“Not that.” She looked away. “Or at least not only that. Coming here, I mean, leaving Earth. When has running away ever fixed anything?”

“If orcs had stayed on our homeworld, we would’ve gone extinct.” He gave her a hard look. “From what you said, you faced something almost as dire.”

When she bit her lip, he wanted to put a finger or three over her mouth to stop her from hurting herself. Or to stop her from speaking?

But she wouldn’t be stopped, he knew. Not by him, not by her ex, not by her own fears.

“I just packed up my problems with me,” she said. “I won’t—I can’t expose Oliver to this much uncertainty. I thought I could tell him this was the adventure of starting a new life. But it’s...just chaos.”

Stung, he sat back, breaking the connection between them. “The universe was born from chaos,” he pointed out. “As it sounds like Oliver was. And from that came love, yes?”

She jerked back too, to glare at him. “Don’t try to spin this as some poetical abstraction, crusher Teq.”

He straightened, ruffling his carapace. “Crushers seek what’s hidden in the stone, to bring it to the light so we might live.”

“I never had secrets,” she mused, “or dreams. I did have riches, though, and what some people on Earth would’ve considered a fortunate life. It made me weak and afraid to lose. I won’t let that happen again.” When her jaw went hard, she still wasn’t anywhere near as imposing as an orc with tusks jutting, and yet he felt the pending impact of her words. “I think it’s best that I take Oliver away from here, away from whatever that rock is saying to him. I’ll be speaking to Mag and Amma after I explain to Oliver, but...I wanted to tell you first.”

The pain of her decision went off within him like a depth charge in a deep-space asteroid—devastating and utterly silent.

He inclined his head. “The *DeepWander*’s path has always gone through rough places with no guarantees, and while I might hammer asteroids into dust, I realize I can’t promise the way will ever be perfectly smooth. You must do what you believe is right, for Oliver and for you, and no one here would ever stop you.”

“Teq.” She reached toward him.

But he evaded her. Easy enough to do when she only used one hand with a mere five fingers and she didn’t really want to hold on.

The wail of the synthetar under Ollie’s delighted but awkward touch followed him as he escaped.

Chapter 10

What was she doing?

Adeline knotted her fingers together, her jaw aching. And still, all that tension was nothing compared to the ache that went much deeper.

If only she could feel nothing as Teq claimed.

Loneliness. She'd survived on her own for so long because separating herself and Oliver from Robert, his crimes, and his family had been imperative. Being lonely hurt less than being with the wrong people.

Being with the orcs... Kindly old Amma, supportive Sil, even Mag making the most for the *DeepWander*.

But no, they were even more lost and desperate than she'd been. Though she'd been willing to work hard, to share what dubious skills she possessed to be a pretty date for an important party, she didn't have the power to turn their lives around. She could only turn herself around and go home.

So... Why was she standing outside Teq's door?

Even as she spun on her heel, his door chimed. "Your presence has been announced. Please enter."

Oh, just great, he already knew she was here, and if then abruptly she wasn't here, he'd know she'd run away. And yes, she *was* running away. That was the whole point of leaving the *DeepWander*, wasn't it?

"Adeline? Is everything all right?"

Though they'd parted with asperity on both sides, the gentle caring in his query now echoed through her head, and she closed her eyes at the temptation of it. It wasn't just the implanted translator, the same as Ollie hearing the rock wasn't just a matter of alien technology.

This was special.

Teq was special. And she was going to leave him behind because... Because she didn't want to risk her heart, not when

she'd sacrificed everything else.

But here she was anyway.

Long, alien fingers brushed her shoulder. There'd been a time she might have recoiled instinctively, not so much because of the alien as because touching hadn't always been good. But Teq had swept away that fear with hands and tongue and the vibrations.

"Where is Ollie? Is he missing again?"

She swiveled back to face him. "No. He's in our quarters, with June. He played ghost in the graveyard with her during uroondu while I talked to Mag and Amma. But when I told him we were leaving the *DeepWander*..." Her voice cracked. "He was so upset. I knew he would be, but..." She drew in a shuddering breath, the tension even in her jaw slackening to utter weakness.

Teq wrapped two arms around her, drawing her into his room. "Let me give you some tea. It's not as horrible as Earther coffee, but..."

She managed to get out a watery chuckle as he guided her to the couch cushions. It was much like her quarters, though sized with no consideration for an Earther, everything crusher big. But there were other touches were uniquely Teq: a looping pattern of dark purple threads in his pillows, a collection of rocks—nothing special to her human eyes—displayed on a shallow dish, words carved over the simulated viewport that her translator read as 'Hold tight.' She shouldn't be so nosy, not when she was sniveling on him.

He returned, bearing two mugs, both ridiculously large, one of which he handed to her as he knelt on the floor beside her cushion. "Tell me," he said simply.

She hadn't been able to explain everything to June, not when her emotions were in such turmoil. But Teq's calm attention took the edge off her distraught panic. She let out another unsteady breath and took a drink. "On Earth, we went to therapy for everything, for the divorce and the abuse he witnessed before, and then later when Robert's family tried to

take him with a court order. But even their psychiatrist said Ollie was fine with me, better than fine.” She gave her head hard shake. “But tonight... He yelled at me. My sweet little boy. He never yells. And then he... He hit me.”

Teq set aside their mugs to clasp both her hands in all of his, a big, gentle cradle of strength. “That must’ve been some hard memories for you,” he murmured.

She looked down at their hands, his so large and powerful, hence the crusher. And yet he held her so gently. “He didn’t intend to hurt me. He *didn’t* hurt me. At least not with his little fists. Worse, I saw the moment he realized what he’d done. I saw it in his eyes. He doesn’t look anything like his father, really. He gets everything from me. And he’s too young to have to understand why those big feelings can hurt.” Her eyes stung, and she blinked away the tears, not wanting to be weaker than she already was.

“You also were too young to have to experience violence from someone who swore to care for you,” he said quietly. “There is no age in all the lightyears of the universe where anyone should have to know such things. There is violence and hardship and need in the universe, and it’s good that you have given Oliver the tools to understand and to heal. He will be able to use that for himself and for others.”

She gazed at him. How could he know this, this alien who claimed he could not feel? “He cried so hard, Teq,” she whispered brokenly. “And I couldn’t stop it. He was crying for everything we lost, and now I’m taking something else away from him.”

Slow and oh so gentle, Teq extended his upper arm and it wasn’t a soft nest like the cushions or a distracting sweetness like the dewdrops, but somehow it was exactly what she needed.

She let herself fall into that sheltering embrace and she sobbed until her throat felt full of cosmic rubble and her eyes gritty with barren dust.

When she had nothing left inside her to sob out, a knight in shining armor would have one of his colorful pennants or a

gentleman in a historical drama would have a monogrammed handkerchief, but a mostly naked orc—despite all those pockets—had only his fingers, lots of them, to methodically brush the tears from her cheeks until her face was clear and his hands were damp. “The IDA handbook describes tears,” he said. “I didn’t understand, it seems so painful. Although I realize you do not ask it of me, I wish I could protect you from this pain. But I am in awe of your strength and boldness, that you would take on a universe for your hatchling, where he can grow up protected, and yet you still make space for him to feel what he needs to feel.”

She shook her head, rubbing her cheek against the carving on his chest that meant he was a powerful crusher. “I feel very small and weak and silly,” she whispered. “It’s how Ollie feels, like everyone else has all the power and no one will listen, and I just want to...to smash everything.”

He brushed one finger down her cheek, though all the tears were long gone. “I can show you where I keep the det cord and explosives. Just count down a warning so I can run and hide.”

Her reflexive laugh faded as she gazed up at him and saw he was serious—and realized she wouldn’t necessarily mind learning something like that.

But when she gazed at him, the countdown echoing in her head was more intimate—and somehow more dangerous. She could run and hide, or...

She reached up to touch his face, his tusk pressing into her inner wrist. They might look different, feel different, but in this moment they were enough the same.

“I shouldn’t ask,” she whispered, “not when I’m not brave enough to stay. But will you kiss me again?”

He seemed to require nothing more from her than that request, which almost made her cry again, as he swept her up against his hard torso, his arms gathering her so close to carry her to his bed. He framed her face, kissing her deep, so deep, and she wanted to thank god or evolution or anyone else who wanted to take credit for the way his tongue matched hers in

delicious, tea-flavored caresses; how his hands were as frantic and fumbling as hers, times two; the way his antennae and his pulse thrummed a wild, syncopated cadence matching hers, not the melancholic dirge of wanderings in alien exile but an exultant pulse of desire shared. In one heartbeat, she was naked, in the next so was he, the orc kilt and the utility sash across his chest requiring only a one-two snap of her fingers, literally, to remove.

In their kissing, she had ended up on top, and now she gazed down the length of his body to his bared loins. “Oh, she said faintly. “For some reason I thought...” She shook her head. “This is what I get for not reading through all the homework.” She’d thought she’d have more time to get to the good parts.

From now on, she’d always start with the good parts.

As if reading her mind, like he was some sort of psychic space rock, he lay back, folding all his arms behind him, a wicked curve to his mouth that she suspected might be universal to certain male-identifying types across the galaxies. “Just because we usually keep it retracted doesn’t mean it can’t be unearthed on demand.”

“Demand,” she murmured. “I would never be so rude.”

“Be so,” he urged. “With me. Command or beg, whisper or growl, whatever you need, ask and it’s yours.”

Her whole body felt rocked, not in orgasm, not quite yet, anyway, but to be given such a gift, freely. To have someone at her side, on her side...not to mention *inside*.

She remembered how he’d kissed his way down her body last time—god, she’d likely never forget—so she echoed that curious, wandering path until she reached the middle of his body. Okay, she might’ve stopped reading the handbook when she got to “claspers and spermatophores”, but the configuration wasn’t *that* different from an Earther.

His skin was softer, sleeker around his rampant sex, the blue-bronze shinier, without the toughness of his exposed hide.

Even as her pulse accelerated, her heart seemed to melt too. Vulnerable, like her.

Compatible in all the ways that mattered.

Not just because the alien orcs had become familiar, but because of Teq and the way he cared for her. The way she'd care for him.

At least until she left.

Now her heart wanted to break. Was she really so scared that she couldn't stay and work with the orcs, work for more of this? But she wouldn't risk Ollie.

If this moment was all she could take for herself, at least she'd give something back to this crusher who swore he couldn't feel.

She spiraled a teasing trail of kisses around his rampant sex until his breath was a growling groan, then wrapped her lips around him. He tasted like their first kiss with its mineral tang, filling her senses. She took him all in one mouthful, and she was no expert but from the way he gasped out her name, she was rather proud of herself. In her enthusiasm, perhaps she sucked a little too hard, because he stroked the underside of her jaw and crooked one finger into the corner of her mouth, breaking the seal.

“Save the vacuum for space,” he murmured. “I'm delicate.”

When she choke-giggled, he groaned again, his lower hands gripping her shoulders. With his words and his body, he gave her all the power.

She found the pressure and the rhythm he liked, playing him like a synthetar. And the noises he made were music to her, the vibrations from him echoing deep inside her until the harmonic throbbing in her clit threatened to overcome her, the yearning ache in her breasts tightening to laser points of need in her nipples. And he wasn't even touching her.

And then he *was* touching her. He rolled her across the huge cushion of his bed, pressing her downward with the heavy weight of his hard body, his erection nudging between her thighs. He cupped her breasts with his big hands, so many

fingers dialing up her need to an all-klaxons emergency fuckmenowdammit.

When he stared down at her, the luminescence in his black eyes made her world spin. No, she didn't have a world right now.

She had him.

In a low rumble like a coming avalanche, he said, "Before, you asked about penetration."

Her clit wasn't just throbbing, it was commanding and begging. And since the IDA initiation had included inoculations that prevented pregnancy and other infections, she could be free as she never had before. "I want you inside me. I want to feel...everything." Angling her hips, she caught her breath on a keening moan as he eased his body into hers.

While his upper arms braced in the cushions, his two lower arms anchored under her backside, suspending her as if she were flying. And his lower-lower hands...

Wait, *what?* Oh. *Oh!* The claspers she'd not quite read about squeezed her labia with a pulsing pressure that sank into her flesh, triggering a rhythm even deeper as he rocked against her.

"Too much," she whimpered, but when he started to withdraw, she clamped her heels behind his backside, wishing she had a hundred arms to keep him close. "More," she demanded. "I want to feel you all."

And there was so much of him.

He took her to the edge, and she felt as if she were peering into an abyss from which there would be no return. She would remember this always, want him always.

She'd take that risk.

The orgasm seized her from within, belling outward in a rapturous rush. When Teq cried out, the sound was nothing the alien device in her head could translate—and everything her body knew by heart.

Closing her eyes, she clasped her two arms tight around him, feeling the rush of their release echoing in the infinitesimal space between them.

When she left, it would become lightyears. It would be forever.

He held her even closer but rolled to his side so they were equals, even if his big body dented the cushions a little more than hers. The brush of his fingers over her hair was achingly gentle, and yet that touch somehow wrung another tear past her quivering lashes.

His lips pressed against her crown in place of his hand, and she felt the gust of his exhalation.

“Mag told me he’ll summon an IDA transport for you during the next work cycle,” he said, his tone matter-of-fact, as if they weren’t still lying naked together. But maybe she understood the need to shore up some defenses. “Kinsley will be going with you.”

Letting out a sigh of her own, she finally opened her eyes. “Did she decide to leave, or is he kicking her out?”

“Per the IDA contract, this was a chance to get to know each other. But that meant there was also a chance it wouldn’t work out for some.”

For her, not a chance, but a choice. But what else could she do?

She started to sit up, and Teq helped her straighten. He only needed one of his arms to lift her from the bed.

They dressed in silence. Easier for him, both the dressing and the silence. She was the one who’d come all this way, into space and to his bed.

When she cleared her throat, before she could speak, he said, “I’ll walk you back to your quarters.”

As if she’d get lost on the way?

At her own door, they stood awkwardly. Was it too much to hope for a catastrophic hull breach to suck her out into oblivion?

“Teq,” she murmured.

The door to her quarters opened. “Mommy?”

She gulped back whatever she was going to say—and it wasn’t going to be any more useful than the silence of a vacuum—and turned to see Oliver gazing up at her miserably.

“Hey, owlet,” she said softly. “You’re supposed to be in bed.”

“I couldn’t sleep until...until you came back.” He rushed to her, throwing his arms around her hips.

Such small arms and yet they broke her. There might be pain in the love, but he had always been her choice.

Refusing to let tears fall again, she glanced over at June. “Thanks for watching him. You’ve been a good friend.” One she might never see again.

June gave her a sideways hug as she squeezed by. “Any time. You know that.” She grinned up at Teq. “Good night. Sleep tight. Don’t let the space bugs bite.” She flitted down the corridor to her own quarters.

Adeline would’ve taken Ollie back inside, but he was clinging like the tightest space bug ever.

“I’m sorry,” he mumbled into her belly. “I didn’t mean... mean to be bad.”

“Oh, owlet.” She stroked his mussed hair. “I don’t think you’re bad. You were mad and scared. I was mad and scared too, which is why we ran away from Earth. But the IDA ship is coming to take us home.”

“But *this* is home now.” He peered up at her then past her. “Right, Teq?”

Teq was still standing there, even though he’d had time to run away from all this messy feeling. “Home...” He sank to one knee and then a little lower yet, almost on a level with Ollie. “Home is wherever you are with the people who care about you.”

“Amma says I’m smart and kind,” Ollie said. “And June watches over me. And Sil let me play his Quantumstrum 2000X even though it’s really valuable. They care about me. And...and you care about me too, right?”

Adeline sucked in a breath. “Oliver.”

He released his grip on her, his little hands clenching. “Because I care about you, Teq. And Roxy cares about me too. That’s why we can’t leave. Because nobody else knows how to care about a rock.” He spun back. “Mom, I’m not mad and scared anymore. And you shouldn’t be either. We have to stay so nobody gets lonely.”

If Robert’s family lawyer could add this to the deposition. Her jaw ached almost as much as her heart. “Oliver. I know this is hard to understand, but you’ll see—”

“I’m not a baby anymore,” he told her. “Why won’t you listen to me?”

“Oliver.” Teq’s low voice silenced them both. “You know that orcs have another sense that Earthers don’t, yes?”

After a hesitation, Ollie nodded. “Echolocation, like bats and dolphins.”

“It’s there for us when our other senses aren’t much use, when we are in the deep and silent dark.” Teq tapped the glyph etched on his torso. “As a crusher, I have another sense. Sometimes I can tell where to dig—and when to stop digging.”

After another little moment, Ollie sighed and threw his arms around the huge orc, burying his face. Whatever he whispered made Teq close his eyes.

“Always.”

She couldn’t reach down to join the hug. She felt frozen in place, as if any movement would break her. So when Ollie looked up, she could only force a few words out. “Time for bed.”

He went without another word.

Teq gazed at her. “Good night.”

She nodded. But even if it was always night somewhere in space, she wasn't sure how it could ever be good again.

Chapter 11

It was deep in the sleep cycle, but Teq could not rest. He'd told Oliver about the orcs' echolocation, but all of his senses reverberated with a presence no longer there. Everywhere he sensed Adeline: the smell of her in his nest, the echo of her breathy cries still stroking through his antennae, her caresses burning in the i'lva. How could he ever sleep again?

Because as soon as he did, when he woke it would be the work cycle, and then Mag would summon the IDA ship to take her away.

He hadn't wanted to feel anything, now he understood what that meant, and wished with all his not inconsiderable might that he could reverse the arrow of time and go back to feeling nothing at all.

And yet when his door started to chime the presence of someone without, he leaped up to answer. "Adeline..."

Kinsley blinked at him. "Sorry, no. She has her datpad avatar locked down or I would've gone to her." She looked with him. "There's really nobody else I can go to."

"Whatever you need, I am not the one," he informed her. He couldn't even hold onto one small Earther. "Sil keeps strange hours." He started to close the door.

"It's the rock," she blurted. "Roxy." She rolled her slightly bulbous Earther eyes. "I know you orcs care about that."

"Sil knows more about that than I do," he informed her.

She rolled her eyes in the other direction. "Him," she said with a little inhalation of air that probably meant something to another Earther female. "He thinks I'm trouble."

"Aren't you?"

She put her hands on her hips. "Yes. Which is why you should listen to me."

At least this Earther was a distraction, he gave her that much. "What about the rock?"

She glared at him, although he felt he'd done nothing to warrant it. "You're going to say this is my fault, but for once it's not. Completely." She shifted her weight from foot to foot, as if she wanted to run away. But she'd already made clear that she didn't think she had anywhere else to go. Unlike a certain Adeline.

He straightened to his full height and looked down at her. "You've already broken into the processing bay and made it seem as if you would steal our fortune," he drawled. "What can be worse?"

"Somebody else does want to steal it," she blurted. "One of your orcs."

He stood back, gesturing her inside and directed her to close the door, although he did not invite her any farther. "Tell me."

"It's Dorn. He came to me and said he would make sure I don't have to go back to Earth if I help communicate with the rock until he can sell it at the Luster."

Teq let out a warning rumble. "He does not have that right."

"I know that, and he knows that. But how much does it matter?" She hunched her shoulders when Teq let out another rumble. "Listen, I know a con when I smell one. I pretended to go along with him, but I knew he wouldn't deliver what he's promising."

Teq stared at her, his antennae stiff with fury. "And you think I'll keep you after what you've done?"

She stiffened too. "No. But I don't want..." She shook her head. "It doesn't matter what I want. You going to hear me out or not?"

Adeline had never tried to lie to him so he wasn't sure if he would know what it looked like, but this other Earther female stood glaring at him as if his doubts offended her. He wished he'd listened to his own doubts. "How does he intend to get the rock?"

She shrugged, and this Earther gesture he thought he was finally starting to learn. "He didn't tell me the good parts," she

said, her tone aggrieved. “But he knew he’d have to act fast before I get kicked off. Except...he never called.”

Teq considered. “He has a primary position on this ship, which gives him access to almost all the important systems. And the sleep cycle is when there are fewest around to observe him.” Unless more of the orcs agreed with Dorn than with Mag and had decided to follow the assay. “But once Mag summons the IDA transport, you and Adeline could be gone any time, so he should’ve come for...” His whole body seized, rejecting the next thought.

But he and Kinsley said at the same time, “Oliver.”

He was out the door many strides before her, not caring that he left her alone in his private place. He didn’t have anything of value there. No, everything he wanted was leaving...

He raced back toward Adeline’s quarters, checking his datapad as he pounded down the corridor. Vug, the internal scanners were offline. Dorn’s work, undoubtedly. Teq swallowed a roar of outrage. He couldn’t make a sound, couldn’t risk using comms to contact Mag or security, not knowing who might be following Dorn or if the orc might be monitoring security channels.

Fury and fear raged through him, giving him a burst of speed and strength, and still he almost went to his knees when he saw Adeline’s door standing open.

“Adeline!” he called in a hoarse voice. “Oliver?”

No one answered. This was how it would be for the rest of forever: no answer.

But he scented her, felt her heat. He ricocheted through the living room to the larger bedroom.

She was sprawled, not on the nest bed as he’d left her in the passionate abandon of release the last time he’d been here, but crumpled on the floor.

“Adeline?” He flung himself down beside her, reaching for her, then paused, suddenly afraid.

A moan, not pleasure but pain, rippled his antennae like the most vicious explosion. Forcing himself to go slow and gentle, he brushed aside the curls of hair tangled around her face, not wanting to move her for fear of doing some further damage. But at his touch, she rolled of her own volition, the dark fringe of her lashes fluttering. She groaned again, one arm flinging out weakly, as if to grab hold—or ward off.

His focus locked on the heat beneath the skin of her cheek. Not the shy blushes that so transfixed him, but a spreading bruise as from a heavy blow.

Her dazed gaze narrowed on him, and for a dreadful heartbeat, he thought she would flinch as she had when she had first come aboard. Instead, she clutched at his hand. “Teq... Dorn broke in, attacked me. Ollie was here with me...” Her grip on his hand nearly shattered his control. “Where is my son?”

Kinsley rushed into the bedroom doorway. “He’s not in his room, nowhere in the apartment. What do we—?” Abruptly, she staggered, as if she too had been hit, and her face blanched a paler shade. “Dark... So dark and cold.”

Adeline grabbed Teq’s arm, hauling herself upright. “Kinsley, are you talking to the rock?”

“I can’t talk to *it*, but it’s saying...” The Earther woman swayed again, clutching for the door frame. Sized for an orc, the gap made her look frail. “It’s afraid. Someone wants to hurt it—and Ollie.” She pressed the palms of her hands over her eyes. “It can’t *see*, but...I don’t think they are in the processing bay anymore.”

Teq considered quickly. “Dorn wouldn’t move the rock if he intended on staying on the ship.” And commandeering the *DeepWander*. “He’s probably heading for one of the shuttles.”

“No. Teq, please. They can’t leave.” With leverage against his weight, Adeline pulled herself all the way to her feet. “We have to stop them.”

“They aren’t going anywhere.” Steadying her but not letting go, he checked his datpad again, sending out a passive

query so as not to trigger any alarms. “Kinsley, I need you to find Sil, fast and quiet. Tell him what’s happening.” Dorn might have sympathizers close to Mag. I’m going to disable some of the ship’s systems to keep them from escaping, so you’ll need a light for your eyes.”

“Oliver’s flashlight.” Adeline stumbled to the storage cube beside the nest. “He left his adventure backpack...”

“He didn’t leave anything,” Teq said resolutely. “He’s still here.”

When Adeline handed over the Earther light device, Kinsley clutched it to her chest. “I won’t let you down, I promise.” She spun around and raced off.

“She can’t let us down,” Teq said. “We’re floating in space.”

Obviously unconvinced, Adeline grabbed him. “We have to find Oliver.”

“Yes.” Lifting her off her feet, he anchored her to his side and followed Kinsley’s fading heat signature out of the rooms. “I would rather leave you here or take you to the med bay,” he informed her.

“But—”

“But I know you would not stay.”

She wrapped her arm tight around his neck. “What are the orc laws regarding abducting a child?”

“Since our hatchling rate is so low, even stricter than mutiny.” With his free hand, he tapped at his datpad. “I’m finding no evidence of increased system usage that would indicate hidden comm chatter. Dorn may be working alone.” Not that it took more than four arms to steal a rock and a child. “I’m putting a stop code on the shuttles and the shuttle bay doors. But Dorn has enough seniority and skill to challenge my codes. Once Sil knows what’s happening, he’ll be able to lock the ship tight.”

Adeline’s grip nearly strangled him. “Teq, he can’t... He just can’t...”

He didn't need her to share all the words; he *felt* them tearing through him. "He won't."

"This is everything I was afraid of back on Earth."

Losing Oliver, with no power to stop it. But it was his deepest fear too: to feel this much. He was a crusher, but he didn't want to *be* crushed.

He had to fight for them both.

"I need a weapon," Adeline said.

He almost laughed. She'd been terrified, attacked, knocked unconscious—and she was ready to fight too.

"You have me," he told her.

To his surprise, she pressed her lips to his cheek, just above his tusk. His pounding strides never faltered, but his heart skipped a beat.

When they got to the processing bay, it was cold and dark, just as the rock had said—and empty.

"Where are they?" Adeline's broken whisper stabbed him.

"I was hoping to pick up a trace from Oliver," he said. "But I don't think they left from here to the shuttle bay." Vug. Orcs ran cooler than Earthers, and the *DeepWander* was saturated with their presence, making a followable track from Dorn essentially invisible. And the rock wasn't talking to him.

The only other way off the ship...

He reversed course. "Dorn tried to get Kinsley to help him. If he is working with someone else besides her, they may be coming to retrieve him and the rock."

And the weakest spot in the ship was the main ore processing bay.

Bigger than the gather-hall, with more hazardous machinery than the secondary bay, capable of swallowing huge chunks of interstellar debris and spitting out gravel, the main bay was dark and cold—and not empty.

“I believe Ollie is here,” Teq murmured to Adeline as he carried her within. Though too full of machinery to echo, the room felt like a section of space itself, briefly captured. “I sense—”

“Maaaaaaah-meeee!”

She twisted against his hold until he set her on her feet. She didn't falter, just fell into stride with him, all but running. “You stop Dorn. I'll get Ollie.”

Near the hatch, the grapppler twisted on its upper gimbal toward them, glaring its array of lights. “Stop!” Dorn's command blared through the grapppler's loudspeaker. “I will tear this ship apart—and the rock and hatchling too!”

The grapppler was a colossal exoskeleton, built to enhance the bay crew's ability to grab and haul rock—and it could crush the locked hatch, no problem. It stood twice as tall as an orc, and each phalange bristling at the end of its four pincers was almost as long as Teq's arm. It was a tough, powerful machine, although it was stiff and slow.

It was Teq's favorite—maybe he related to it a little too much?—and now he would destroy it without hesitation to retrieve one squishy alien hatchling and a pet rock.

He swung to one side of the grapppler, gently nudging Adeline the other way, though every instinct in him demanded he keep her close. “Dorn,” he called, wanting the other orc's focus on him. “What the vug are you thinking?”

“I'm saving the *DeepWander*. Mag is wasting this chance at a fortune. But if he can't hold onto it, I want it.”

If he can't hold onto it...

Wasn't that the mistake Teq was making?

He forced himself not to look for Adeline. He'd caught just a glimpse of one of the containment crates, suspiciously *not* full of rubble, and Ollie's lonely cry had come from that direction. Sil would be arriving at any moment with backup. Teq just had to keep Dorn distracted long enough...

I want it.

Or he could grab Adeline, Ollie, and the rock for himself, and flee for the stars.

He leaped for the grappler.

For all its size, the exoskeleton fit closely around its occupant, and Dorn was wedged into the recesses, only his eyes and tusks gleaming in the backwash of the grappler's work lights. Teq grabbed for him, but Dorn lashed downward with one of the pincers, snarling.

Teq spun away—up, not down, heaving himself to the top of the grappler. Having much less experience with rocks that didn't stay where he put them, the assay fumbled to reach for him, swinging again with more pincers.

Defly evading the devastating blows, from his perch Teq waved to Adeline who was yanking at the crate latch. "Ghost in the graveyard, Adeline," he roared. "Run home!" She and Ollie had to get away.

If Dorn broke open the hatch...

Adeline swung Ollie into her arms and darted out of view. Gone, just as he'd ordered.

His datpad squawked. "Teq," Sil said urgently. "There's an unmarked ship inbound. Teq? Are you there?"

"In the main bay. Can you remote access the grappler? Dorn is exploring a change in his crew position." One that might see them both ejected into space.

A moment that felt much too long passed before Sil responded. "Vug. I'm locked out. How? This isn't even orc code—never mind, that's not important. I can break it. I just need... Ah, muck it."

For all Sil's erratic mutters, "mucked" did capture the essence of the situation.

Dorn steered the grappler in a lumbering circle, and Teq was going to taunt him for not being able to control the powerful machine. But as they came around to the gaping crate, the words curdled in his mouth.

Adeline stood there...without Ollie in her arms but with a diamond-blade laser saw clenched in her hands instead. She revved the saw. “Roxy isn’t yours,” she growled over the grating buzz. “You can’t steal it just because you want it.”

Dorn’s voice boomed even without the loudspeaker. “This is not your fortune either, Earther.”

“It is, actually.” Her gaze flicked up to Teq.

She only meant Ollie, of course, and yet...

She charged, the saw screaming even though her jaw was clenched tight.

Taking advantage of the impossible confusion, Teq clambered over top of the grappler. Its appendages were made for forward and side motion, not above, so he wasn’t in danger—much.

Adeline, on the other other other hand...

Dorn flailed at her with the exoskeleton’s arms, but the grappler was made for larger, less precise work, and she ducked beneath—although the proximity made Teq bellow a warning. Darting closer with the saw brandished ahead of her, she rammed into the nearest supporting limb.

With an awful grinding of gears, the grappler listed sideways. But Teq was still separated from her by six thrashing arms capable of pulverizing stone and metal.

Overwhelmed by worries, she’d criticized herself for being afraid for too long, for being uncertain she was making good choices.

So she picked up a laser saw and assailed a grappler?

Vug, no wonder he’d been afflicted with such feelings for this female.

Now he just had to get to her before she cut herself or the ship in half.

Chapter 12

Fury and a pounding fear warred for supremacy in Adeline's body as she careened around the hollow robot's broken leg. But what was really annoying her was the little voice in her head that needed no translation tutting, *wow, so this is definitely a choice.*

But it was her choice. She'd been compelled to marry Robert because their families wanted it. Despite her faltering marriage, she'd gotten pregnant, and by the time she'd realized it wasn't just stress making her queasy, restrictive local law and Robert's controlling behavior had ended any other options. Even signing the contract with the IDA had felt like a last chance, not a choice.

She would not let fear hold her back anymore.

Also, she had some things she needed to say to Teq.

But standing between them was a giant freakin killer robot who had tried to take her son.

Fury winning over the fear, she swung the orc chainsaw with brutal intent. It wasn't really a chainsaw, she knew, and it was large and ridiculously heavy, but it fit her Earther hands well enough. Compatible in all the ways that mattered, it threw off a viciously brilliant light that screamed of severing and pain.

Almost like a song of what she'd been through to get this far.

This far and no farther. She had found a safe spot to stash Oliver, but she was going to fight until she'd made the damn universe itself their home.

She jammed the chainsaw up into what would be like the belly of the robot, hoping to hit important mechanical guts.

Under Dorn's erratic control and the damage she'd already done, the robot was staggering around like a cross between a drunk and a toddler. But it was still large and heavy and an outright menace.

And the hull was *right there*.

She might not have committed the entire IDA handbook to memory, but she had a mom-of-a-seven-year-old-science-geek general understanding of what happened if the outer layer of the ship was breached into space.

But through the waving menace of the robot arms, she caught a glimpse of Teq. So close. If they could just—

Before she could *just* what, the ship's klaxon sounded, strident and urgent.

“Warning: Contact imminent. Brace for impact.”

Contact? With what?

Despite all the commotion and her concentration, she felt the bone-deep thud through her feet all the way to her jaw. And instant later, the whole ship jolted.

“Adeline!” Teq's hoarse shout barely reached her over the klaxon. “Hold on.”

Hold on? To what? Why?

A corner of the hatch tore aside with a squeal of rending metal.

The shriek of air evacuating through the hole was even worse.

The bay was huge with plenty of air—for the moment. But the hole was getting bigger. Through it, she caught a glimpse of a docking tunnel, poorly aligned.

And Dorn's robot with Teq aboard was trundling toward it.

Stumping along on one solid leg part, the robot wheeled side to side. The wind yanked at her, trying to knock her over too. If she fell, would she be sucked out?

But she had to stop the robot, at least until Teq could get free. Because suddenly, self-actualizing her revenge against Dorn/Robert, didn't seem so important as saving her crusher.

As the robot staggered onward, its sideways tilt put one arm in reach of Ollie's rock. With a snap of its pincers, Dorn

grabbed the crate.

She didn't want to care. That rock had caused more trouble than it was worth, even if she kept hearing it might be worth a lot.

But Ollie would be devastated. And so would the orcs' chances at the Luster, their chances at a better life.

Turned out, she *did* want revenge against everyone who'd tried to take what was hers.

And maybe she was feeling a little fiercely orcish herself.

The muscles in her arms burned from exhaustion as she hefted the laser chainsaw and hurtled toward the robot.

“Adeline, go!” Though her head clanged like the struck ship from the wail of the chainsaw and a likely concussion when Dorn had broken into the apartment and knocked her to the floor, somehow Teq's voice whispered past the cacophony. How could she even hear him?

She didn't, she realized. She *felt* him.

Like echolocation, Ollie had said, but it felt like a touch. Almost a shove. Like Teq wanted to get rid of her or something.

Gritting her teeth, with all her frustration and what was left of her fear, she swung the chainsaw at the pincer holding the rock. She would take this place apart, piece by piece if she had to, dammit!

The saw squealed through the pincer. A chunk of metal and Ollie's rock slammed to the floor, the crash lost in the howl of wind. Exactly how much air could a spaceship lose? It felt like all the oxygen was being forcibly extracted from her body.

Along with her strength and courage.

Dorn steered the robot's tilt downward again, snatching at the crate she'd *just* freed. She stabbed with the saw—

But the orc had obviously known she would do just that. He angled the swing of the arm right at her in a lethal sweep.

She stumbled backward, only barely evading the robot. The pincer clipped the edge of the chainsaw, wrenching it from her grasp and spinning her in a half circle. She dropped to one knee, bracing herself, and gasped as her palm skimmed the hot gash seared by the chainsaw through the floor plating.

In the robot suit, Dorn paused in a similar stance. Through the armor, the glowering orc bared his tusks and all the rest of his teeth at her.

No, not at her. Teq.

From somewhere, her crusher had found giant mechanical gloves that turned all four of his already big hands into monstrous weapons. There'd been a time that hands had hurt, but now they were being used for her, with her.

He grabbed the robot's appendages, forcing it back from Ollie's rock. Though the suit was twice Teq's size, with its chainsawed leg, Dorn couldn't get leverage against him. Dorn yowled out some orcish invective, but the sound was almost lost in the wind and the screech of straining servos as Teq's powered gloves relentlessly smashed the robot armor.

Now she understood why he was called crusher.

Maybe Dorn was reminded too. In another moment, the robotic structure would be so bent around him, he'd be trapped there.

With a dexterous wriggle displaying how well orcs had evolved in the tight confines of caves, Dorn levered himself out of the suit. He bolted toward the torn hatch. Was he just going to—?

Beams of lights, a thousand times brighter than her little chainsaw, ripped through the hole in the hull.

Whoever Dorn had contacted was coming to get him—and presumably the rock.

Just *what* had the orcs found?

Not that it mattered at the moment, since the threat to the *DeepWander* was now so much worse. Teq grabbed her—somehow managing a non-crushing grip despite the robotic

gloves—and yanked her behind a thin panel, one of several scattered around the bay. It was *so* thin, but the shiny pebbled surface scattered the laser light into a harmless glow.

“You have to get out of here,” he said. “I believe this is the ship that attacked us once before. The vreign of Luster Station frowns on piracy as bad for business, so if Dorn made a deal with pirates to deal with the Luster, they won’t hesitate to destroy us, erasing the evidence.”

“What do we do? Everyone on board is in danger. Don’t you have weapons too?”

“Yes, and I will use them. But I don’t want you in the way.”

Though they were in terrible trouble, his brusqueness bruised her. “How can I help?”

“Go.”

Just as she’d always done. That had been how she saved herself before.

“I’m not going anywhere,” she said firmly.

For just the briefest moment that somehow seemed to last forever in the midst of this chaos, he looked at her. And the shimmer in his dark eyes had nothing to do with the lethal light glowing all around them.

He handed her a long, narrow tube. “Aim that end at Dorn or anyone else who comes through the hole. Don’t aim it at me.”

While he rummaged through the detritus strewn all around them, she peeked out from behind their little barrier. Maybe she should be grateful for having to try out all the videogames she’d prohibited Ollie from playing.

Though Dorn had clearly intended to flee the *DeepWander*, now he was hesitating, obviously wanting to retrieve the rock but not sure it was worth his life. She fired once, hoping to resolve the question for him. But a flurry of shots from the invaders made it clear they weren’t giving up either.

Heart skittering erratically—because this *wasn’t* a video game—she ducked besides Teq. “We can’t hold them off

forever. Should we give up and surrender the rock?”

“No. At this point, their only choice is to leave nothing of us behind, if they want to sell at the Luster and not on some less lucrative black market.”

How unfair to come all this way only to face such greed and violence again. She swallowed hard. “Then what?”

“Just don’t let them kill me,” he warned.

“What...?”

He popped out from behind their fragile shelter, hauling some hastily assembled device with him. A little cord dangling behind. He’d promised to show her how to blow things up, but she hadn’t wanted the lesson to go like *this*.

The mechanism she had wasn’t even a real weapon, just a tool the orcs used to cut up rubble. It had just enough reach to keep Dorn and the others away from Roxy, but all they needed was one moment to grab it while she was ducking in fear.

Teq clambered up into the hollow robotic shell Dorn had abandoned. The behemoth robot looked much the worse for wear. But he managed to guide it toward the hole in the hatch. Was he going to use it to block the hole? That wouldn’t really stop the air from escaping or stop the invaders from coming in.

Under Teq’s control, the robot continued its halting stumble toward the break in the hull. Somewhere in the depths with Teq, a red light began to blink, slowly at first.

Then faster.

As if it were counting down in the language she didn’t need to know.

Lightheaded, whether from hypoxia or panic she wasn’t sure, she finally understood.

The robot was a walking bomb.

And Teq was going with it.

“No!” Even in her own head with the universal translators embedded there, she couldn’t hear herself through the thinning atmosphere and escalating chaos.

Pinning her finger on the device controls so that its fading energy shot wildly ahead of her, she ran after the robot—and Teq. Obviously deciding that his chances with the invaders weren't great if he didn't have Roxy, Dorn reversed course away from the holed hull, pelting back toward the main corridor.

She didn't bother looking back.

Teq would sacrifice himself for his ship, that was clear enough. But she got that. She'd never been willing to sacrifice for herself, only for Ollie. Well, Teq might not save himself, but he would save her. She was sure of it—sure of *him*—as she'd never believed anything else in her life.

With all his focus on the hole in front of him, he never had a chance to stop her. And she was right beside him, reaching through the bent and broken structure of the robot.

She couldn't speak, breathless from the void and panic.

His dark eyes opened wide, so wide and black like all of space, like all her fears distilled down to this moment of the bad choices and fear.

She reached toward him. Her hand had never seemed so weak and small, even when she was warding off the blows that had ended her old life.

He'd told her once he wouldn't touch her, that he couldn't feel. The countdown light was blinking faster, but still not as frantic as her pulse. If he wouldn't reach back now...

The wind wasn't quite as strong—meaning the air pressure was equalizing and not in a good way—but it was still gusting enough to make her sway. Maybe she was never going to be strong enough, forever doomed to be rocked by fickle fate and other people's choices.

“Teq.”

It wasn't even a whisper; she didn't have the breath. But despite the whipping wind, his antennae focused on her.

And he thrust one hand out through the machine cage.

A hand slicked with blue-green ichor: orc blood.

At some point, he'd been hit. She hadn't protected him well enough. Her muscles froze with guilt and horror as much as the leaching chill of space.

But she grabbed his hand, extra tight to counter the slippery ichor. Bracing her free hand on the robot, she heaved with all her weight, helping him scramble free of the robot.

For an instant, he sagged backward, as if he were about to fall into the hollow again. He toggled something and then leaped free, lifting her with him.

And wings flared out from beneath the shell of his carapace.

The iridescent bronze, like dragonfly wings, unfurled twice as long as he was tall, gliding them in a shallow arc away.

The robot continued to shamble toward the gap in the hull where the invaders—emboldened by the lack of return fire—had attached giant hooks reaching through the hole. The hooks stabbed into the robotic shell, right where Teq had been.

He landed badly, crumpling, and though she tried to hold them both upright, she barely managed to keep him from faceplanting into the laser-scored floor plates.

Somewhere in the back of her head, that blinking light was strobing so fast it was almost solid red. It told her they didn't have time to get to the main corridor.

From behind him, she wrapped her arms around his wide chest, the wings sagging limp over her own shoulders. Holding him tight, she chocked her heels in the scarred floor, pushing with all the big muscles in her thighs. Dammit, she could've chosen some little green man from the IDA matchbook, but nooooo...

She lunged back once, twice, a third time, and her spine slammed into a lumpy barrier. Ollie's rock.

It hadn't seemed very big when it was mounted under the lights in the secondary bay, and it seemed even smaller now as refuge against the void. But here they were, and her legs were quivering and her arms felt stretched to disjointed and her head pounded—and her heart ached even more.

“My crusher,” she murmured. She flattened her burned and bloodied palm over the glyph on his torso and let out a breath at the empowering rush through her, as if someone had distilled into one essence the energy of coffee, the pleasure of chocolate, the thrills of ghost in the graveyard—and the love of a man who had reached for her as she reached for him.

The last of the air whispered out around them as the invaders yanked the robot out into space, clearing a path for their raid. Teq wrapped one hand behind her neck and pulled her down for a kiss.

And as the bomb he’d sent out to the pirates exploded, the darkness of space ignited around them.

Adeline.

The voice nudged at her. But she was sleeping so peacefully. It had been forever, it seemed, since she got to sleep in. Usually she had to roll out of bed like a thief, soak the tear tracks from her swollen eyes or do her makeup to cover any bruises, get breakfast started...

No, wait. That was done, had been done for a while. Except for breakfast. Pancakes were forever—

“Oliver!” As she bolted upright, another word burst from her. “Teq!”

“Mommy?” From the blankets spread beside her, Ollie lifted his head. “Did you have a nightmare?”

She wanted to laugh or cry or both. “No. No, owlet. It wasn’t a nightmare. It’s a good dream because you are here.”

As she hugged him close, she gazed over his sleep-tousled hair. “And you’re here too.”

From his seat across the med bay, Teq gazed at her. “Because of you.”

She wasn’t ready to put Ollie down, not after she’d almost lost him, but she looked over the big crusher as if she could use her hands. “You were hurt.”

“Barely a scratch.”

Ollie twisted his head to blink up at her. “He was bleeding all over the place when he carried you out of the bay. But I only screamed a little. He said I could scream for him while Sil glued him back together.”

“Maybe your screaming helped stick the synth skin.” Teq crinkled his eyes and widened his lips—those lips she’d kissed—around his tusks. It was basically a smile.

June bustled in, Sil right on her heels. “Adeline! You’re awake!”

“How’s your head?” Sil held some sort of scanner near her. “I think we cleared the concussion, but you might be a little sore. Would you like to go back to your quarters?” He set aside the scanner. “Or would you rather wait here until the IDA transport comes?”

She froze, and it felt as if the entire universe froze with her.

Ollie’s little hand snuggled into hers. “Mom?”

“What is it, owlet?”

“I don’t want to leave here. The adventure isn’t over.”

She kissed his head. “No. It’s not over.”

June and Teq flanked her as they walked slowly through the *DeepWander* to her quarters.

She glanced up at him. “I guess we didn’t blow up?”

“*We* didn’t,” Ollie said before Teq could answer. “But the pirates blew off their whole boarding apparatus. Mag had to rescue two of them or their blood would’ve boiled in space.” He scowled fiercely. “Maybe Dorn should have to boil in space.”

June hugged him to her side. “Mag will make sure they face justice at Luster Station.”

“Mag was almost to the bay when I launched the grapples,” Teq said quietly. “He took Dorn into custody along with the pirates who were attempting to board.” He didn’t scowl quite as fiercely as Ollie, but it was close.

She found herself leaning slightly into his shoulder, even though he must be hurting as much as she was. “I wish I could’ve carried you all the way out.”

His steady strides faltered as he half turned to her. “But you did.”

Before she could clarify, they were at her door. With June’s help, she got Ollie washed up and into his own bed.

As she kissed him good night, he murmured, “Roxy is so happy we’re staying here. It says it’s making a surprise for us.”

That sounded ominous. “I love surprises,” she lied.

Except that wasn’t entirely true. She *had* loved some surprises lately: the shimmering beauty of cave slug slime, her flair with a laser chainsaw, loving a space orc...

She walked with June to the apartment door, and the smaller woman gave her a long hug. “I can’t believe this is so...much,” she mumbled. “I’d freak out but...”

“I hear it’s an adventure,” Adeline reminded her. “I can’t wait to find out what happens next.”

After a moment, June peered sidelong at her with a smirk. “Oh, I’ll hazard a wild guess.”

Teq was still waiting by the door, but June slipped past him and shut it before he could escape.

With his back to the portal, he looked almost afraid. “Are you...” He cleared his throat. “How are you...feeling?”

Adeline rubbed the back of her head ruefully. “Whatever Sil did to me before I woke up, I don’t feel anything.”

Teq’s shoulders sagged, all four of them. “Ah. So...no feelings at all?”

“Oh, Teq.” She walked right up to him until their toes overlapped. “*You* made me feel. I felt terrified. Furious. Confused.”

“Adeline...”

“I felt protected. I felt desire.” She took one of his hands, threading her fingers through his, so his tremor went all the way through her too. “I feel...” She let out a breath. “Hope. You made me believe in this second chance.”

His black eyes shone like a bug she hadn't believed could be beautiful, like piercing lasers and a million promising stars. “I have felt all that. And more. Because of you. I feel...this is what they mean by love?”

Stepping even closer, she angled their joined hands between them so her heartbeat reverberated through him. “This is love.”

“You...will stay?” His antennae trembled.

She knew that uncertainty too well, and she would make sure her mighty crusher never doubted, never regretted, always knew he was loved. “Crusher Teq, do you want an Earther wife-mate?”

“I want you.” He swung her up into his arms. “Adeline. I've only ever broken rocks. For you and Oliver I will make a new place, a new life, a new chance. Just tell me how you want it to be and I will make it.”

She flung her arms around his neck, hoisting herself high enough to center a kiss on his mouth. “I'm sure the handbook is around here somewhere, but let's skip to the step where we make love.”

“I will make your home from stone and from my body,” he promised, “from my i'lva, from any fortune I find.”

She kissed him again, and then once again, wonder and delight blazing through her like an infinity of shooting stars. “We'll find it together.”

And with her orc mate, she knew their adventure together would never end.



The adventure continues now with WIFE-MATES FOR THE ORCS #2!

He's the littlest orc.

She's the Earther girl fleeing her mistakes.

Together, they're getting into big trouble in outer space!

Welcome to the Intergalactic Dating Agency!

The Omega Reclamation Crew finally found their fortune—but unfortunately, the orcs can't spend it. Sil, the *DeepWander's* only short orc, has an idea to save the ship and prove his place on the crew separate from his big brother the mighty apex. Sil just needs someone who'll believe in him, a.k.a. an accomplice...

Kinsley Sullivan meant to be good, honestly. Hacking into the Big Sky IDA dating profiles to stow away on a spaceship, escaping her problems, was supposed to be her last scam. Except now Sil the space nerd is dangling a prize she can't resist—and not just the enticing alien secrets beneath his orc kilt.

Guided by a talking pet rock, they're on a road trip across the galaxy, where the menace of mercenaries, the risk of rogue comets, and the vulnerability of the void is matched only by the threat of trusting each other—and the hazards of their own lonely hearts.

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In the quietest part of the next rest cycle, when even the slymusks had gone to sleep and their illuminated trceries through the halls had faded, Sil made his way to the Earthers' quarters. He stood outside Kinsley's door.

He was probably making a mistake.

The door opened.

"Hey." She leaned in the doorway, a satchel slung over her shoulder. In a dark tunic and tight black leggings, she was a shadowed silhouette against the low light behind her. "Was wondering when you'd come."

"I..." He swallowed. "Come for..."

"Me?" She tilted her head. She'd piled her two-toned hair high with a colorful elastic binding the mass, making her even taller, but a few soft coils dangled past her rounded ears and rippled over her shoulders. "To go after the rock dust? I'm ready." When he stood there, hesitating, she crossed her arms over her chest. "Oh, did you suddenly change your mind? If you decided you don't need me—"

"No!" He modulated his tone. "I need you. Let's go."

Side by side—he didn't have to slow his steps as much as Teq did with Adeline—they went to the shuttle bay. The shuttle was bigger than the life pods that had been part of the safety drills for Ollie and the other Earthers, but it looked very small when he thought of the interstellar map.

And it looked even smaller inside with Roxy crammed into the cargo bay.

Kinsley paused. “We’re taking it with us? I thought you figured out where we’re going.”

“Just in case Roxy was confused.” He hustled toward the cockpit. “This way you can steer us right.”

“That’d be a first,” she muttered as she followed him.

As he settled into the pilot’s position, he didn’t have time to ask her what she meant. Not when he had to quickly cue up the launch. Teq had tightened security after the pirates had tried to take Dorn and Roxy. But the often overlooked little brother of the apex still had some tricks.

Choking out an oath as the shuttle jerked into motion, Kinsley quickly took the seat beside him. She’d left her bag in back next to Roxy. “What’s the hurry?”

“Oh, no hurry at all. Just trying to save the ship and its crew and our future before the Luster exposes our failed fortune hunting and we are doomed to the void of space—”

“Okay, okay, I get your point.” She latched the safety harness around herself; obviously she’d been paying attention during the safety drills too. “I just didn’t realize we were going in this little bucket. I thought we’d all be going together in the *DeepWander*.”

He clacked his tusks once before stifling the giveaway emotion. “This will be faster and less obtrusive.” He gunned the shuttle toward the hatch.

Kinsley pressed back in her seat. “Um. Not that I know anything about flying a spaceship of any size, but doesn’t the door need to be open?”

“It will open, in just a second,” he reassured her, wishing he could reassure himself. “There is a scheduled duty cycle that runs through a sequence with an option to vent the bay in case of emergency.”

She whipped her head around to stare at him. “Emergency? Why doesn’t the door just open on command?”

Before he could answer—and he really should’ve thought of a better answer—the comm crackled.

“Sil,” Teq growled. “Why is your brother’s security signature on the shuttle bay emergency override sequence?”

Refusing to meet Kinsley’s accusing glare, Sil cleared his throat. “Because otherwise the hatch wouldn’t open?”

“Because you are not authorized to leave,” Teq said. “Because your brother, your apex, who apparently did not hide his codes from you, specifically forbade you from leaving.”

Sil clamped all four hands around the shuttle controls. “This is our best option, Teq. Why won’t you all believe me?”

“Because you’ve stolen a fortune and abducted an alien?” Teq’s growl was so deep, the words almost vibrated the comm panel.

“He’s not stealing the rock,” Kinsley said. “He’s just borrowing it. And I’m not abducted. I’m...borrowed too.”

Unable to stop himself, Sil glanced at her. She was watching him, her smoky blue gaze steady; if there was more nuance to the look, he didn’t know enough Earther expressions to interpret it.

“Kinsley, is everything all right?” Adeline’s voice was softer than the crusher’s, but no less stern.

Kinsley snorted. “I’m not going to use the IDA safe word. Really, everything is fine. Or maybe not fine exactly.” She rolled her eyes at Sil. “Sil says this is what we need to do to save the ship. And I believe him.”

The hatch opened, and Sil gunned the shuttle toward the expanding square of darkness. Within him, something else leaped forward, energized by Kinsley’s words.

Some murmured conversation between Teq and Adeline didn’t quite come through the comm until the crusher’s voice cleared. “I’ll cover for you as best I can.”

“Kinsley, this is your chance,” Adeline said. “Make it count.”

The comm blanked with a soft chime, and Sil punched the acceleration, hurtling them out into space.

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[Elsa Jade](#) writes sexy shapeshifting romances, fast-paced urban fantasy romance, and out-of-this-world science fiction romance. In all the subgenres, she believes in hopes, dreams, and the transformational power of love. She thrills at the chance to share her stories with like-minded readers.

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