



CRAVING THE HEVEIANS BOOK 6

THE ALIEN'S

Fate

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THE ALIENS' FATE

A SCI-FI ALIEN ROMANCE

CRAVING THE HEVEIANS

BOOK 6

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Axlos

My people are fighting for their lives against a power determined to rip our planet apart for a valuable energy source. I am on the front lines, leading our forces. I knew this would be my fate if we went to war, and I don't expect to survive.

My only regret? Not telling Arria, the shy little human we rescued, that I loved her. Now it's too late. I've taken my last steps on my home planet of Heveia. I'll fight to the end alongside my warriors to ensure that my people survive.

That *she* survives.

Arria

I may be one small, quiet human, but I have a knack for a few things. One of them is seeing patterns that even computers miss. When I unlock an enemy command cipher, I know it can help our forces, but the algorithms disagree and it's deemed too risky to send me out in the middle of battle. Instead, I do the riskiest thing I've ever done and steal a shuttle with the help of a friendly cybot. When we arrive on Axlos' ship, his feelings become crystal clear. Amid a battle that will end the war—one way or another—I learn if I can open my heart or if the scars of my past will determine my future.

CHAPTER 1

Arria

I'd had a feeling my cause was a lost one before I even walked through the door. I was right. My materials were displayed on the large screen before me, detailing why my research and I needed to be placed on a transport and delivered to the Heveian cruiser, now named the *Renegade*.

Minister Bazer gazed down at me with a slightly sour expression. "Your request is denied, Ms. Davis. I'm sure I don't need to explain why."

This was not the throne room, although I had no doubt that Minister Bazer would have loved to have access to that room. He stood tall and aloof in his private office, which was still impressive, deep in the Heveian palace where he ruled while Crown Prince Gavrox was off-planet working to develop more allies in the war against the United Coalition for Peace, or rather, the United Coalition, now. They dropped the "Peace" bit when they began openly attacking Heveian ships in a bid to control the planet.

I raised my chin. "On the contrary, Minister, an explanation would be appreciated. I have before you a solution to crack the enemy's coded communications. I need the enhanced capabilities of that cruiser to run the necessary progra—"

His slender hand raised, cutting me off. "There is nothing on the *Renegade* that makes its computing power superior to what we have here on Heveia. If you cannot demonstrate this

miraculous code-cracking breakthrough you claim to have found here, I'm afraid I cannot help you further."

My hands tightened into fists. I couldn't stand this male. He had been put in charge of keeping peace and calm on the planet while Heveian forces were fighting the UC in space, but he was about as open-minded as a rock. "The *Renegade* has been enhanced enormously," I said. "First by Axlos, then by both Kiki Ricci and Claire Turich. All of them made significant upgrades and integrations to the ship's central computer. Together, they created fully functioning cyborg limbs for Craal and increased the ship's computational capabilities by over three hundred percent. Nothing on Heveia comes close."

Minister Bazer's cat-slitted eyes narrowed. "That may be, but you are still confined to the surface of this planet for the duration of the war."

Frustration bubbled up inside me. "That's ridiculous," I blurted in almost a shout, which was exceedingly rare for me.

"May I remind you that *you* are the one who requested residency on Heveia?"

"That was before," I snapped. "They need this information. It could change the course of the war, which *isn't* moving in our favor."

Minister Bazer looked to be as out of patience as I was. He tugged the front of his stiff brown uniform. "'Could' is not enough of a reason to break Captain Axlos' orders that you remain here."

Those words were like a hard slap. "Captain Axlos is not my master, parent, or ruler," I said coldly.

"No, but he is enormously valuable to our forces," he said. "You would be a distraction to him. One he can ill afford."

"Why?"

Minister Bazer's stern expression cracked, just a little. "Ms. Davis, you must know how he feels about you by now."

Now, my thin thread of patience snapped. Yes, I knew Axlos had feelings for me. *Everyone* knew it. I also knew I'd made it clear that I didn't return those feelings. Or rather, I *wouldn't* return them. I had my reasons. Primary among them was that I valued my independence more than I desired Axlos. There. I said it. There was a time when I was controlled by one particular man and I suffered in ways no one should ever have to. I still bore the scars on my back as a memento. I didn't need to justify my decision to hold on to my independence. "What does that have to do with anything?"

He blinked and spluttered, as if I'd tossed a drink in his face. "I did not think I needed to spell it out, but very well. The general is in love with you, Ms. Davis."

"It isn't my fault that Axlos has some misguided hope that we—"

Minister Bazer's expression turned pitying. "He has no hope of anything, Ms. Davis. He accepts your feelings and has asked that you remain on Heveia—which you yourself initially requested—so that he is not distracted from his important work of directing his flank of the defenders." He sighed, folding his long hands in front of him. "Just as you cannot help your feelings, or lack thereof, he cannot help his."

I took a deep breath and processed what he said, which wasn't untrue. "Surely he can put his feelings aside to allow me to do work that may end this war quicker."

Minister Bazer shook his head. "I answer to the crown prince, who has directed me to accommodate General Axlos in whatever he requests. As Gavrox is not here to weigh in, I will adhere to my orders and deny *your* request."

"What about Princess Lila?" I asked desperately. "Surely she can weigh in in Gavrox's absence?"

His brows dropped into a scowl. "The princess is recovering from the birth of her son. She is not to be disturbed."

I knew that was going to be a dead end, although I knew Lila was well enough to weigh in on just about anything. She

and I were the only two humans left in the palace. The others had gone with their Heveian mates on the cruiser. I had to admit, it was lonely. Although I visited with her every day that she was up for it, Lila *was* busy and exhausted with a new baby, and she worried—with reason. The war wasn't going well. My shoulders dropped. "What can I show you to prove that I can break this code?"

One silvery brow rose. "You can break the code. *Then* I would believe you. But I fail to see how one human female can do what all of our computers and analysts have been unable to do as of yet."

I shook my head. "They're going at it wrong," I murmured. "The codes are based on a language that isn't a language."

"Ah, now it all makes sense," Minister Bazer said dryly. "Please return to your quarters, Ms. Davis. My decision is final."

Defeated, I left the minister's office and let the door slide closed behind me.

"May I assume your request was denied?"

I looked up to see Hoc, a slender cybot in shining metal gazing down at me from the strip of black glass across his otherwise smooth face. His visual scanner missed nothing. "Yes. Denied. I wanted to punch Minister Bazer."

A fuzzy, staticky sound came from Hoc that I'd long recognized as his cybot version of laughter. "That would have been amusing, yet ill advised."

"I know," I muttered, walking beside him toward my quarters. "That's why I didn't do it. That, and his face is too high for my fist."

Hoc chuckled again. "You would sooner punch yourself than another living being. But I admire your spirit."

I let out a frustrated sigh. "I'm a wimp. I know it."

"You're kind and compassionate," Hoc said. "I would argue that those traits make you the opposite of a wimp."

“Thanks, Hoc.” But I *did* feel like a wimp. If I had pushed harder, made my case stronger, he might have seen the merits of my request to be sent to the *Renegade*. *Yes*, it was in the middle of a war zone. I firmly believed that Axlos could, and would, set aside his interest in me if it meant unraveling the cryptic transmissions sent and received by the UC. He was not ruled by emotions, after all. He was a natural leader. A male who all followed and obeyed.

Just like Brother David, the man who had left me scarred...inside and out.

Logically, I knew Axlos was *not* like Brother David. Never once had I witnessed Axlos hurt anyone, belittle anyone, or manipulate them into doing something they didn't want to do. He always looked tired. He listened to others and deferred to them sometimes. But he was always, *always*, the final authority on the cruiser and I couldn't untangle that fact from the man in my past who haunted me, even though a galaxy separated us.

It was a rare day that an alien abduction improved one's life, but that's what had happened to me. Despite being tossed in a cell and nearly starved to death, it was better than living in the compound.

“Here we are.” Hoc stopped beside my room. I, lost in thought, would have walked right by. “Don't give up hope. There still may be a way.”

I looked up into his blank, smooth face—entirely featureless—which still somehow managed to convey more emotions than a lot of people. “I don't see how.”

Hoc's body was made of slender, brassy metal, so when he rocked back on his heels I worried that he'd tip backwards. He didn't. “Can we go inside for a moment?”

Hoc and I spent hours each day in my quarters, poring over data displayed over dozens of screens that covered almost every surface in the room. This time, he seemed tense. “Of course.” I opened the door with my handprint and we went inside.

When the door was shut behind us, Hoc began to pace on his delicate legs. “I have been working on this code-breaking project with you for the past four months. Ever since the *Renegade* left port and the war began, and those mysterious transmissions were intercepted, we’ve been working together to decipher them.”

I sat on the edge of my bed, one of the few places not covered in research. “Yeah?”

“So, I think you’re close.” His voice was smooth, except for the slight mechanical ring to the edges of his words. “I have intimate knowledge of the cruiser’s capabilities.”

I frowned up at him. “Hoc, what are you saying?”

A metal hand closed around my shoulder. “I don’t know yet, but I’m working through scenarios in which we steal a transport and make our own way to the cruiser.”

“Hoc.” I was so scandalized all I could get out was his name.

“I know, Arria. I know.”

“No, you don’t. You could be disassembled for this. And they could put me in prison. Or worse...” *They could send me back to Earth.*

“But if we succeed in decoding the enemy messages, we’ll be heroes.”

I closed my eyes. “I don’t need to be a hero.”

“But you do need a home,” Hoc said gently. “And at the current progression of the war, there is a seventy-seven-point-three-eight percent chance that Heveia will lose. I’ve worked over thousands of models and none of them end well for our side. The UC has more ships, more weapons, and faster everything. Even with the Mitrans and others, our forces are always one step behind the enemy. They are picking off our ships one by one.”

I sat on the edge of my bed and thumped my fists into the mattress. “Why doesn’t Minister Bazer *see* that?”

“It’s easy to not see what isn’t right in front of you,” Hoc said. “Especially when he’s never left the palace or made a decision on his own.”

“That doesn’t make what you’re suggesting any less risky.”

Hoc knelt down in front of me. He cocked his smooth, egg-shaped head. “Arria, of the countless models I’ve analyzed for the possible paths of this war, only one lowers the likelihood of total loss.”

I knew what he was going to say, but I needed to hear it. Hoc was an unusual cybot. He’d been programmed to be a bartending bot, rescued from that by Princess Lila when the outpost they were both on was destroyed, and had since become integrated as part of the crew. He was here to be Lila’s attendant, but she’d asked him to assist me with my work. So here we were, sitting in my room discussing committing a high crime that could see both of us severely punished. “What path is that?”

“If you can crack the enemy code, our forces can get one step ahead of the UC, for once,” he said. “That lowers the failure probability to eleven percent.”

“Eleven percent.” My eyes lost focus and I turned my gaze to the floor. “That’s...lower.”

“But you do need the dynamic capabilities programmed into the *Renegade*. That ship is uniquely altered to run the enormous amount of data required to untangle the code.”

“What is the probability, even with the cruiser’s computer, that my theory is correct and the code is breakable using the formula I’ve come up with?” I asked.

“Sixty-two percent,” he replied. “Give or take a fraction.”

I grimaced. “Not the best odds.”

Hoc rose, standing straight and tipping my chin up with one narrow metal finger. “Arria, we *will* lose,” he said softly. “The palace will fall within two months. The UC will control Heveia and the *vistran* power crystals this whole absurd war is based upon. Everyone we care about, including Lila and her

new baby, will be executed. I'm willing to risk disassembly for a sixty-two-percent chance of improving our odds. Are you?"

CHAPTER 2

Axlos

“Steady that shield generator.” I braced my arms on either side of the screen and gazed down at the swarm of red moving around us. “Those drones are coming in fast.”

“On it.” Wulfrex moved between two consoles as he worked to send power to the shield and reroute the system as the cruiser took a hit that knocked something loose. I didn’t know what. The lighthearted Wulfrex I’d grown up with was gone. This version was quiet, serious, and never smiled. Not that any of us had reason to smile these days.

Drave, my communications officer, didn’t look up from his station, but raised one finger in the air. “A Mitran battlecruiser has arrived,” he growled out. “Not a moment too soon.”

The surprise arrival of our ally threw the enemy into disarray, especially because the battlecruiser, the *Shagris*, appeared right beside the *nisran* carrier, which tried to make an evasive turn to get away from the Mitran ship. Not easy with a huge carrier.

The drones flew in disarray. The Mitrans charged up their most powerful weapon—a *tentral* pulse—only usable in close proximity and a one-shot deal, as the pulse took hours to recharge. I watched, nearly shaking with relief, as a great light flared in the darkness before being silently swallowed by the void of space. Sure enough, the drones shut off and drifted.

The *Shagris*, unharmed, slid away from the cluster of wreckage. “That should be the end of those drones. Sorry for the delay,” came the *Shagris*’ captain through the com channel. “We were held up in sector E-33.”

“Your timing was perfect,” I said with forced calm. “Thanks for the help.”

The *Shagris* did a scan to make sure there were no more enemies, as did we, then departed, leaving us to our post as it blinked out of sight.

“Mitrans are good allies, but it’s dangerous to rely on them too much,” Drave said. He was not being suspicious. It *was* dangerous.

“Their ships are faster and better equipped than ours,” I said, “but I agree. I don’t understand how the UC always outmaneuvers us as if they know where we’re going.” I leaned over the round flat screen, which was crowded with damage reports and updates, and frowned at the information I was reading about the shield stabilizers. “Wulfrex, what caused the damage to the shields?”

Wulfrex raised one eyebrow. “Unknown.”

“Can you be more specific?”

He left his station and crossed to where I stood. “The stabilizers stopped working, but not due to any damage sustained by this battle. It appears to be an internal failure.”

The back of my neck prickled. “This has been happening with more frequency.”

“It has.” He met my gaze. “And I was looking into the cause of it, before I alarmed you.”

My stomach tightened. “Do you believe we have a UC spy on this ship?”

The crew was much larger than it had been before we went to war with the United Coalition. The last time Arria was on board, space has been tight but now had seventy-two crew members—who rotated in and out on shifts that lasted several weeks—not including Wulfrex, Dani, Drave, Harp, and

myself. Although they were cleared by numerous checks and interviews, I didn't know most of them. And at least one of them appeared to not be who they seemed.

He shrugged. "I'm looking into it."

I raked my fingers through my hair. A spy or saboteur was the very last thing we needed. "I want regular updates."

"Will do, Ax." He hit the setting on his screen interface and opened on the coms to the maintenance crew farther in the ship. "Catch as many of those drones as you can with the drawing beams and grapples," Wulfrex bellowed. "Put them in cargo."

"What do you want them for?" his mate, Dani, asked from her post at one of the weapons consoles.

"To reprogram them," he replied. "Send them right back at the UC scum."

Dani shook her head and looked back to her screen. "No more enemies on the scanner, sir."

That "sir" was me, although I barely deserved the title. I didn't know how much longer I could keep everything together. The ship was taking a beating. The crew was stretched to the breaking point with little sleep and enough stress to put us all in a medic bed, but Jorok wasn't here to take care of us. Half my core officers ran a cruiser of their own, the *Defiant*, captained by Ryland. He was more than capable, but I missed him, Jorok, and Craal, the cyborg we rescued a while back, who had since become part of our crew.

I ran my hands through my hair. "Run a ship diagnostic," I said. "Start repairs immediately." *Before the next wave arrives.* I didn't need to say that part out loud. We all knew it.

"Yes, sir." Harp, Drave's mate, sat beside him in her station and executed my order. "Diagnostic coming through now. Huh. Not that bad. Some hull damage to level twelve and that shield integrator came loose again." She swiveled in her seat and looked me over with an appraising eye. "Jorok may not be here to give his medical opinion, so I'll say it instead—you look like shit, Captain. Go get some rest. Sir."

I frowned. "I'm fine."

Wulfrex glanced over. "You're not. She's right. We'll hold the main deck for a few hours."

Dani raised one brow and jerked her head toward the door. "We'll call you if we get company."

I suddenly felt my fatigue in every joint of my body, weighing me down like an overactive gravity replicator. Without a word, I walked off the deck. Even my footsteps were leaden. I had been on the deck for three full shifts, staying awake and alert while everyone else had had rest time. My belly ached from lack of food. Harp was correct, I needed rest. But the fact that I needed to be *told* that I needed rest was a worrying sign. This war was getting to me.

Gone were the days when my friends and I swung through the quadrant hijacking black-market shipments and getting rich from selling them. From accepting bounty assignments and chasing down wanted criminals for the thrill and profit of it. When Wulfrex would laugh at a dislodged shield stabilizer and swagger into engineering to fix it, then tinker with something else, returning with an announcement that he'd improved our turn ratio by eight percent. Drave would make a dry, cutting comment and Jorok would chide us all. That belonged to another life. Another set of Heveian males. I didn't recognize them in us now as we fought for our lives in a war that we were beginning to realize was unwinnable.

As Crown Prince Gavrox hopped from system to system gathering allies, or at least trying to convince species not to engage against us for the UC, we were being worn down. The Mitrans, our greatest allies, with the biggest fleet, were the only reason we had lasted this long. Other allies had lent what help they could, but most didn't have the firepower to go up against the United Coalition, who had amassed a powerful armada. They wanted the *vistran* energy crystals on Heveia and had no interest in allowing the species native to that planet to continue existing as anything other than slaves.

We would die before that happened.

I trudged into my quarters and collapsed on the bed, not bothering to take off my boots or armor. I felt hollowed out, as if everything I had been was eaten away except for the shell. “Coms, give me Minister Bazer on a secure channel.”

I heard an acknowledging ping and the current caretaker of the capital city answered immediately. “Captain Axlos Pentrak. This is Bazer.”

I sighed, having long dispensed with pleasantries. “Update on Prince Gavrox.”

“His royal highness the crown prince is just leaving the Olor system, where he met with representatives of the Tew-tos-lin species about sending some of their stealth ships.”

I threw an arm over my eyes. “Have they agreed?”

There was a pause. “They said they would be likely to if the war begins to turn in our favor, sir.”

There was that word again: *sir*. “I wish I could send some better news his way,” I said. “We are holding ground, but not gaining.”

“All of Heveia is in your debt, Captain,” said Bazer. “Your leadership is inspiring.”

I snorted, not even bothering to address that statement. “How is she?”

Bazer knew exactly who “she” was. He also knew this was the real reason I had reached out to him.

Arria.

The human female had my heart, whether she wanted it or not. *Not* being the clear sentiment.

“She came to see me today,” he said. “She has ideas that she can break the enemy communication code.”

My eyes flew open. “What ideas?”

“Nothing convincing,” Bazer scoffed. “We have teams of hundreds and all the computing power of the planet dedicated to the endeavor. If the codes can be cracked, we will see it done.”

I sat up, waving a hand that Bazer couldn't see. "What did she say about it?"

"I could make no sense in her words," he replied. "Something about the codes being based on a language that wasn't a language." He chuckled. "I suspect Ms. Davis could do with a good night's sleep and a visit to the medic to calm her nerves."

I pushed down the urge to snap at Bazer. "If Arria thinks she's on to something, make sure she has what she needs to work."

"Oh, believe me, Captain. I told her that she has whatever computing power she desires here. I haven't restricted her access. She can use the entire mainframe, if she pleases."

"Good, good." I relaxed back down. "It wouldn't surprise me if Arria did it. She has an incredible mind."

"Of course, she does, sir." I could hear the placating tone but was too tired to try to convince him. Bazer was an aging court diplomat thrust into a position he was not meant for and prejudiced against the human females who had snared the love of powerful males. Princess Lila would have been a better choice to be in charge, but she'd just given birth *and* she wasn't Heveian—the law forbidding non-Heveians from sole rule had not yet been changed. So, Bazer was in charge of the capital city and everything that happened in it, for better or worse. The poor fool had no clue how tenuous our hold was on our own planet.

"Anything else I need to know, Minister?"

"Nothing of importance, Captain."

"Good," I said. "Axlos out." I ended the transmission and stayed where I was, sprawled on my bed. I should be getting something to eat, getting out of these clothes, bathing, but I knew I wouldn't be moving from this spot for a while. I let sleep take me, and the only thing I had left to hope for was to dream of Arria.

CHAPTER 3

Arria

It had been hard to act normal. I'd gone about my day, eating my meals, visiting Lila and playing with the baby, Braam, who was a beautiful combination of his parents. All the while, I pretended I was *not* on the verge of stealing a Heveian transport and going against the current ruler's direct orders.

I so badly wanted to tell Lila during our time together, when I played with little Braam and she got a break to bathe and chat, but I couldn't. I wouldn't put her at risk and have her carry a burden she didn't need. This was *my* decision. Well, Hoc was a hearty accomplice. I couldn't—wouldn't—do this without him. It still didn't feel real.

Now, I stood nervously behind the chair I was supposed to be sitting in as Hoc guided the small transport out of the capital's hangar under the false pretense of a medical resupply to the *Star-runner* and a made-up manifest.

"How long before they figure out what we did?" I asked my co-conspirator.

"A few hours," Hoc replied. "But that is more time than we need."

I swallowed hard. We were defying a direct order and stealing a ship in a time of war. The *Star-runner* really *did* need a medical resupply. This was going to ensure that I would never be given permanent residency on Heveia. I would be a

criminal, especially if I couldn't decode the UC's communication codes.

And in the back of my mind was how Axlos was going to react to me showing up in his ship unannounced. That could go very badly.

"You may as well sit down," Hoc said. "We are going to be here for a while."

I sighed and looked at the seat. It felt like actually sitting down was accepting this course and being at peace with it. Neither felt true. I wished the palace computers had what I needed. I wished that Minister Bazer had just approved the trip. I wished I could tell Axlos that I had feelings for him and why I could never, ever act on them.

But here I was, on a stolen transport, wearing the uniform of a medical officer, with the crown princess' personal cybot as my accomplice. Breaking the rules had never turned out well for me. Just being *myself* had earned me punishments and the condemnation of the Human Fundamental Values group I'd been raised in.

It was these people—the women and the Heveians who rescued us—had been the first to let me learn, be my friends, and accept me.

I sat down in the seat. Hoc wouldn't have done this if he didn't think I had some chance of success. And success meant the people who had become my family would live. I would live.

Axlos would live. That mattered to me more than I cared to admit. *He* mattered to me.

"May I recommend a sedative?" Hoc asked from his seat next to mine. "I don't need to do a scan of your organic systems to see that your anxiety level is spiking."

I forced myself to take a deep breath. "I'm fine," I said. "I don't want to be groggy when we arrive on the cruiser."

"Very well," Hoc said. He didn't have to use any of the controls. He plugged his fingertips into a port and synched himself with the ship. "We will arrive at the *Renegade* in three

standard galactic hours, twenty-two minutes, and five seconds.”

I sighed. “Great. Thanks. Plenty of time to reflect on my mistakes.”

“Whatever mistakes you have made, this is not one of them,” Hoc said. “I believe in you and your calculations. And I believe the cruiser’s programming and speed will unravel the code. There is a reason why the UC targets Axlos’ ship more than any other.”

My gaze snapped to his. “Do you think the UC knows?”

“I think they know the *Renegade* is a superior ship with an outsized computing system that has been heavily augmented, yes. And they have probability analyzers, too. They know the cruiser is unique.” He turned his head my way. “They do not know about *you*, however. Of that I am ninety-eight-point-nine percent sure.”

The rest of the trip felt interminable. Then our destination came into view.

“The cruiser looks like it’s in good condition,” Hoc remarked. “Only a few areas that show repairs were needed. It helps that it’s a fast ship.”

I saw the huge, hulking cruiser, which looked shockingly intact, considering it was in a war, and felt my eyes prick with tears. I missed this ship. I missed the people on it.

When it came time to announce ourselves to the *Renegade*, I closed my eyes and tried to shut out Hoc’s explanation for being there. I heard something about an important update that had to be delivered in person, a secret message, and so on and so forth. All I wanted to do was crawl under a chair and hide.

Drave, who I had always thought of as the master of the “no reaction-reaction” was speechless over the com system. He made Hoc verify five times through various codes and questions only Hoc could answer that it was in fact him all the way out here in space and not a ploy. Or a trick.

“Is Arria really there with you?” he asked the cybot.

“Affirmative,” said Hoc. “Say hello, Arria.”

I winced. “Hello. It’s me, Drave. I’m right here.”

I had not heard Axlos’ voice once through this entire thing, but I knew he was there listening. He had to be. After a pause, Drave came back on. “Against my better judgment, you are secure for docking. Come straight to the main deck after decontamination.”

I looked at Hoc, who turned his shiny metal head in my direction. “It’s done,” I said. “We can’t go back now.”

The light of the rapidly approaching ship gleamed off his visual scanner. “Would you want to?”

I swallowed. “I don’t know what I want.”

That metal head tilted. “Why do I have the feeling that that answer is a response to many questions you have.”

I let out a rusty chuckle as our little shuttle was swallowed by the cruiser’s hangar bay. We flew inside its belly, no longer in control of the little vessel. A tractor beam brought us down on a nearby landing pad. “You are far more perceptive than anyone thinks,” I said. “And I mean no disrespect to other cybots.”

He nodded, almost regally. “No disrespect taken. I know I am unique among my kind. I believe I owe it to all the people who never saw me as just a cybot, especially Lila.”

Lights in the cabin turned a pale blue as the shuttle locked onto the hangar floor and gravity returned to my limbs. I felt heavier, more weighed down than ever. I sighed and unclipped myself from the seat. “Here goes nothing,” I muttered to myself. “I hope he doesn’t hate me.”

“*He*—if you are indeed speaking of Axlos—could never hate you,” said Hoc definitively.

“Oh, I think he could,” I said. “Don’t forget that he gave orders to keep me on Heveia.”

“For his own sanity.” Hoc rose from his seat and made a show of stretching his metal limbs. “I am so very grateful to be exempt from romantic urges. They seem terribly burdensome,

but I am happy to advise, when possible. Here is some advice, even if you don't want it—no matter how he behaves at first, Axlos will be *very* pleased to see you.” And with that, he strode back through the shuttle and down the exit ramp.

I was pretty sure I loved Hoc. He was correct ninety-nine-point-nine percent of the time.

Now, there was nothing else to do. I got up and followed him. It was time to face Axlos and accept whatever came next.

I went through the decontamination unit with Hoc, almost in a trance. The cruiser felt like home. The smells and sights and sounds made my entire being sigh with the feelings I had come to associate with this ship—safety, friendship, and happiness. *Yes*, I'd been happy on this cruiser. I hadn't realized how much I missed it.

I crossed into one of the main corridors and ran my fingers along the wall as I walked. I could find my way through this ship with my eyes closed, that was how well I knew it. When I first arrived, I had taken the time to learn every chamber and passageway, every storage compartment and maintenance access corridor in case I needed to hide or run.

Maybe it was foolish. Hiding on a space ship was ultimately futile—there was no where, really, to go. But it gave me the illusion of safety and control to plan out dozens of hiding places. In the early days of arriving here, I had assumed it was an inevitability that *someone* would try to hurt me. The ship was run by large gray aliens with blue hair. Of course one of them would attack. But not one of the males did. Slowly, I learned to trust them. Even Axlos.

The quiet hum of Hoc's mechanisms made a soothing rhythm as we walked through the ship. The crew had increased in number. I saw many faces I didn't recognize. Previously, I would have recognized everyone. There were species I'd never seen before. No one moved casually like they used to. There was an urgent, tense energy to the ship that made me sad and nervous. I couldn't imagine the stress the officers were experiencing.

I took an air tube and felt a twinge when it zipped past deck, *Residential 6D*. My room used to be on that one. Someone else undoubtedly lived in it, now. Levels flashed by as we ascended to the main deck. I knew where everything was—Jorok’s medical lab, Ryland’s training room, the pool, the open lounge, the engineering decks. But this time, I wasn’t sure I still belonged here.

At last, we alighted on the main deck, footfalls echoing in the quiet corridor.

The doors to the main deck rose before us like impending doom. I didn’t know what made me more nervous—detailing how we had completely violated orders to come here, or trying to explain *why* we’d done so. Suddenly, my theory felt thin, unproved. Possibly, *unprovable*.

Also, and I disliked admitting this to myself, I couldn’t wait to see *him*. I missed him—his face, his voice. The way he ran his hand through his blue hair when he was agitated.

I missed the way he looked at me.

I shook off those silly feelings, took a deep breath, and walked through the doors.

“Whoa, it really is you. Hey, girl.” Harp’s face lit up when she saw me.

Despite my nerves, I couldn’t resist a smile. “Hi,” I squeaked out.

Seeing them all felt like I had returned home to my family. A very *tired* family. Dani, dressed all in black, flashed a grin and a salute before turning back to her station. Drave, characteristically, raised his eyebrows skeptically. “Welcome back, Arria,” he said dryly.

Wulfrex had changed a great deal. He looked serious and stern and wore plastoid armor like a second skin, making him even bigger than he was. The humor that usually twinkled at the corner of his every expression was absent. He nodded slowly. “Hello,” he said. “This is a surprise.”

Finally, I raised my gaze to meet Axlos’. His slitted catlike eyes blazed blue and focused like lasers on me. He did not

look pleased. “Arria.”

I clasped my hands in front of me and lowered my head again. Both were reflexive gestures from my time in the HFV. It was the expected demeanor of a member who knew they had violated a rule. “Hello, Captain,” I said quietly, to the floor.

He strode up to me, radiating everything I feared in a male—anger, frustration, impatience. “You’d better have a good explanation for coming here,” he said coldly. “Or I’m putting you right back on the shuttle and sending you back to Heveia.”

CHAPTER 4

Axlos

I couldn't even keep track of the emotions I was feeling. The sight of her, standing like a terrified child with her hands clasped so tightly I could see the tense outlines of her knuckles put my chest in a vise. Her face was a pale oval. Her shoulders were hunched in an ill-fitting medic uniform. She held her body tucked in a posture of penance and guarding, as if she were expecting to brace for a blow.

Useless rage spiked at whoever caused her to feel this way. I knew of Arria's past. She'd been raised in a horrible place with people who had left her scarred—inside and out. Because of this, she was a locked door. The walls around her towered so high and were so thick, I had long abandoned hope that she would ever let me in. It didn't stop my attraction to her.

But now, she was in the most dangerous place I could imagine: *here*.

Panic flowed through me like ice water. I could not protect her. I could not keep her safe. "Arria," I said again urgently. "*Why* are you here?"

I watched her slender throat work as she swallowed thickly. "I have something," she said. "I—I think I have something that can help."

Of course she wasn't here to see me. But her response was unclear. I couldn't keep the frustration out of my voice. "What do you have?" I asked. "Aside from a death wish?"

"Dude," said Harp. "Easy does it."

Harp was right. I needed to control myself. Lashing out, even a little, would make Arria retreat farther away. I ground my fingers into my temples and took a deep breath. “Do you need a few minutes to collect yourself?” I asked in a measured tone.

“No,” came her almost inaudible reply. “I’m sorry, Captain.”

My jaw clenched at those soft, miserable words. *Did she always call me Captain?* Arria addressed me so infrequently, I couldn’t recall. “You have nothing to apologize for,” I said wearily. “You are always welcome here.” Then, taking in the odd uniform, I asked belatedly, “Did Minister Bazer give you permission to come here?”

“We, ah, liberated a transport,” replied Hoc, who appeared to have been trying to let Arria speak for herself, but that wasn’t happening with any coherency. The female before me was different from the quiet, yet composed, one I had lived with for months on this ship. Arria was shaking with fear. But fear of *what?*

“Captain Axlos, sir, Arria has been working tirelessly since your departure on deciphering the coded communications of the enemy. She believes she has had a breakthrough but requires the computing power of this cruiser and its uniquely upgraded systems in order to test and put it into practice.”

Dani let out a low whistle. “That would save our asses.”

Wulfrex’s eyes narrowed. “This is true?” he asked Arria. “You think you’ve cracked it?”

Arria looked up, seemingly finding it much easier to look at him than me. “I have a solid theory. The systems at the palace simply do not have the speed or versatility to test it. But yes, I wouldn’t have come all the way here if I wasn’t confident.”

There was a bit of that measured, confident female I remembered. She stood there as tall as she could make herself, now. Her long blond hair was coiled in a tight knot at the back of her head. The cool oval of her face was usually a warm

tone, but she was pale. Her brown eyes were darker, wider. Her sweet little mouth pinched. She looked thinner, which made my brows lower. Was that great fool Bazer not looking after her like I'd told him to?

Wulfrex appraised her. "If anyone can decipher those communications, it's our Arria," he said. "Why did you have to go to such lengths to come to us? Did you not tell Minister Bazer of your theory?"

"He had orders to keep me on Heveia and he meant to follow them." Reluctantly, with a hint of accusation, she turned to me. "Nothing I said had an effect."

"He underestimated you, clearly," I murmured.

I watched her fight to keep her shoulders straight. "He said I would be a distraction if I came here."

"You are." It might have been the fatigue or the sense that our fate was no longer our own that made my thoughts flow unfiltered from my mouth. "But you have always been."

She ducked her head. "I'll face whatever punishment the Heveian government decides to deal out to me."

Wulfrex let out a snort.

Harp was less measured. "You're one of us. They aren't going to touch you, understand?"

"Provided that we survive this ordeal, I agree with my mate," said Drave. "But it would be best if your presence here was kept as quiet as possible." He slanted the others a knowing look. "In case any observers think to examine what Arria is doing here."

I grimaced, having no choice but to acknowledge the truth of his words. It was likely that the cruiser had a spy at best. A malicious saboteur at worst. Arria's work in decrypting the UC's encryption made her a target.

"Is something going on?" she asked, looking alarmed.

"Nothing to worry about," I said. "I'll tell you about it later, but Drave is correct. Your reason for coming here must be kept secret."

She looked at Hoc. “This sounds bad.”

“It does,” the cybot replied. “Am I to believe the recent spate of untimely and mysterious malfunctions is what is causing this precaution?”

“How do *you* know about that?” Dani demanded. “You’ve been on the ship for ten minutes.”

“I needed ten *seconds* to scan the ship’s datalogs,” he replied haughtily, well aware of Dani’s mixed feelings about cybots. “I know this ship intimately.”

“Really?” she said. “Have you seen its—”

“*Don’t*,” Wulfrex murmured to his mate as Dani looked to embark on the well-trod path of exchanging barbs with a clever cybot with a far superior repertoire of rebuttals.

She nodded and rubbed her eyes. “Fuck. I’m tired. Sorry, tin man.”

Hoc inclined his head. “No need to apologize, Dani. I enjoy our banter. Perhaps another time.”

“Perhaps we can get to the business at hand,” I said. “What do you need to get started?”

Arria’s eyes darted back and forth as her mind worked through the information she now had. “Are Kiki’s and Claire’s workspaces still intact? I’d need use of one of them and the equipment.”

I nodded. “Kiki’s is available. Claire’s space was turned into quarters for our additional crew. Her equipment was dismantled and moved into Kiki’s space, but it can be set up in there to increase the power of Kiki’s system.”

“Thank you,” Arria said with a slight wince “That would...work.”

But I knew what she was thinking. Kiki’s space had been tiny to begin with. There had been hardly any room to even walk in and now, I had no idea what it looked like. I had just ordered the equipment moved, not set up. It was a storage room.

“I can get it arranged for you,” said Wulfrex. “Hoc can help me.”

“Happy to do so,” said the cybot with more cheer than any of us could muster. “I imagine Kiki’s space is in some disarray after moving everything around, but we’ll get it in top shape in no time.”

Arria gave Hoc a bemused look. “Thanks.” She turned to me. “I am so sorry to cause more trouble.”

“You’ve caused us no such thing,” said Wulfrex. “We will take any chance to improve the situation here. I’m sure you are aware that it is not good.”

I was certain that the true progress, or lack thereof, of the war had reached Heveia. It was impossible to pretend one was winning when they were not.

“I am.” She looked incredibly unsure of herself and I didn’t know how to help. I doubted she wanted comfort from me. I doubted she wanted *anything* from me. It was near torture to be here with her, holding myself back from touching her, when that was the only thing in the universe I wanted to do. There had been some solace and relief at having her far away. I didn’t have to think about her being right down the corridor, so close, so very much *there* all the time.

I cleared my throat. “I’m afraid your quarters were given to some of our new crew. Every bit of space is needed now. You will stay in my quarters while you are here.” I said it without thinking.

Her eyes widened almost impossibly large. “Oh, no. I couldn’t do that.”

I shook my head. “I’m rarely in them,” I said. “Someone should get use of them.”

“He’s right,” said Harp. “We have to force him to rest. We take breaks in shifts, so Axlos is welcome to sleep in one of our rooms when we’re on duty. We really should just make a communal sleeping room.”

Arria looked uncertain, but she nodded. “As long as you’re *sure* it’s okay.”

I shrugged, determined to not look as excited as I was by the prospect of Arria sleeping in my bed. Granted, I would not be sleeping *with* her, but I liked it, nevertheless. “Perfectly fine,” I said calmly. “Hoc, you remember where my quarters are?”

But before the cybot could respond, Arria held up a hand. “I know where your room is.”

I blinked, processing that information. “Oh. Excellent.” I made a slight bow. “Make yourself at home.”

“I shall add Arria’s biometrics to your room door,” said Hoc.

Hoc said that for Arria’s benefit only, as he knew that Arria had *always* had permission to enter my room, if ever she wished to. Her biometrics had been added not long after she became a part of the crew and began occupying space in my mind and dreams.

Lights flashed on the consoles. “Axlos,” Drave said. “We have incoming in the sector.”

It was not what I wanted to hear just then, but it snapped me out of thinking about Arria and brought my mind to the problem at hand.

“Six Scrakat ships.” He barked out the coordinates, but I already saw them on the screen. “Engage or evade?”

I turned away from Arria and faced the wide, curved window, giving me a view outside the ship. These were low-level combatants—more scouts than anything else. Their purpose was determined to be an extra wave between larger offensives. In the beginning, we scoffed at this, but we didn’t any longer. Eventually, they would wear us down. The enemy was simply bombarding us with everything they had. Never letting us rest. Never letting us fully address the repairs on our ship. And knowing there was an enemy agent on our ship was an extra layer of difficulty.

“Evade.” I gave orders as naturally as breathing, and they were common to the crew by now. Wulfrex inputted maneuvers that would keep us hidden during the Scrakat’s run.

Dani's gaze moved from the screen, tracking their trajectory with our scanners just in case she needed to fire. Through the window, I could see the enemy with my own eyes. Then, I remembered Arria was still here.

I turned suddenly. "You don't need to be here," I snapped. "Go to my quarters."

I regretted my harsh tone immediately. I needed to be more careful with Arria. She tried to act strong, but she was like glass, especially in my hands. I turned back to apologize, but she was gone. Off to my quarters, like I ordered her.

Everybody else on the main deck was absorbed in their duties. Even these ships, which were probably unmanned, operated remotely, and not too difficult to dispatch, needed our full attention.

"They're in weapons' range," Dani said. "Are you sure we're not to engage?"

I nodded. "Let them pass." I tried to remind myself that every day that went by that we weren't destroyed was one more day that we could protect our people and planet, but the enemy always seemed to have more to throw at us. If their plan was to wear us down—wear *me* down—they were succeeding.

CHAPTER 5

Arria

My steps were brisk as I moved through the corridors I knew so well. Hoc walked beside me but he didn't need to show me where Axlos' quarters were. I knew full well where they were. I'd walked past them countless times. I'd often wondered what his rooms looked like. A few times I'd tried to peek in, but I'd never gotten more than a glimpse of warm dark colors and a rumpled bed. He'd intrigued me. I felt a draw toward him, even when I was most afraid of him.

I didn't blame Axlos for speaking to me sharply. He had a job to do and I was impeding it. Just my being here was inconvenient for everyone. The best thing I could do was stay away from the main deck and concentrate on the reason why I came here.

"Am I going to be able to open the door?" I asked, stopping next to Axlos' room.

"Yes," said Hoc. "Your biometrics—your hand—will give you access. Same as your old room."

"That was quick," I said.

Hoc made his staticky chuckling sound. "You've always had access to his room," he said.

I startled. That had to be a mistake, but Hoc didn't make mistakes. "*What?*"

“There was a time when Axlos hoped that you and he, ah...” Hoc shrugged one metal shoulder. “He had *hoped*. Regardless, put your hand on the door and it will open.”

I shook my head, pushing that little nugget through my mind before packing it away. That was a bit more than I felt like processing right now. The idea that Axlos thought I would come to his room and just *go in* there was absurd. I would never breach his privacy in such a way. Unless...

He wanted me to. He *hoped*, as Hoc put it, that one day I'd welcome his company, seek him out, and wouldn't be afraid of him.

“I'm *not* afraid of him,” I hissed to myself, but it wound up audible enough for Hoc to pick it up.

“Who said you were afraid of him?” the cybot asked, offended. “I never said that.”

“I know,” I said hotly. “No one said it. *I* said it. But I'm not, okay? He's never been unkind to me. Or anyone.” My face was warm. I slapped my hand against the door and, yes, it opened.

I walked in. Those warm, rich colors were still there. The carpet on the floor was deep, plush red. His bedding was dark, royal blue. A gleaming rack adorned one wall, lined with ornate knives of different sorts. The bed was messy with a pile of blankets and a profusion of pillows thrown all over. I stood there, mouth hanging open, but not because the room was splendorous. It wasn't.

Axlos, captain of the *Renegade* space cruiser, leader of the ship and a right hand to the crown prince himself, was a slob.

I put my fingers to my lips as a laugh escaped. “Oh, my.”

Heaps of clothes were all over the place. A pair of pants sat in a puddle on the floor, perfectly collapsed with two leg holes visible where he'd dropped them, stepped right out of them, then left them there. “Whatever I thought Captain Axlos' room would be like,” I said, “this isn't it.”

“I should have tidied up.” Hoc immediately began picking up clothes.

“You knew it was like this?”

“I suspected. He spends very little time in here.” Hoc held a pair of pants in each hand, looking between the two. “Difficult to know what is dirty and what is clean.”

“What about a smell test?” I suggested.

“I’m going to assume everything is dirty.” Hoc tossed both pairs in the square opening clearly marked as the garment cleaner.

I picked up the pair of perfectly crumpled pants and shook them out, then tossed them in the same device. “The machine that cleans and folds is *right there*,” I said.

“Perhaps he never got around to it.” Hoc’s voice had a hint of disapproval. “But as someone who does not wear clothes, he should take better care of his.”

“Should we be messing with his things?” I asked after I put another pair of pants in the machine. “Maybe he doesn’t want anyone touching his things.”

“He should’ve thought about that before sending you to his room,” said Hoc. “Honestly, I had no idea it was *this* bad. His quarters were always messy, but—”

“Wait. You mean he’s always been like this?”

“This is exceptionally bad, even for Axlos,” said Hoc. “I recall, he only attended to his laundry when he was out of clothes. He was always very busy.”

I gathered the pillows. “Then why didn’t he get a bot to clean up?”

“He had one,” said Hoc. “Wulfrex used parts of it to make me.”

I opened my mouth on a gasp, but Hoc waved it off.

“Try not to worry. The cleaning bot had no consciousness whatsoever. It cleaned, according to Wulfrex, but not very well. Apparently it malfunctioned often. It would clean the same spot over and over, leaving the rest of the room uncleaned. And it had a tendency to put clothes in the

incinerator rather than the laundry. Wulfrex could never figure out what was wrong with it. Drove him mad.”

“It’s easy to forget that not all cybots are like you,” I said.

“Thank goodness they’re not. Then I wouldn’t be so special, would I?”

That made me laugh, as I knew it was intended to. Sweet Hoc was trying to lighten the mood. I looked doubtfully at the bed. “I guess I’ll have to sleep there,” I said. “Not weird at all.”

“If you’re not hungry or tired now, why don’t we start to work on the lab? We can get some of it done without Wulfrex.”

I straightened up suddenly. “That’s a great idea. Let’s make ourselves useful. Well, *you* are always useful. Me...?” I shrugged. “No one’s sure whether I have any business being here.”

Suddenly a slender metal finger was cool under my chin and tilted my head up. “You have nothing to prove to anyone, Arria.”

I sighed. “Thanks. It just seems like everyone has this purpose here. Harp and Drave are communications experts. Dani couldn’t miss a target if she tried. Wulfrex is incredible with everything mechanical and Axlos is the super leader to everyone. And then there’s me. And I’m just...*here*.”

“And your being here might be the key to unlocking the UC’s encrypted messages. So let’s focus on that. Did you hear any officer suggest you return to Heveia? The answer is no,” Hoc said before I could reply. “Seems to me that the only person you need to prove something to is *you*.”

I shot him a glare, which he ignored. I wanted him to be wrong and I hated that he was right.

“I’ll be a few minutes.” I gestured to my stolen clothes. “I need to get something else to wear. I’ll join you in Kiki’s computer lab later.”

“Take your time. You’re home now,” he said. “Oh. And it’s your lab now,” he threw in before he left to begin setting up my workspace—*our* workspace, as I preferred to think of it, although now that he was here, I was sure he’d be needed elsewhere on the cruiser. I couldn’t expect him to be my full-time assistant.

I stood in Axlos’ tidied-up room. I took the scant time I had to myself to use the washroom and take a quick shower, although they didn’t call them showers here. It was just a body-size compartment that almost magically cleaned you. I wasn’t interested in how it worked, but I always felt refreshed afterwards. My skin tingled. There was a glow to my cheeks, and it made my hair smell nice. I wrapped myself in one of Axlos’ massive towels that was more like a blanket. The ends dragged as I walked back into his room and stared at the stolen medic uniform I’d worn here. I couldn’t continue wearing that.

I went to the replicator and sure enough, my settings were still in the system. I wanted to order up some new clothes, and the machine showed me my previous choices. They were wide, shapeless skirts and dresses that went down to my feet. Heavy fabrics that covered me from neck to wrist.

There was a digital image of me in them. There I was on the screen in my long braid, slowly rotating, showing me every drab, unflattering angle. I raised my finger to select the first dress it showed. Long, high-necked in muted gray. Everything on the screen was gray or brown. It occurred to me with a jolt that I looked *exactly* like I had back in the HFV. These clothes fit better, but they were still shapeless, lacking personality, color, and style. They were the same.

How had I not realized that before now?

Because maybe *I* was the same. I may have left the HFV, but parts of my mind were still trapped there. I still had dreams about the place—terrible dreams of facing the branding iron and denouncing the “alien influence” that Brother David believed made me smarter than everyone else. I knew now that aliens had nothing to do with my intelligence. But for a long time, I just thought I was defective. Worthy of punishment.

Tears spilled from my eyes as I stared at the screen. That woman wasn't me anymore. I *liked* color. I *had* a personality. Here I was—literally a renegade, having stolen a transport to illegally board this ship.

I thought about what Hoc said—that the only one I had to prove something to was myself and I wondered how much of the pain I experienced at the HFV I still carried with me, even in *this* place where I was accepted and free. Freer than I'd ever been, anyway. Axlos was still the captain. If he ordered something done, it was done. No questions asked. But he was nothing like Brother David. *Nothing* like that beast of a man whose orders often strayed to the sadistic, who was drunk on power to the point where any individuality was beaten away—literally.

I couldn't help that I had a brain that worked differently than most humans', but Brother David had made sure I suffered for it anyway. I hated the clothes I'd been forced to wear, *so why was I still wearing them?*

Why was I still choosing shapeless, colorless garments when there was nothing shapeless or colorless about my spirit?

I wiped away my tears. With a shaky finger, I scrolled away from my previous choices. I looked at what the other women had chosen. I could see their personalities in the way they dressed. Bright colors for some, flowing, loose fabrics for others. Tight, stealthy armor for yet another. Not one of the other women I lived with on this cruiser was like another. They all had their own style. Their own sense of self.

So who did *I* want to be? Who was I here on this cruiser, right now? It certainly wasn't the woman hiding behind brown, shapeless skirts, desperate to go unnoticed. I didn't have to hide anymore. Hoc was right about that. No one here had condemned what I'd done. No one had been disapproving. Even Axlos, who had been sharp with me and sent me off the main deck, was eager to see what I could do with the enemy transmissions.

The replicator waited. The screen remained patiently unchanged for me to input my clothing selections.

It was strange that this would be a moment where I felt a transformation coming. Clothing, of all things, something I barely thought of more than in passing. But it meant something. I was no longer in the HFV. No longer hiding.

I thought of the looks Axlos gave me when he thought I wasn't looking. His gaze would go perfectly neutral when I looked at him, but I *knew*. I could always feel his presence. His intense focus on me. I had always iced him out. He was the living embodiment of everything I had run from. Of a system that had hurt me over and over again.

But Axlos was not Brother David and he had never shown himself to be. I could acknowledge to myself, as I stood there gazing at a screen full of garment selections, that I had liked the way he looked at me. I'd felt it like a caress. I'd felt powerful, desirable, interesting. It'd answered a thrill in the core of my body and no matter how hard I tried to squash it, I never could.

Maybe it was time to defrost. Maybe it was time to give him a chance.

My finger rose and pressed against the screen. I had chosen a pair of cargo-style pants, not unlike Harp's typical choices. I doubted I would ever feel comfortable in the skintight, leather style Dani wore, and I had no desire for the flowing fabrics Kora, Ryland's mate, liked.

I wanted to be comfortable and I really did like pockets. These pants had lots of them. Also, I didn't want to wear brown or gray anymore. I chose a rich cobalt blue. The style was loose in the crotch but hung lower on the hip. I always admired the fit on Harp, although she kept her colors to neutrals. I would wear color for the first time in my life. I swallowed hard, acknowledging that this should not be this hard of a choice. Women of my age usually knew what they liked, but it was something I'd never had the opportunity to explore. My life had revolved around what Brother David liked. I didn't know any better. Neither did the other women who had been born into the HFV.

I looked through the endless selection of tops. Long sleeve, short sleeve, no sleeve, tube tops (*no*); it went on and on. The temperature on the cruiser was generally comfortable for humans. The Heveians were unaffected by a wide range of temperatures and didn't seem to care how warm it was as long as we were comfortable. And the residences of the ship adjusted temperature based on the species that worked there. Piknas preferred it cold, while all the Verlos could only sleep if it was hot. The cruiser's life support systems were programmed to accommodate species' needs.

Luckily, Heveians and humans enjoyed similar temperatures, so I did not need to bundle up in order to be comfortable on the cruiser. I liked the idea of shorter sleeves. I'd never shown skin before, except when using the pool. That was some of the greatest enjoyment I'd ever experienced—swimming.

I was beginning to get overwhelmed by choices, so I tapped a simple top with sleeves that ended at the elbows. It had a V-neck, but not too deep of a V. I wasn't ready to show cleavage, not that I had much, and I opted for white. Another forbidden color for women to wear at the HFV. White was the color of purity, and according to Brother David, there was no such thing as a "pure" woman. Some women were chosen to produce children and others, like me, were only allowed to perform manual labor. Either way, we were all evil manipulators who secretly lusted after alien males, according to the men. Ironically, that last part was true.

A grin curved my lips as I inputted my final selections. The replicator hummed with the business of producing my new clothes. I paced, a little excited, as I waited. I was eager to try these on, to step out and find who I truly was. I caught a glimpse of myself in the mirror. My long hair was demurely held back in the same style that I had worn it for most of my life. It had also been forbidden for a woman to cut her hair.

I took hold of the long braid, suddenly hating it. It was like a weight, a rope tethering me to the past. There was a strange surge inside of me. I went over to the rack that held Axlos' knife collection and plucked one off the wall. It was sharp and

short and curved, and with a red haze over my vision, I sliced off the rope of hair right at the nape of my neck. I stood there, gasping, holding my severed braid in one hand and the knife in the other, as if I had just cut off one of my own limbs. My first thought was of terror.

What have I done? I would be punished! And then I felt... lightness. My head was so light, it could float away without the weight of all that hair. Air was cool on the back of my neck. I turned to look in the mirror and saw a very different me. The cut was somewhat uneven. My hair was a little longer on one side than the other, but I liked what I saw. I smiled at my reflection.

I put Axlos' knife back up on the wall and after a moment's hesitation, I put the braid in the waste bin for incineration. A quiet ding from the replicator told me that my new clothes were done. With shaky hands, I quickly dressed, pulling on undergarments, then reveling in the feel of such foreign clothes on my body. Looking down at myself, I could see the nip of my waist, the flare of my hips, the shape of my arms.

I giggled, feeling triumphant, giddy, as powerful as if I'd slayed a great beast. A tiny little voice in the back of my head said I was drifting into dangerous territory, but I waved it away. I had spent all the time I'd been on this cruiser letting my mind expand and grow with knowledge. It was time to let my heart and soul do the same.

I strode from Axlos' room, feeling like I was on top of the world, and headed to Kiki's old computer lab. Hoc was in there, I was sure, and maybe Wulfrex, clearing out some of the equipment that was in storage and setting up the computers for me to use. I walked inside, catching Hoc and Wulfrex in conversation. Hoc was rapidly attaching tubes and wires and securing equipment on shelves. Wulfrex was telling him what to do and Hoc was disagreeing with him. *You're going too fast. Move out of there and let me do it. No, you can't hook up the optimizer to that hard drive. It's finicky. She'll have to restart every forty-five minutes.*

I didn't know who was the better authority—the cybot who *was* a computer or the male who made him a body.

Then maybe a better connecting cord would be in order, you know—

They both noticed me at the same time. Two heads turned in my direction and stared.

I stood in the doorway, hands clasped in front of me. A twinge of doubt wormed into my brain. “What?” I asked. “I needed a change.”

A corner of Wulfrex's mouth tipped upwards. “About time,” he said, then looked at Hoc. “Is this your doing?”

Hoc's metal head tilted to one side. “Oh no,” he replied quietly. “This is all her.”

I smiled, relaxing. “How are you guys doing?”

“Good.” Back to work, Wulfrex explained what they were doing, and how they were progressing on the lab. It was a tight space to begin with, but now it was cramped. Free space had always been at a premium on the cruiser. Before the other women had partnered up with Heveian mates, we had all been in one room.

Kiki's little lab had originally been partitioned off from the training room. Claire had had an office where she'd worked with Jorok and Wulfrex to get Craal's mind integrated with his metal limbs, but that space had become sleeping quarters for the additional crew. I was lucky to have any place to work. All of Claire's equipment had been crammed in here, but it was slowly being sorted. Machinery was attached to the walls, even the ceiling was being utilized. Ordinarily, I would push up my sleeves, but my sleeves were already short enough. I squeezed inside with the two of them. “How can I help?”

“You can hand me that...” Wulfrex trailed off. His gaze moved to something behind me. His expression turned distinctly amused.

I didn't have to turn to know who was there. I could feel his presence, as I always did. He gave off an aura of power and strength. I turned, slowly facing the inevitable.

Axlos stood in the doorway. He stared at me, surprise evident on his handsome features. Why did he have to be *so* good looking? His blue hair was shaggy. It came just past his ears. It used to be long, but he'd cut it when they'd gone to war.

I realized that I had chosen my pants in the exact shade of blue as his hair. The first color I had chosen to wear on my body was *his* color. I was acutely aware of it *now*, as his cobalt blue eyes moved over me, slowly, methodically, taking in every inch of me. I stood there during his quiet, intense perusal, feeling heat curl through my body. It was impossible to ignore or deny my attraction to this male. He was everything I used to fear and everything I wanted.

Warmth stole through my limbs, making my fingers twitch and my nipples harden. A tightening ache pooled between my thighs. "Hello, Axlos." My voice was deeper, huskier. "Did you want something?"

CHAPTER 6

Axlos

D *id I want something? Oh, yes. Yes, I did.*

For a moment, I didn't understand what I was seeing. This couldn't possibly be Arria. She was still the petite female with blond hair and delicate features, but the rest was very different. The long hair she always wore secured back was short now. Blunt, uneven tips skimmed just above her shoulders. The shapeless gray shifts and layers had been replaced with clothes that revealed a bit more of her shape. And what a lovely shape it was.

I knew I was staring. There was no helping it. I'd never seen her like this before. She stood almost defiantly in blue pants that were baggy and covered in pockets, and a white shirt that skimmed her upper body. There was a flush on her cheeks.

My cock made itself known, tightening and swelling in my pants. That was a sensation I hadn't felt in the months since leaving Arria on Heveia. That had been a sweet relief. The only good thing about not seeing her so frequently was not existing in a near-constant state of arousal. I was always holding back the desire I felt for her. But now, she was here, and she appeared ready to leave behind some of the ghosts of her old life.

I shook my head, trying unsuccessfully to clear it. "I, eh, see you've settled in." I nodded, acknowledging her changes.

She shrugged one shoulder, a hint of vulnerability and uncertainty captured in that gesture. “It was time to try something different.”

My gaze dropped to her blue pants. The color matched my hair and eyes. I forced myself not to read into it. It was just a color. Still, she could have chosen any and she chose mine. “It suits you.” I dared not say anything more. I always felt as though I was on delicate ground with her. That one wrong word would send her scattering like sand in the wind. Maybe not anymore.

She took a deep breath and nodded. “Thank you.” A tiny whisper of a smile curved her lips. “I think it does.”

I forced my breath to be steady, even. *Do not read into this. Do not read into this.*

“Thank you for coming, Captain,” said Wulfrex. “I need your access code to connect these processors to the mainframe. It allows Arria’s interfaces to utilize the full power of the cruiser.” Wulfrex lowered his brows. “I fail to see why I can’t authorize this myself.”

I shrugged. “I don’t know why you can’t, either. I don’t remember the last time I’ve had to put in an authorization code.”

“Perhaps because you have never attached a new terminal to the central computer system,” offered Hoc. “It would be very risky if the user was not completely trusted.”

“Why?” I asked.

“It gives the user of this terminal access to the entire cruiser,” Hoc replied. “But you needn’t worry about Arria.”

Arria’s eyes widened. “I had no idea that was the case.”

I walked forward, squeezing into the impossibly tight space. “I’m not worried that you are planning to commandeer the cruiser. Where do I put in this code?”

“There.” Wulfrex’s brows were still low. He considered himself the ultimate authority of all things mechanical on the ship. In truth, he was. I knew the ship well enough, but he

could navigate through its innards blindfolded. He knew where everything was and what everything did. I put my face close to the facial scanner and felt red light bathe my skin. The console turned green and a friendly voice said in Heveian, “Authorization complete.”

I stepped back, brushing against Arria as I did so. She made a tiny noise. I tried to adjust my position, but there was no room. My arm pressed against hers. “Is that it?” I asked a little tensely.

“Yes,” Wulfrex replied. He gave me a pointed look. “It would be nice to have access to all areas of the ship’s system.”

“Very well,” I said. “I will add your facial ID to the master system.”

“Thanks, Ax,” said Wulfrex. “I mean, thank you, Captain.” A slight whisper of his old humor returned to flicker through the creases on the edges of his eyes. “I might need it one day.”

I edged out of the small space. Hoc didn’t take up much room, but Wulfrex did, and with me as well, there was no room to maneuver. I could feel Arria getting tenser by the moment. I felt big and hulking, taking up too much space. I bumped into her and she reacted by jerking away. She began to tumble backwards.

Instinctively, I grabbed her upper arms, preventing her from falling on a stack of equipment that had not yet been assembled. I held her up. The front of her legs bumped against mine. Every nerve in my body was suddenly aware and hopeful. She looked up at me with massive brown eyes, blinking rapidly. I set her upright and released her, holding my own palms out. “It’s okay,” I murmured. “I didn’t want you to fall.”

I saw her throat work as she swallowed. “I know,” she said in a whisper. “Thank you.”

I very carefully stepped backwards out of the room. Trying to turn around would only cause more trouble. Just outside the doorway, I took a deep breath, relieved to be out of that tiny space with the female I desired desperately. It dismayed me to

see I still caused her fear. “I will leave you to your work,” I said stiffly. “I turned my eyes to Wulfrex and Hoc, who had watched that whole scene unfold in silence. “If you need anything, feel free to summon me.”

“Will do, Captain,” Wulfrex said, “I think we have it under control.”

At least someone does. I strode away, full of the scent of her, the feel of her. Her heat had scorched me. The feeling of her delicate arms in my hands had threatened to be my undoing.

“Captain?” A soft voice followed me down the hall.

I stopped in my tracks as if frozen in place. Slowly I turned. “Yes?” I asked Arria, who stood in the hallway.

“Thank you,” she said.

“You thanked me already,” I said harshly.

“For catching me, but this one is for letting me stay here. For letting me test my theory.”

“Why wouldn’t I?” I asked, baffled. “You’re brilliant. Your mind is...” I shook my head. “It’s like nothing I’ve known before. Of course, I want you to test your theory.”

“I know you don’t want me here.” Her words blurted out, louder than I think she intended and perhaps uttered while she had the nerve to do so. “I don’t want to cause trouble.”

“You are wrong.” My voice sounded harsh. “I want you here. I *always* want you here. Never doubt that.” I hated how I sounded—harsh, bitter. “I cannot guarantee your safety here, and that troubles me.”

“And what of *your* safety?” She took a few steps towards me.

I stayed where I was. “What of it? I desire nothing more than to keep my people safe. That is why we fight.”

She shook her head. “I don’t want anything to happen. To *you*.”

I smiled again, refusing to read into her words. She was being nice. She was showing me some of the compassion she spread around to everyone she encountered. “It’s kind of you to say that. Thank you.” I nodded and stood straight. “Now if you’ll excuse me, I need to return to the main deck.”

“Of course,” she said quietly. “I didn’t mean to keep you.”

I let out an impatient sigh, irritated by her obsequious behavior. “Arria, you do not *keep* me. You do not inconvenience me, and you certainly do not need to apologize to me for anything. Do you understand?”

Color faded from her cheeks. She nodded quickly. “I think so, Captain.” With that she lowered her head, turned, and headed back to the computer lab.

“Arria.”

She turned back. “Yes?”

“Call me Axlos, if you please.”

She paused, considering me. “I’ll try, Captain.”

That was something. I shook my head and strode back towards the main deck. My feet felt like they were made of lead. My shoulders ached. I wished I could go back through space and time and wring the neck of the beast of a male who had hurt the female—who I *knew* was my mate—and give her a different life. What could have been, had her path taken a better direction?

I scraped my hand through my hair. I would never know that answer. Just as I would never know how to break through the walls of Arria’s heart.

CHAPTER 7

Arria

“**H**on, *what* did you cut your hair with?” Harp asked. “It’s a lot longer on one side than the other.”

I was aware of this. “It was a knife.”

“You cut your own hair with a *knife*?” One side of Dani’s mouth curled in a grin. “Arria. You badass.”

Harp pursed her lips. “Badass, maybe, but now it’s time to fix it.” She beckoned me toward the bathroom. “Come over here.” She had a pair of scissors in her hand and snapped them twice. “Let’s see what I can do with this mess.”

I sat down dutifully on Harp’s toilet lid and let her go to work. Wisps of blond hair floated to the floor as she snipped away.

“You have a nice wave to your hair now that it’s shorter,” Harp remarked. “What was the motivation for this wild departure in style?”

“Yeah.” Dani leaned a hip against the wall. “You went from pilgrim girl to the modern era in one day.”

I started to shake my head, but Harp stopped me with a hand to my chin and a firm, *hold still* look. “I needed to shed my old skin,” I said. “It didn’t feel like me anymore. Or maybe it was a version of me I didn’t want to be anymore.”

“You mean the *you* from the cult?” Harp asked.

I still winced inwardly when people referred to the HFV as a cult. I knew it was one. It was filled with people who rejected all aspects of humans' new contact with alien species. My extra natural intelligence was seen as a threat. It was seen as an element of alien influence on the beautiful purity of humanity, according to Brother David, who founded the group. I just hated the word *cult*. Because my mother was still in it, even though she had long forsaken me, and there were others who were trapped there—younger people who didn't know any better. I could only hope that by now more were coming to their senses and finding their way out. Perhaps local governments were beginning to take a closer look at what was going on there. The abuse, inequality and the refusal to allow girls to learn the basics, even to read, was against the law.

"It was time to leave all that behind," I said. "Overdue, actually."

Harp and Dani exchanged a look that they thought I couldn't see, but I did.

I held up a hand. "I know what you're thinking, and no, I'm *not* going to throw myself into Axlos' arms and beg him to ravish me."

Dani's brows shot up. "Who said anything about ravishing? We're just hoping you'll have a conversation with the guy one of these days. It would make his week. No. His *year*."

"I've had conversations with him," I grumbled. "I think he's nice."

Harp's scissors made a loud snip. "One step at a time." She shot Dani a look that said, *easy does it*. "I say this right here is a vast improvement. You look fresher, brighter." She put the scissors on the wash basin and stepped back to admire her work. A smile spread across her face. "And I'm not bad with scissors. Go on. Look."

I felt my newly styled hair and checked out my appearance in the mirror. My hair was evened out into a blunt cut that emphasized my neck and jawline. My hair fell in waves. I looked...pretty. "I love it. Thank you."

“My pleasure.” Harp used a towel to scoop up the fallen hair. “Had no idea you had such a cute little figure under all those layers.”

“It’s a little weird to show my arms,” I said. “I feel a little naked.”

Dani let out a bark of laughter. “You’re adorable, Arria,” she said. “You’ve definitely brought some fun to this god-awful mess of a war.”

Harp sat down on the closed toilet lid I’d just vacated and shook her head. “For a few moments there I could forget.”

I watched the look of weight and sadness and anxiety suddenly pull at the features of my two friends. “Hey,” I said. “Does the food replicator still have the settings for ice cream?”

Harp looked at me in surprise, as if just remembering that ice cream existed. “I think so.”

“I think we need some,” I said. “Right now.”

Dani shrugged. “I could eat.”

“It’s a little weird without Kora, Claire, and Kiki, but why not?” said Harp. “We have a little more time before Dani and I are back on duty.”

I stood up, shaking off the extra hair that clung to my clothes and ignoring the itch of the few little bits that clung to my neck. I would shower later. My friends really needed a pick-me-up.

We went back to my room and spent the next half hour crowded on Axlos’ bed with cups of ice cream in our hands. Harp went overboard with the hot fudge—because, why not?—and I tried strawberry, which was a new flavor Claire had developed right before we arrived on Heveia. I felt more like one of them. Less separate, and I was pretty sure that feeling wasn’t just because of my new clothes and haircut.

For the first time ever, I had taken a major risk. I’d chosen to ignore an order and come out here. Both of these women had taken chances, lived fully, and faced dangers, when I had been safely ensconced in the cruiser or the Heveian palace. It

was not long, however, before Harp and Dani had to return to the main deck and I was alone again in Axlos' room.

The computer lab was almost finished being set up, and according to the schedule, this was when I was supposed to get some sleep. I didn't want to sleep. I wanted to work, but even I could feel the fuzz at the edge of my mind and the weight of my eyelids as they struggled to stay open. Giving into basic human needs, I washed up, changed into a simple nightgown, courtesy of the replicator, and crawled under the sheets of Axlos' large, soft bed.

His scent was impossible to ignore. He smelled of metal and the cleaning agent from the hydrotube. Without realizing it, I buried my nose in the sheets and inhaled deeply, taking in as much of it as I could. The smell was the safety, strength, and excitement I couldn't ignore whenever he was near. Sleeping in his bed was like being enveloped in his essence. And with that, I slid away into a deep velvety sleep.

CHAPTER 8

Axlos

I was on autopilot walking back to my quarters after a long shift. We had evaded a squadron of UC ships and managed to make the remaining repairs needed. The challenge was finding out who was sabotaging the ship, but it was no easy task. We had never tracked crew on the cruiser. It wasn't our policy to monitor everyone's movement at all times.

It had been something we felt strongly about in our earlier years, giving everyone autonomy. As long as your work got done, we didn't care what any of the crew did. But now, I wished we had not disabled those mechanisms. Enabling them now would let our saboteur know we were on to them, making it much harder to find them. It might also create some dissent among our long-standing crew who would chafe at having their movements tracked. No. That would be a last resort, only if we couldn't find another way to locate the saboteur. I was pondering these problems when I placed my hand against my door and then walked inside.

I stopped abruptly. The first thing I saw was how tidy my room was. The second thing I noticed was a small lump lying in my bed, breathing softly. The third was her scent, which hit me across the head like a metal-clad fist.

That's right, I'd given her my quarters. I *had* neglected to clean it up. As I spent so little time in this room, it'd slipped my mind. I mentally smacked myself for forgetting to do so. What must she have thought when she came in here and saw

my clothes strewn all over the place? I groaned and began to quietly back away towards the door.

A soft moan came from the bed, and Arria—beautiful, sweet Arria—sat up, bracing one elbow on the bed. She looked up at me with sleep-puffed eyes. “Captain,” she said. “I’m sorry. I—”

I held up my hands to let her know everything was fine. “My apologies, Arria,” I said. “I forgot you’d be in here. I will leave you now.”

She raised a hand. “No. Wait.”

I froze with one foot already stepping back. She could ask anything of me and I would comply. “Yes?”

She sat up all the way and ran a hand through her newly shortened hair. It bounced around her face, defining her features. The line of her jaw and the arch of her cheekbones were emphasized. Her eyes appeared bigger and more luminous than before. “I just wanted to say, I’m sorry that I am distant with you. I don’t mean to be.”

I stayed frozen where I was, unsure what I was supposed to say to that. I felt like the wrong move would send her scattering like a flock of feral *blinas*. “As I told you before, you have nothing to apologize for,” I said formally. “You’ve been through a lot. I understand.”

I sounded stilted and robotic. I wished I could reach inside her mind and find out what she needed from me. Whatever it was, I would give it to her. Gladly.

She shook her head. “No, I’ve been unfair to you. You’re a good leader. Fair. And you never rule with fear and punishment.”

“I don’t rule at all,” I said. “It is I who serve everyone on the ship. My decisions could result in life or death, so I try to make the best ones I can.”

The smallest of smiles curved her lips. “Doesn’t sound like an easy job.” Her voice was little more than breath. She leaned forward and patted the end of the bed. “Would you like to come and sit?” she asked in a rush.

My heart was beating fast. The sight of her in a light, sleeveless nightgown, thin as air, made my cock hard and my fangs ache. They were long and needy and hungry. “I thank you for the invitation, but I think I’d better not.” My voice was a growl.

She nodded and withdrew her hand. “Of course. No problem.”

If there was ever a time to tell her why I shouldn’t sit on the bed with her, that was it. “Seeing you in my bed is tempting enough,” I said. “Being with you in it would be torture. I have excellent restraint, Arria. But it is not infinite.”

Her mouth dropped open in a silent gasp. “I see.”

I made a small, formal bow. “Good night.”

And with that, I turned and walked away with my heart pounding in my ears, my hands aching to feel her in them, and my breathing ragged. I did not exhale until I got out in the hallway and the door was shut behind me. I stood there for a moment, dazed, struggling to compose myself. Who knew that the slightest bit of attention from her could provoke me into such a state?

Stars, how I wanted her. And for so long I’d kept it controlled. I *would* keep it controlled. She was not ready for the need that had built up inside of me. It was a monster by now, a roiling, frothing beast, starving for the taste of her. My fangs—I couldn’t remember them ever being longer. They throbbed in my mouth, desperate to pierce her flesh and draw in her essence. To bring it into me to make her a part of me.

I started walking, somewhere, I had no idea where I was going. Just, away from her room. Away from her, before I went back in there and told her exactly what she did to me.

She wasn’t ready for that. She was not ready for any of it.

I bumped into someone; I wasn’t even looking where I was going.

“Ax?” I looked up to see Drave looking at me narrowly. “Either something horrible has happened, or something

wondrous. Which is it?” The skin around his eyes went tense. “Tell me. I am expecting the worst.”

“No. All is well.” I rubbed the spot between my eyes and drew in a shaky breath. “I am tired, is all.”

“Wulfrex’s quarters are empty,” he said, although his gaze was intense on mine. “He just went on duty. You should go there to sleep. Dani is also on duty.”

I nodded. “Thank you. I’ll do that.”

“What happened?” The question was direct and valid. I had known Drave my entire life. Not answering him was not an option.

“I accidentally went into my own room and found Arria there.”

“Ah.” A world of understanding hung in that one syllable. “Was she awake?”

“She was.”

“I see.”

That was so Drave-like. It was his way of inviting a conversation, as backwards and strange as it was.

“She wasn’t afraid,” I said. “A little bit confused, I think. She was *friendly*. She apologized for being distant and...” I winced, half afraid I’d imagined the rest. “She invited me to sit with her.”

“On your bed?”

I nodded.

“Did you?” he asked.

“No. I got out of there. I couldn’t... There was no way I could stay.”

Drave nodded knowingly. “Of course not. Who could?”

“*You’ve* been through this,” I said to him. “What do you think?”

“I think you were correct to leave when you did,” he replied thoughtfully. “And I would take it as a good sign. She’s

less afraid of you.”

I let out a choked laugh. “*Less* afraid of me. Pretty sad that she was afraid of me in the first place.”

Drave held up a finger. “*That* had nothing to do with you and was not your fault. You just bore the consequences of it.” His icy eyes flickered. “We all have our ghosts from the past, Axlos. Arria has hers. She has to find her own way to vanquish them.”

Drave had plenty of his own ghosts. I knew what they were. He was raised by a horror of a father whose abuse made my friend withdraw and struggle to trust. He had always had me, Gavrox, Wulfrex, Jorok, and Ryland, however. We were unwavering in our friendship. Sometimes I wondered how he would’ve survived if he hadn’t had us. Arria had had no one.

I nodded. “I know that. Logically, I know that. I just wish...”

Drave placed a hand on my shoulder and squeezed. “I hear she stopped wearing those atrocious clothes and cut her hair. And now she’s talking to you. Take the win.”

I smiled wearily. “I think I will. It’s something anyway.”

Drave’s lips curled into a smirk. “If you need to talk to someone, I would recommend Harp. After all, she had to deal with *me*.”

“And look how well that turned out.” I didn’t mean that sarcastically. Things *had* turned out spectacularly between him and Harp. But as I recalled, she’d had to work on him. He had not gone easily into partnership with a mate. I also suspected that Arria confided in Harp. After we parted ways and I found myself in Wulfrex’s quarters, I thought about what Drave said—that Arria had to resolve her past in her own way. It seemed like a strange thing for a captain to be thinking about in the middle of a war, however. Perhaps if we had a little bit of peace time. If the temperature could lower, just a little bit, for a while. We could catch our breath.

I lay on top of Wulfrex and Dani’s bed, not even bothering to take off any of my clothes, and was instantly asleep.

I woke to a poke on my shoulder. “Hey, Captain,” said Dani. “Time to wake up.”

I blinked groggily to see an amused Dani looking down at me. “How long have I been asleep?”

“Seven standard galactic hours.” She crossed her arms. “My shift is over and yours started an hour ago, but we decided to let you sleep. All is calm.” She waved off my instant stab of worry. “We’d have gotten you up if anything interesting happened.”

I raked my hands through my hair. “I’m sorry, I should not have—”

“It’s okay.” She patted my shoulder. “You’ve been running yourself ragged for weeks. Take the extra sleep when you can.” She cocked her head to the side. “But yeah. You need to get up now.”

I peeled myself off the bed and left. I wondered if Arria was still in my room. A change of clothes and a quick cleaning would be a good thing. Instead, I made my way straight to the main deck. I had work to do. As I stepped up to the main console, I felt the familiar burdens of leadership and responsibility fall on my shoulders like heavy weights. Here, there was no room for anything but my duties. I forcibly shoved thoughts of Arria from my head. There was no room for them here. Perhaps I *should* send her back to Heveia. If there was anything that could distract me from what I needed to do here, it was her. I frowned at the updates and communications that had flooded my screen while I had been sleeping, and got to work.

CHAPTER 9

Arria

Maybe it was a dream, but I was pretty sure I remembered Axlos coming into my room, or rather *his* room. I didn't know what to think of it anymore. Neither did he, if my memory was correct. I was sure I'd seen him standing there, silhouetted by the light in the hallway. His tall, rough form in stark outline with the fatigue, weariness, and burden etched into the angle of his shoulders, the tilt of his head.

I had felt nothing but softness for him. I wanted to comfort him. In those moments, where I wasn't fully conscious but not asleep, he wasn't the leader, the captain, the ultimate authority of everyone on the ship. He was just a tired soul looking for a place to rest.

It had occurred to me for the first time that maybe Axlos felt as alone and separate as I sometimes did.

Seeing him like this, worn down, brought stark light to how different he was from Brother David. Brother David ruled the HFV for control, but Axlos ran the cruiser from a sincere desire to keep everyone alive and safe. *It is I who serve everyone on the ship.*

It wasn't that I'd never noticed before, but I'd never quite believed it. I always wondered if, when push came to shove, he would resort to the same harsh and cruel tactics as Brother David had to keep his people in line. Fear, shame, and guilt were effective at the HFV. But even now, in a time of war,

with the crew bloated and the situation desperate, Axlos was the same. He expected everyone to do their jobs. And they did, but not because they were afraid not to.

It took me no time at all to get up and get dressed, but I couldn't wear the same clothes day after day. I had a few more garments made, similar to the ones I had picked out yesterday. I had to admit, dressing the way I wanted to felt good. It felt amazing.

I ate a nutrition bar on the way to Kiki's old computer lab, which was now temporarily mine, and got to work. Hoc was not here so I had the small space to myself. A simple but comfortable chair swiveled around so I could reach everything I needed to.

I dove in, starting with fresh communications from the enemy. They sounded like garbled noise when running through the sound emitter. Nothing remotely comprehensible. They matched no known language, but I thought a few sounds came close to something recognizable now and then. But it all felt so elusive, as if I was missing a key.

This was what I expected. Hoc had loaded my working data into the systems here. I spent the rest of the day ensconced in my work, glued to glowing screens flowing with texts in different languages, with the recordings of the enemy transmissions running constantly in the background.

This was my element. I loved nothing more than sinking into a project, particularly one that was a mystery, and unraveling it. The most fun part of all was putting it back together in a way that made sense. I'd had the luxury of time and access to all the Heveian information databases when I was on the cruiser before. I had made use of them. I loved learning languages and had become fluent in several, including Heveian and the common galactic tongue, relatively quickly. Both used the same rules that the Earth languages did. The enemy transmissions, however, did *not* use those rules. There were no patterns. They used a completely different system, which was what made them so difficult to decrypt.

They were so confident in their code that they thought nothing of blasting their communications on every wide channel. They didn't even bother to use secure ones, knowing that we had no idea what they were saying to each other.

I was determined to change that. If we knew their messages, we could outmaneuver them and get the advantage.

There was a knock at my door. I spun around just as the door opened and a face I wasn't expecting appeared there. It was Drave, Harp's mate and the chief communications officer. There was some irony to that, because Drave would *never* be confused as someone who was an open communicator. He was cool to the point of icy, and tight-lipped about most things. He never bothered me but never sought me out, either. Truth be told, I never quite knew what to make of him.

I blinked up into his very pale blue eyes. "Hi?" I said, instinctively nervous. There was no reason for this male to be here unless... "Is there something wrong?"

He shook his head and glanced around the room. "I would ask if I could come in, but I won't."

I let out a little snort of laughter. "You could *try*."

"What I have to say can be said from here."

Uh-oh. Now I was even more nervous.

"We have received a message from Minister Bazer, demanding you be sent back to Heveia immediately."

My shoulders hunched. I had been expecting this. "I understand," I said. "If you could just give me a little more time, I'll willingly go—"

"Arria, you're not going anywhere," he said, as if this were obvious. "I'm just informing you of our fine minister's request." He leaned one shoulder against the doorjamb. "Unless you wish to return, of course. The option is there."

I chuckled. "I never wanted to leave this cruiser in the first place."

"I thought you planned to apply for Heveian citizenship."

“When the conflict was over, sure,” I said. “But not while everyone is out here fighting. This ship is the closest thing I’ve ever had to a real home.”

He inclined his head. “I agree with that sentiment. The ship is my home, as well. And my family lives here.”

I relaxed again, safe in the knowledge that I was not going to be shipped back to Heveia just yet. I peeked up at him warily. It seemed all he wanted was to talk. And I *was* curious about him. “Harp said that you didn’t have the best early life,” I said carefully. “I’m sorry. I can relate to that.”

“I know you can.” He gave me a direct look. “Which is why I also came here to tell you that you are a part of *this* family. I consider you a part of my family. And so, you will face absolutely no repercussions when we do finally return to Heveia.”

I blinked, stunned. “Thank you. I—I’m...thank you. I’m relieved to hear that you think we *will* return to Heveia.”

One corner of his lips curved upwards. It was a signature look for Drave, but this time it held no sarcasm. It was a genuine smile of affection. “I believe we will return, because you will figure out what the UC are saying to one another and give us the advantage we need to defeat them.”

“Do you really believe that?” This was a lot to take in and it was the longest conversation I’d ever had with Drave.

“I do. And so does Axlos.”

My heart did a little bump in my chest at his name. “Well, he didn’t put me right back on the transfer and ship me to Heveia, so I guess that’s something.”

Drave sighed deeply. “I’m going to say this to you, and I ask you to not take it lightly. I do not, as a rule, involve myself in matters that exist between people, but as one damaged person to another, think long and hard on the stories your head has told you about how people are.” He tapped the side of his own head where his short, light blue hair was neatly combed back. “They’re lies, you know. Almost all of them. Your brain uses them to protect you, but after a while the protection

becomes a cage. I should know. I didn't realize it until after I'd let Harp in." He shrugged his broad shoulders. "All I'm saying is, write your own story. Don't let the past write it for you."

He turned to go, but I wasn't ready. This was making my head spin. "Wait," I said.

He stopped and turned. One eyebrow raised. "Yes?"

"How do you know?" I asked. "How did you know that Harp was the one for you?"

"It's different for Heveians than humans." He flashed his teeth, revealing an even white set with no visible fangs. "The biting urge is one sign," he said. "Although that can be confused with simple attraction. But there's something that happens in *here*." He placed his hand on his chest. "I think humans can feel that, too. It's a strange and uncomfortable feeling, but it can't be denied forever. And we have little say over who causes us to feel this way. I felt it for Harp and she felt it for me. No idea why. I'm impossible to be around, sometimes." His eyes softened when he spoke of his mate. "It's something you trust, or you don't."

And that was the end of the questions. He gave me a curt nod and was gone. I was left there to sit and stew about this. I was staring at the screen when an alarm screamed through the corridors and emergency lights turned red.

I jolted out of my seat and stuck my head out the door to see crew members dashing about. Panic raced through me. Were we under attack? I dashed to my main console and checked the ship's status. *Yes*, there was an enemy vessel approaching. I could only imagine what was happening on the main deck.

The chattering noises of the enemy transmissions flared loud and clear through my speakers, changing from twisted-sounding whispers to jerky, sharp sounds. I shut off the alarm sounds in my lab to better hear the enemy communications. My system was recording it all. This was the first time I'd had access to real-time transmissions during a battle.

I threw myself back in my chair, swallowing back fear, and began running some of the programs I was working on while these transmissions ran. The enemy was *right here*, making the sound clear and crisp. Nothing was indistinct or out of range. I could make out every strange pop, crunching sound, and voice.

Again, it matched no known language recorded in the galaxy. I felt a warm tingle in the back of my neck—a feeling I had come to associate with being on the edge of something close to a revelation. But it was still just a little out of reach.

The ship suddenly rocked, nearly spilling me from my seat. The lights flickered. My screens showed jumbled colors for a moment before evening out to their normal display. I gripped the arms on my chair. Sweat trickled down my back.

I tried not to think about how my friends were dealing on the main deck. I imagined Axlos standing straight and firm in front of his console, giving orders; Dani returning fire; Wulfrex stabilizing and maneuvering the ship to avoid hits. Drave and Harp would be checking diagnostics and relaying orders to the rest of the crew while monitoring damage.

How many times had they done this? The law of averages was not great. The more battles, the more likely the chances were of being destroyed.

“Whoa.” My body lifted from my chair as I went weightless. With a jolt, I realized the gravity system had been disabled. That was a system deep, *deep* inside the ship. No blow from enemy fire should have affected that system. I thought about what Axlos had said about keeping my presence on the ship—and my purpose here—quiet. Was this the work of the saboteur?

Since I had access to the whole ship, anyway, and it was a very simple process, I made a quick check of the ship’s systems, investigating to see what happened with the gravity stabilizer. I hooked my feet around my desk legs to keep myself stable. Furniture and equipment had always been secured for situations just like this. *I* was the only thing in danger of floating away.

In addition to the gravity problem, there *was* damage to other parts of the ship. The most alarming one was the steering system. I could see by the fact that it was in maintenance mode that Wulfrex was working on that issue.

I was no engineer, but one of the first things I had done when I moved into the cruiser—in addition to exploring it all—was figure out where everything *was*. The location of the gravity stabilizer was one deck down from this room.

Just one. I didn't even need to take an air tube. There was a maintenance shaft with a simple ladder that was easy enough to access. I could go and at least see what had happened. See if it was the work of a saboteur, or if by some odd chance, the damage was from the battle. It should be obvious.

Without thinking too much about it, I unhooked my legs and pushed myself towards the door. Outside, it was quiet. Everyone had gotten to where they needed to be. Stations were filled and attention was on the enemy.

I clumsily maneuvered myself down the corridor to the hatch. I opened it and went feet-first into the narrow shaft, using the rungs to propel myself down one short level. I opened the hatch on the side and slid out into this rarely visited part of the ship.

There wasn't much to look at—just a mess of machinery—and since it was in the very belly of the ship, this was where the gravity stabilizer was housed. The room was dark. Darker than it should've been.

I *had* been down here, of course. I knew what everything was, but I wasn't an expert on operating any of it. At least I didn't have noisy footsteps to give away my location. I didn't make a sound as I floated through the maze of devices and mechanisms to a dull, faceted metal object the size of a basketball in a containment unit. It floated in a metal cage, unmoving. It was supposed to be spinning and glowing red.

This was the thing that kept everyone's feet on the floor. Every large ship had one of these and this one had been tampered with. That was as obvious as anything could be. There was no sign of blaster fire in here. No smoke and sizzle

from an errant plasma blast that somehow made its way into this sector of the ship.

Just the single thick tube that had been detached from the bottom of the sphere. It led down into the floor where its power source was located. The tube was as thick as my wrist. Blue phosphorescent, conductive liquid floated in blobs where it had leaked out of the tube.

Somebody had purposefully pulled it off, cutting the power to the device and causing it to fail.

I glanced around furtively. Was that a shadow moving in the corner? Something rattled in the distance. I didn't think I was alone in this room, and that scared me. But the cruiser was without gravity, making everything harder for the rest of the crew.

I had to do something. I stole forward, bracing myself as I bumped into the gravity unit. I went underneath, lifted the tube and shoved it back into place. The blue gel turned luminescent and pushed sluggishly through the tube again, bringing power to the device. It hummed and began to spin. Slowly at first, then faster until it went so fast it looked like a whirling sphere. The color of it changed to bright, glowing red again.

With the restarting of the gravity stabilizer, my presence was very much *known*. Tubes did not reattach themselves unassisted. My breathing was short, uneven, as I wondered how I could get out of here quickly.

Then suddenly, my stomach lurched and gravity returned. I was pulled back to the floor as if yanked by a rope. I tumbled, landing badly on my ankle.

There was a noise coming from the corner. There was no imagining the strange snarl. I began to lunge for the exit just as a figure emerged from the depths of the room. It whirled past me so fast, I barely caught sight of it, but I did catch a glimpse of a thin being, slightly taller than me. They were dressed all in black and moved faster than wind.

Something hit my head hard. My vision smeared and I fell. My head smacked against the floor, and all I saw was

darkness.

CHAPTER 10

Axlos

“**H**ow did this happen?” I raged, pacing my room. *Arria’s* room. The room that was mine but now held *Arria’s* still form in my bed. The sight of her there made me want to gut someone. I was with Drave, Hoc, and our current medic, a Diplolu-lu named Tupaloo.

“I have done what I can to piece together *Arria’s* movements,” said Drave. “After I visited with her briefly—”

“*You* visited with her?” I asked sharply. “What for?”

Drave shrugged nonchalantly. “Nothing in particular,” he said. “Just saying hello.”

“You never just say hello,” I said in an ominous growl. “You hate talking to people.”

“I was intrigued by her apparent transformation and I wanted to see it for myself.” He raised one icy eyebrow. “I’m entitled to some curiosity, aren’t I?”

There was more to the story. There was *always* more to the story when it came to Drave. Getting it out of him would be next to impossible, so I settled for a different tact. “Did anything you say to her cause her to be upset?” I asked. “Anything that would make her do something brash?”

“No,” he replied lightly. “We had a pleasant, brief conversation and I left.” He gave me a pointed look. “If I may continue, the log shows that her door opened again at timestamp 06.32, which was shortly after the gravity stabilizer

was disengaged.” He gazed down at his handheld screen. “Then, sensors indicate that the shaft hatch on her deck was opened, which I assume was by her, and six minutes, thirty-five seconds after that, the gravity stabilizer was back online. She was found unconscious next to it shortly thereafter.” He stuck the screen under an arm and gazed at me. “I have sent you this in a report. You may review it again at your leisure.”

I resumed pacing with more vigor. “So you’re saying she went down there to fix the gravity stabilizer on her own?”

He shrugged one shoulder. “That would be the obvious conclusion, yes.”

“I will agree with Drave here,” said Hoc. “Arria has an uncanny grasp of this ship. She explored it intimately shortly after coming on board and she would’ve had access to the information about the gravity stabilizer. She would’ve seen that it was one deck down from her location and it would surprise me if she didn’t try to fix it.”

I didn’t ask Hoc why he seemed hot on the word “intimate” lately, as another issue stole precedence. “Why would she need to explore the ship so thoroughly that she knew where things like the gravity stabilizer was located?” I demanded. “She had everything she needed—a safe space to live with the other human females, access to food, sanitation and warm clothing, even exercise and recreation.” I knew how much Arria loved the pool. It was a shame it was now filled with supplies rather than water.

Drave blinked at me as if I was missing something painfully obvious. “One can have all those things and still feel unsafe. Consider what she came from.”

I threw up my hands. “All I do is think about where she came from. I would move stars to make her feel safe and comfortable.”

Drave’s expression shifted to annoyance. “Axlos, you are my brother, but sometimes you have the sense of a *kranpling*.”

“What is *that* supposed to mean?” I rounded on him, jaw clenched. “What *exactly* should I have done differently?”

Drave blinked slowly. “Nothing. You did everything right. But you cannot give someone security if they are incapable of feeling it. The best thing you have given her is time. She told me that the cruiser feels like home to her. That we are her family.” He cocked his head. “Can we return to the issue at hand, which is finding the one who attacked her?”

“Yes. Please.” I sat on the edge of the bed, suddenly more exhausted than I could recall ever feeling. “You,” I said to the medic. “How did she get hit on the head?”

The small Diplolu-lu made a gurgling sound of nervousness. He had been running some sort of scanning device over her head. He looked up nervously. “That will be a question the female can hopefully answer when she awakens,” said Tipaloo. He was a poor substitute for Jorok, but the best we could find on short notice. It was difficult finding medics willing to treat many different species, including humans. “Perhaps if she were to be moved to the medical lab—”

“She stays here,” I snarled. I’d ordered her brought to my quarters, *not* to the medical lab. It was irrational and possessive of me, but I didn’t care. I wanted her where I knew she was safe. Nowhere on the ship felt that way at the moment. I turned to the short, blue Diplolu-lu, probably looking as crazed as I felt. “Whoever did this is still out there. Do you think I want them to finish the job?”

“N-no, Captain,” he replied. “Of course not.”

“When will she wake up?” I demanded. “Stop fiddling with that device and give me answers.”

He hastily set aside the scanner he’d been holding over her head. “I can tell you she has a brain contusion. The swelling will go down with the neural reparative cap I’ve put on her. It speeds up healing and reduces inflammation.” He had to be referring to the mesh cap over her head. It was black and was connected by dozens of thin wires to a larger device that sat blinking next to the bed. It covered the whole top half of her head, including her eyes. All I could see was how pale her cheeks looked and how still she was. Even her lips were colorless.

The cybot had been hovering near her since she'd been found by a maintenance worker. "I will guard this room, Captain."

"Thank you, Hoc," I said. "But you might make a better analyst than a guard. You think faster than anyone on this ship and can possibly piece this together faster than any of us. I want whoever did this found," I said through my teeth. "*That* is a priority."

"Are we sure it wasn't an accident?" the little medic asked.

"What do you think?" Drave asked. "Was there anything in that chamber that she might have banged her head on?"

"The blow came from behind," said the medic, pointing to the back of his own pointed skull. "And with such force that... No. I see no other explanation for what caused this injury."

"Perhaps it is time we reinstated crew tracking via the communicators they all wear," suggested Hoc. "I know you were loath to do it before, but—"

"Do it," I said. "Whatever it takes. I will not have this-*this* creature walking my ship," I snarled. "And when I find them, I *will* get answers." My hands were clenched on my thighs. *How dare anyone harm her.* I unfolded my fists to pick up one of her slender hands and held it loosely between my own.

"I think it's time for us to leave," said Hoc. "Let's give Arria some quiet rest."

Drave did not need to be told twice. He was eager to go, but the medic lingered, murmuring about monitors and neural scans and whatnot. I finally bared my teeth at him and told him to go monitor her things from his lab, where two other patients were recovering from mild burns sustained in the recent battle.

When I was alone with Arria, I let myself lean forward, resting an elbow on my thighs, feeling as if the universe weighed on my shoulders. "I swore I would protect you, Arria," I murmured to no one. "I failed. I am so sorry, my love." I lifted her limp hand to my lips and kissed her soft knuckles before laying her hand carefully back on the blanket.

“That’s it,” I announced to the room, to the unaware female lying on the bed. “I am never letting you out of my sight again.”

CHAPTER 11

Arria

“A rria, you have a concussion.”

I could hear Hoc’s mechanical voice. That was a good sign.

“That’s not what it is,” said another voice. This one I did *not* recognize. “You have a minor traumatic brain injury.”

“Why don’t you use the common human term for it?” Hoc asked testily. I couldn’t see anything. My vision was dark. I wasn’t even sure if my eyes were open for any of this. I was lying on something soft that smelled faintly of a certain appealing male. I was pretty sure I was in Axlos’ bed.

“You are not the medic here, cybot,” said the unfamiliar voice. “You just happened to download some information about human medical data.”

“It’s more than what you did,” Hoc retorted. Despite his relatively monotone voice, I could detect a testy edge to it. “I dare say I know more about human physiology than you do.”

“What do you think I’ve been doing since I arrived on this —”

“Enough.”

That one word, uttered with complete authority, silenced both of them.

My skin tingled at the low, husky timbre of his voice. He had such an effect on me, even as I lay here with a splitting

headache, listening to an argument between a cybot and, presumably, the current medic of the cruiser. I missed Jorok. I suspected Hoc did, too, based on his argumentativeness.

A huge, warm hand curled around mine. “Can you hear me, Arria?” Axlos asked.

I opened my mouth, trying to reply, but my throat felt dry as dust. A weird, croaking sound came out.

“No need to talk,” Hoc said. “We know you’re regaining consciousness based on your biometrics.”

The hand holding mine was firm and steady, like a home base in a storm. Maybe that wasn’t the right analogy, but it was the best I could come up with at that moment. Steady. He was *steady*. Solid. I squeezed his hand.

“You are going to be fine,” Axlos said. “You’re in bed, and you’re safe. Someone hit you hard on the head, but the medic has put a neural reparative cap on your head to reduce the swelling and to heal you. Just rest.”

I didn’t want to rest. I had work to do. I had questions. *So many questions*. Who hit me over the head? Did they find who did it? And did we make it through the battle okay?

I assumed the last one had to be answered yes because here we were, and Axlos wasn’t sounding more grim than usual. Well, there *was* a little bit of stress in his voice, but I suspected it had to do with me.

I raised my other hand to my head and felt a thick mesh-like fabric there. I pushed up the bottom brim so I could look out. The first face I saw was the medic, leaning close and adjusting something on the cap. The first thought I had when I looked at him was that he reminded me of a fish. He had a sharp, wedge-shaped face, and watery, bulging eyes on either side protruded and blinked often. His mouth opened and closed hinge-like, just like a fish. “Hello, Miss Davis,” said the medic in an equally watery voice. “I am Tipaloo, the ship’s medic. You should really leave that cap over your eyes to—”

“Her injury’s in the back of her head,” Hoc interrupted. “Let her see.”

Tipaloo gave Hoc a dark look. “Perhaps the next time we have a patient, I will call you in to care for them, if you know so much.”

Axlos was just out of my vision,. I couldn’t turn my head with the cap on, which seemed to be attached to something. I couldn’t *see* him.

Still, his voice silenced all. “I said, *enough*,” he commanded. “The two of you can leave.”

The medic’s fishlike mouth opened and closed a few times, as if he desperately needed to be in water again. Hoc, of course, had no facial expressions at all. He gave Axlos a brief nod and left.

Soon, we were alone. He moved to the edge of the bed and sat down, coming fully into my line of vision. His hair was mussed. He wore a dark gray uniform, crisp and clean, but undone at the neck. He was still holding my hand and I did not shake it off. It felt good to be held like this.

“They have not stopped bickering.” His gaze drifted briefly down to our joined hands. “I cannot tell you how relieved I am to see you awake.”

I tried to smile. I wasn’t sure if I pulled it off. “Did I cause trouble?” I got out in a low, raspy voice.

“You?” He smiled. “Impossible.”

“So I did, huh?”

“It appears that you also reconnected the gravity stabilizer, so I’d say any trouble you *think* you caused was fully redeemed.”

I tried to laugh, but my head felt like it had been cleaved with an ax. “What happened?”

His dark brows rose. “I hoped you could tell us. Did you see who attacked you?”

I sighed, trying to remember back to those fleeting moments. “I realized I wasn’t alone in that room,” I said. “I reseated the primary power tube—you know the one with the blue conductive gel?”

He nodded. “I know the one. *That* was disconnected?”

“Yes. It wasn’t an accident. I reconnected it and I saw movement. When gravity was restored, someone ran at me. That’s all I remember. I didn’t get a look at their face.”

“What *can* you tell me?” he asked gently. “Were they shaped like you and me with arms and legs? Did they have extra limbs?”

I closed my eyes briefly, trying to draw up what I could. “Whoever they were, they moved *very* fast. I don’t think there were any extra limbs, but honestly, I can’t be sure. They were wearing dark garments. I didn’t see anything other than a shadowy blur.”

His gaze moved over my face, possessively. His other hand came up and his thumb stroked over my cheek. “Thank you. I will let the others now. We will find who did this. I promise you that.”

“I know.” This conversation had already exhausted me. I could feel a tingling sensation all over my scalp where the device on my head was quietly doing its job. “My head hurts.”

Axlos’ face tightened. “No one will ever touch you again. That’s another promise.”

“I’ll be okay,” I assured him. “Honestly. Can’t be that bad if I’m already awake and talking.”

“If that blow had been slightly harder, your skull would’ve been cracked.” There was an edge to his voice. It was cold, angry. “When the medic says minor traumatic brain injury, that is a subjective term. You could’ve been killed.”

I squeezed his hand holding mine. “But I’m not. I’m here and I *will* be fine. Don’t worry about me, Axlos.”

“I will always worry about you,” he murmured.

“My head’s pretty hard,” I said, trying to diffuse the tension on his brow. I moved my gaze towards the door, then back to his. “How long will I be stuck here? I need to get back to work.”

“No, you do not,” he stated. “You are to remain here until you are fully healed. And then, you’ll be escorted anywhere you need to go. By either me or a guard I trust.”

It hurt, but I lowered my brows in a frown. “That is not necessary. I was just in the wrong place at the wrong time.”

He shook his head. “It won’t happen again.”

“You can’t spare anyone to babysit me.”

“It’s not babysitting. It’s protection.”

I would’ve rolled my eyes if I hadn’t hurt so much. So, Axlos had a stubborn streak. I could see there would be no dislodging him from this. “Hoc can hang out with me in the lab.”

“Hoc is undeniably helpful and useful in many ways, but he is not built for personal protection. Either I or someone I trust will be with you anytime you step foot outside of this room.”

I sat straight up in the bed, provoking a sharp, nauseating pain. I hissed out a wince and released his hand. “You cannot treat me like a prisoner on this cruiser. Whoever it was that I interrupted was startled. It’s not *me* they attacked, it was whoever would’ve been down there at that time.”

He gently pressed me back into the pillows. I would have fought against it, if I was even remotely capable of it. “You’re not a prisoner,” he roared. “Do you have any idea how terrified I was?” I could feel the frisson of panic laced through his words. “I don’t know what I would do if anything were to happen to you.”

There it was. The reason for it all. Hearing this broke down a wall that I’d been holding up for a long time. I wasn’t just a thing he wanted. He *cared* about me, and because of that, his protective attitude not only made sense, but it was okay. Especially while the danger was still out there.

I took a deep breath to gather my thoughts and let the headache ease. “Fine. But you have bigger problems than me getting a bump on the head,” I said. “There’s somebody on the ship actively trying to sabotage it.”

He rose, pushing away from the bed, and paced back and forth. “I’m aware of that. Very, *very* aware. I’ve instituted crew tracking, which I am not pleased about. I never believed in the practice of using crew members’ communicator devices to report their locations at all times, but it has come to that.” He stopped beside the bed, gazing down at me with dark, unfathomable eyes. “This was too close. Allow me to take care of you, Arria. If I know you are safe, I won’t be distracted from my duties here.”

That was impossible to counter. The last thing I needed was to be the cause of any mistake, any lapse of focus. I pressed my lips together, then said, “I accept your protection. I promise I won’t go and do anything like that again.”

One corner of his lips turned up. “You mean being a hero by reconnecting the gravity stabilizer?”

I briefly closed my eyes again. “Yeah, like that.”

“Good. Despite almost being killed, you *did* save us, you know.” His words were quiet, clearly reluctant. “We had all drifted from our stations with nothing to push off from. Dani couldn’t reach her controls. Wulfrex was unable to navigate the ship. Only Drave was connected to his station because he was clipped into his seat.” He shook his head. “So, thank you. You saved us.”

I met his blue gaze. His slitted catlike eyes moved over my face again. “I’m glad I caused something other than just trouble.”

He leaned down, close. His mouth inches from my ear. I could feel his warm breath on my skin. The scent of him was so much like the ship that he was almost one with. “You are never trouble. You are mine.”

And those words, quietly spoken, thundered through me like a herd of buffalo. They were a thousand waves crashing at once. They were a symphony and the boom of a cannon. All of those things at once, as they moved through my rattled brain and settled in.

All I could do was stare up at him, mouth open. Jaw slack.

He reached out and gently tugged the brim of my cap over my eyes. “Rest, sweet Arria. I will check on you later.”

And then he was gone. Leaving me alone in the room with feelings I couldn’t even begin to comprehend.

You are mine.

What does that even mean? Through it all, through the hearty rebuttals my brain came up with, the immediate knee-jerk refusal, there came a sense of warmth stealing through me like liquid honey. Would it be so bad, really, to be with this male?

I would, I supposed, be finding out soon.

CHAPTER 12

Axlos

I didn't trust anyone anymore, except for those I had known for a very long time. I went about my duties while Arria recuperated. The neural reparative cap Tipaloo had put on her was rapidly decreasing the swelling. She would be up and about very soon, thankfully. Even after four days of rest, she was getting antsy. She wanted to be back in her lab working. I briefly debated moving the entire room's worth of equipment into my room, but Hoc talked me out of it.

"The new supply shipment has come in," Drave informed me as I stood at my post on the main deck.

"Good," I said.

"And Minister Bazer has once again requested that Arria Davis be returned to Heveia."

"Tell Minister Bazer to shove his request up his clenched ass," I snarled. "She stays *here*."

Drave, without missing a beat, said, "Is that the exact wording you wish me to use?"

"By all means, use your discretion," I said. "But inform him that Arria is no longer his responsibility. She's mine."

That was the second time I had used a variation of that phrase in the past few days.

She *was* mine. I'd always thought of her that way, but it was beginning to feel as though she was beginning to trust me and have feelings in return. Something had changed between

the two of us. She was more open. She allowed me to touch her. Every spare moment I had, I was at her side. She did not complain when I held her hand or brushed tendrils of blond hair from her face. She met my gaze more often. We were beginning to have conversations, when in the past, it was just stilted greetings and brief exchanges. I was not so foolish as to believe that she returned my feelings wholeheartedly. Not yet, anyway. But I wasn't imagining that she no longer saw the villain of her past when she looked at me. She was beginning to like me.

Every time she smiled at me, it was like a weight lifted off me, just for a little while. I worried I had gone too far by declaring myself a mere four days ago. I had prepared an apology, complete with the truth—fear for her had sparked an overly possessive mood in me, causing me to speak without thinking. All of those things were true. But an apology had not been necessary. She had not brought me to task over it.

“Good news. We are being joined by two Mitran battle cruisers while their forces redeploy,” Harp said, turning in her seat. “They are increasing their defenses for us. That will buy us some breathing room.”

I nodded. “It will.” It didn't hurt that the Mitrans had been receiving their shipments of *vistran* energy crystals on time, allowing them to deploy more ships.

Some said we were buying the Mitrans' fighting forces by supplying them with the precious energy crystals that were the cause of this war, but if that was the case, it was well worth the price. There was certainly more *vistran* on Heveia than we would ever need, and ample quantities to sell. Our allies, the Mitrans, were a unique species, ruled by warlords in tightly organized groups on their home planet, which was only one system away from ours. The fierce, crimson-skinned, horned warriors had one of the very best space fleets in the galaxy. They had a great deal at stake in this fight, too.

Harp sat back in her chair. “Did you hear what I just said?”

I blinked, realizing that she had still been speaking to me. “What?”

“I said, when is the last time you’ve eaten anything?”

I blinked at her. “I don’t know. I’m sure I have.” Every moment of spare time had been in analyzing what I could do of Arria’s attack in an effort to find the one who’d disabled the gravity stabilizer and hit her. But I was sure I’d eaten something...

Harp and Drave exchanged a look. “Here’s an idea,” she said, waving a finger in the air. “Go into storage and get some actual furniture for your room, like a table and chairs, and have dinner with Arria. She’ll be happy to get out of that bed—I know that because she told me when I visited her earlier today. It’s not easy for her to eat sitting in bed.”

I stared at her for a moment. “I hadn’t thought about that. Do you think she would like to eat with me?”

Harp rolled her eyes. “I can see why it’s taken so long for you to make anything happen here,” she said. “Yes, she would like that. A little less uncomfortable than eating meals on a bed.”

I ignored her jibe. I had never eaten a meal in the bed. I’d always taken my food in the officers’ lounge, despite having a food replicator in my quarters. But the officers’ lounge had been converted into an overflow medical bay. Mostly, I ate while on my way someplace, stealing moments here and there to feed myself, but I had not *dined* in a long time. Not since before this war began. There was plenty of space in the room for a small dining area. And we did have extra furniture.

“We have everything under control here,” Harp said. “Why don’t you go? Eat something. For the love of god, hop in the hydrotube first.”

“Fresh garments would be nice, too,” Drave added. “You smell like spent conduction fluid.”

Wulfrex was on the deck, too, but he didn’t say a word. I missed his wisecracks and questionable sense of humor. In the past, this would’ve been a moment when he would’ve chimed in. But he remained where he was, gaze locked on the screen before him with a schematic of the cruiser’s coolant system in

front of him. He shook his head. “I’m trying to pinpoint the vulnerable systems,” he said, apparently oblivious to the conversation that had been going on around him. “I’m putting locks on everything that could be tampered with.”

I squeezed his shoulder as I left. “Good work, Wulfrex. You could use a break too.”

“No breaks, Captain. Wherever this traitor is, I will find them and make it hard for them to sabotage any more systems.”

Doubts ate away at me as I walked through the halls. Was it foolish of me to want to surprise Arria with a proper meal when I could be spending my precious off-duty time hunting the monster who hurt her?

I had devoted the majority of the last four days to that endeavor, poring over crew logs and trying to discern where everyone was when the gravity cut out. There had been some complaints about the tracking system being turned on. Some original crew members who did not know of the saboteur, had objected to their movements being tracked.

There was little I could tell them, aside from the fact that I had good reasons to do it.

Still, I could sense the discontent rippling through the crew. I wouldn’t have liked having all of my movements monitored, either, if I were them. We only used these features when we were going somewhere dangerous off the ship. Now, seventy-eight crew and officers were being tracked by the ship’s computer system at all times. I could not tell them it was because there was a traitor on board. Suspicions would run high. Accusations would be made. The ship would break down—I had seen it happen and heard of it happening on other ships.

I entered one of the storage rooms where excess furniture was stacked up. I didn’t spend too much time in choosing a style. A rectangular table, ideal for two, and two chairs that appeared to be comfortable were close enough to grab quickly. I carried them to my quarters, set them down, and knocked on

the door with my knuckles. Humans, we had learned the hard way, appreciated this gesture of announcing one's presence.

I heard soft words of greeting come from the other side. I opened the door and entered to see her sitting up in bed with her legs crossed and two flat portable screens on the bed in front of her. "I thought the medic told you not to read anything," I said.

She looked up, chin tilted in an expression that did *not* invite a discussion. "He said I shouldn't read until I felt better. I feel better." She nodded to the furniture I held in front of me. "What have you got there?"

"It was suggested that you might appreciate eating at a table rather than in bed," I said, maneuvering the large chairs inside the room. "I have never spent much time in these quarters, but if you would like, I would share a meal with you." I realized how very awkward that sounded and probably looked to her, with me standing there with two chairs and a folded-up table balanced in my arms. They were not heavy, but they were large and cumbersome.

"I would like that," she replied after a moment. She tucked her hair behind an ear and watched as I set up the furniture. She said nothing as I positioned the table and chairs and stepped back to admire my work. "Huh," I said. "It doesn't look bad in here."

"The other rooms have furniture, so..." She shrugged. "It's a good thing." She carefully rose from bed. Her long sleeping gown covered her from neck to toes, leaving her arms bare and covering her body in a shapeless flow of cream-colored fabric. She looked like a goddess.

I rushed over to her side and carefully took her elbow. "Are you okay to walk?"

She looked up at me as if I'd lost my mind and swatted my hand. "How do you think I've been getting to the bathroom?" The swat turned into a reassuring pat. "Honestly, I'm okay. I feel almost back to normal. My headache is gone."

She still wore the mesh reparative cap, but it was no longer hooked up to the device next to her bed. The extra power and constant monitoring wasn't needed any longer.

“What would you like to eat?” I asked, settling her in a chair and standing beside her like a dining server.

She started to tell me a few of her favorite things and then paused. “I would really like to try some Heveian dishes.” She looked up at me with a smile. “Can you recommend any?”

She was so beautiful, I couldn't resist reaching out and feeling the tips of her short hair between my fingers. It was the softest thing. “Yes. I will be right back.”

I crossed the room with my fangs aching and my cock twitching. I wanted her so badly, it scrambled my mind. I knew it was impossible. First, she was injured and in no condition for my advances. And second, I was only just beginning to earn her trust. It felt as though that was still a fragile, easily shattered thing.

I returned minutes later, with a tray laden with food. The Heveian dishes wouldn't taste as good as classic, homemade meals from my home planet, but the replicator did its best to offer versions that it generated from the base proteins and nutrients in the machine. Hot blamik kebabs, sikkal meat skewers, floma puffs and kratin soup, mingled with foods from Earth that the human females had taught the machine to make.

Curious, I picked up a thin yellow stick. “What is this?” I asked.

“That is a french fry,” she said. “Or rather, a very *sad* french fry, according to Harp.” She picked one off the plate and popped it in her mouth. “I'd never had one before coming here, so I think it's really good.”

“Are these common food items on Earth?”

“They are for normal people.” She grimaced and ate another one. “But I wasn't normal. We could only eat the food that we grew and raised. No restaurants or fast food for us at the HFV.”

I took a bite of the yellow thing and chewed it thoughtfully. It wasn't *bad*, just salty and it had a strange consistency. "Was there anything pleasant about living there?" I wondered if this was a bad question, but she smiled up at me and took one of the skewers from the plate.

"There were peaceful moments," she said. "My mother moved there when I was a toddler, after my father left us. After I became an adult, I learned how to be quiet. Keeping the attention off myself made the punishments stop. I worked in the fields or with the animals, and there were times when I felt peace."

I shook my head. "I wonder what drew your mother to such a place."

She chuckled. "The HFV was strictly against the new contact and influence that alien cultures were having on our planet, and my mother was a total believer in that. She was sure we would lose our identity as a species and bought in to the HFV's wild conspiracy theories. They believed in only a human culture, and that any species that brought progress and new technology to Earth was dangerous and to be rejected. My mother fell under Brother David's spell, even to the point of believing that I was secretly being controlled by aliens." She shrugged, and her eyebrows rose as she chewed the imitation meat skewer. "This is really good. So much flavor."

I was pleased that she enjoyed it, but more fascinated by how freely she was sharing her life with me. From what I'd heard, she didn't even speak of this to the other women. I thought of the scars her body held from those "punishments" and shook my head. "I wish I could go back in time and take you away from all of that."

She smiled tenderly. "Thank you. I wish you could, too. I don't even know if the HFV still exists. I've been putting that life behind me, one bit at a time. I'll never go back. I have been looking to the future, and this war is making me see how important it is to do that."

My heart beat faster. "Does that have anything to do with how you've been with me recently?"

Her lashes lowered over her brown eyes. “Yes. I never disliked you, Axlos.”

She was calling me by my name, not Captain. Hope quickened my pulse. “You might like the soup,” I said, looking to shift the topic to something easier. I reached for a slice of Earth food on a plate. It was very flat and looked disgusting. “I heard this dish is called *pizza*,” I said, trying to keep the disgust off my face. “The females are obsessed with it.” I frowned at the strange item, which flopped forward unappealingly. I braced myself and angled it into my mouth.

Arria watched me keenly. “What do you think?”

I chewed, taking in the new textures and flavors. “It’s better than I thought it would be,” I said in surprise. “Pleasant.”

She laughed and took a slice herself. “I think *pizza* is one of the most amazing things in the whole universe.” She bit off a giant piece and closed her eyes in bliss.

“Better than ice cream?” I’d heard of this substance as well. I had never had it, having never been invited to one of their ice cream and wine parties.

“Oh, *pizza* is up there with ice cream.”

“I take it you never had this before in your old life, either?”

“Oh, no. The food at the commune was simple and basic, pretty flavorless because we didn’t have any seasoning aside from salt. We weren’t supposed to *enjoy* our food, after all.” There was a twist to her voice. “We weren’t supposed to enjoy anything.”

“That’s a shame,” I murmured.

She raised one eyebrow. “Interesting hearing *you* say that. I’ve seen you smile maybe once.”

I looked up, surprised. “I smile,” I said. “Or, I used to. I haven’t had much cause to, in recent months.”

Her eyes dropped. “That’s true. But even before, when everyone else was relaxing and having fun, you held yourself

apart, as if you couldn't even allow yourself to unwind."

She had a point. "I have a lot of responsibilities. I don't want to let the crew down."

She held my gaze, not breaking eye contact. I would've given anything to see into her mind at that moment. What was she thinking about? What did she think of *me*? "You won't." She turned her attention back to the food on the table and said, "Let me try the soup."

My hungry gaze watched as she tasted the dish for the first time and pleasure moved over her features. I wanted to see a different kind of pleasure. I wanted the groan that escaped her lips at the enjoyment of the food to be brought forth by my touch, my mouth. My body.

Her brown eyes went wide and she set her spoon down. "*That* is amazing. Heveian foods are delicious."

I sat back and observed her. "I'm very glad you think so, since you plan to settle on my home planet."

"I hope to," she said. A shadow crossed her eyes. "It's hard to say with everything the way it is right now."

Whether we win the war. That was what she was really saying. I wanted to win it for her. I wanted to show her all over my home world and take her wherever else she wanted to go. I wanted to give her the galaxy.

We talked and ate, and it was the most open and friendly she had ever been to me. She wanted to know about my family and how I grew up on Heveia. There was little detail about that. I was a Heveian noble. My upbringing had been regimented and unremarkable, a series of tutors and classes and lessons. I'd not had an unpleasant relationship with my family, but it had certainly not been a life that I had wished to emulate. Stuffy meetings with stuffy nobles discussing things of no consequence was not my idea of a life.

"So, is that why you stole this cruiser and headed out to become a pirate?"

Her question caught me off guard. I looked at her over the empty plates and smiled. Just a little. Not enough to reveal my

distended fangs. “I don’t remember exact reasons why we took this ship or what it was that set me on this journey.” I shrugged, crossed my arms and leaned back in my chair, trying to think back to a past that was so unremarkable it had fallen into the shadow of my mind. “I hate to say it, but it may have just been boredom. I wanted to *do* something, not sit around taking diplomacy lessons and choosing the trim material of my coats. My parents were content in that, but I always felt... restless.”

She nodded. “I felt that way, too, stuck in a place that wouldn’t let me think or read or anything. Well, that among other things.”

“You cannot compare our childhoods,” I said. “They hurt you. They...” I couldn’t finish. My hand curled into a fist and I clenched my jaw in impotent rage at those who had done such damage to her body and spirit.

She reached over and took my hand for the first time ever. “I’ve let it go,” she said. “Don’t let it bother you.”

I tried not to react as my mind reeled at her initiating the touch. “How can I not let it affect me? When someone harms you, they harm me. You are perfection, and light. You’re the loveliest thing I’ve ever seen. Anyone who would raise a hand to hurt you is my enemy.”

Her fingers squeezed mine. “You are not at all what I thought.”

I couldn’t breathe. Air just hung, suspended in my lungs. “And you are everything I knew you would be and more.”

Without breaking my gaze, Arria arose from her seat and walked around the table. She still held my hand and looked down at me with an inscrutable gaze. “Axlos, I’m going to ask you something. You can say no.”

But I wouldn’t. “Anything.”

Her dark lashes fluttered, revealing nerves. “I would like you to kiss me.”

My mind went blank. “What?”

“You know what a kiss is, don’t you?”

“Yes, I know what a kiss is. I just don’t—”

“I *know* how this sounds,” she said. “But I’ve been thinking about it ever since you said those things to me when I woke up. And I just want to know.” She paused to swallow thickly. “I want to know what it feels like. I want to know what *your* kiss feels like.”

I didn’t know if I could move enough to perform this kiss. I was stunned beyond words. “If you’re sure that’s something you want,” I said with effort. “I am at your service.”

“Okay.” She huffed out a breath and shook back her shoulders. “Not a really big kiss. Just a normal one.”

I felt my brows draw together. “What *is* a normal one?”

“It’s one that’s not too...” She waved her hands back and forth. “Not too much, but not a kiss like a brother, either.”

“I will do my best,” I rasped out, barely believing this was happening and not a product of a dream. “Are you sure you want to do this?”

She nodded smartly. “I am ready. I should let you know, I’ve never done this before.”

“Never?” I asked.

“Nope. Even if there was someone I *wanted* to kiss at the HFV, every man knew to stay away from me. I was tainted by the alien influence, after all.” She smirked. “That’s funny, now.”

I shook my head, trying to make sense of this very strange moment. “Just tell me what you would like me to do and I will do it.”

“Okay. Pull your chair out.”

I did as she asked, sliding my chair out from the table and then waiting.

“May I sit on your lap?” she asked politely.

I almost groaned. “Feel free.” I spread my arms, and she settled herself primly on the tops of my thighs, well away from the tight rise of my cock, which strained painfully against my pants. A kiss was one thing. A hard male cock was another. “Where would you like me to put my hands?”

Her eyes twinkled as she realized the control she had. I was her willing servant. Anything she asked me in this moment, I would do.

“You may put them around my waist or on my back.”

I chose the waist for now, thrilling at the feel of those soft curves. The swell of her hips just below her waist teased me. I raised one eyebrow. “I am ready when you are,” I said. “Perhaps you should be the one to initiate this kiss, so that it’s not too much.”

“You’re not mocking me, are you?”

“Not at all,” I replied. “To be honest, this is new to me as well. I have not been kissed in recent memory. And by recent, I mean decades.”

She chuckled and placed her hands on my shoulders. “So neither of us know what we’re doing.”

Oh, I knew what I was doing. Rutting and all its aspects—including kissing—was ingrained in the makeup of every Heveian male. It required no instruction and no special preparation. “We will pick it up as we go.” I didn’t even recognize my own voice. I sounded like I was speaking through grainy speakers.

Then, her lips were moving, closing in, coming closer and closer. My breathing became a choppy, shallow mess. My hands tightened on her waist. The pain in my groin was unreal. A breath away from my mouth, she paused. “This is it, though, I just want you to know. Just a kiss. No...you *know*.”

“No what?” I rasped out.

“No sex.” Her face tinged with bright color.

I nodded, forcing myself to be calm. Not a wild rutting mess of hunger. “Just a kiss.”

I would take anything she would give me. Her touch alone made my skin sing with pleasure. I *would* control myself during this kiss. If I burst into flames in front of her, I would still keep it together.

“Okay,” she said. “Here it goes.”

And then, suddenly, her mouth was on mine. I sucked in a breath through my nose as her lips mashed hard against my own, flattening my lips against my teeth in a sudden onslaught. I eased back, putting a hand to her cheek and gently drawing away.

Her eyes were wide. “Did I do it wrong? I did, didn’t I? I did it wrong.”

I took in a deep, fortifying breath. “There is no wrong way to kiss a male,” I said. “But how about something like this...” Keeping my hand cupped around her cheek, I leaned in and gently brushed my lips against hers. It was a caress, as natural as breathing. As glorious as morning sunlight on the skin.

She sighed against me, leaning in for more. Her inquisitive mouth found mine, gentler this time.

“Hmm.” The sound purred from her throat as we kissed. It was the same sound she made when sampling the dishes of my home planet. Her purr of pleasure was fire in my veins. It was delicious, and sweet, and engulfing. My hand on her waist slid upwards. I cupped her rib cage, feeling the fast beat of her heart and a shallow tremble of her breath.

There was nothing “normal” about this kiss.

This was a kiss of promise and need and hunger and everything I wanted. This kiss was a prelude of what would come. I knew in that moment that I would have her. Arria would be mine in body and soul. She didn’t know this yet, or maybe she did someplace deep inside. This was a first kiss, but not the last. She melted against me, her breasts, full and soft, against my chest. Even through the fabric of our shirts, I could feel her beaded nipples. She shifted forward, coming up against the hard outcropping of my cock, which was fully engorged and bent inside its confines. I ached to adjust it, but

to do so would require unseating her, and that I would not do. I tried to keep my hands on her back or waist, but they slid down her arms, over her hips, to where the lush softness of her bottom met the hardness of my body.

She mewled softly into my mouth as her lips parted and her inquisitive tongue slid between her teeth into the domain of my mouth. I met her questing tongue with my own, sliding over hers and testing the softness of her mouth. She moaned, making a lustful sound that was nearly my undoing.

Her hands rested in my hair. She wiggled against me, probably unaware of the messages her own body was giving her.

But I was. I could smell her arousal. The way her sex rubbed against my thighs. The way her breasts slid over my chest. She wanted me. Arria, the female who possessed my every dream, wanted *me*.

CHAPTER 13

Arria

Everything was under control. I was pretty sure of it. I knew what I was doing.

No, I didn't.

I was spinning, floating out of control as if the gravity stabilizer had gone offline again. I didn't know which way was up or down. My body was a stranger to me. It was a coil of need and trapped with a hunger I couldn't satiate. All I knew was wherever he touched me, it felt good. *Really* good.

Somewhere in the jumbled mess that was my head, I was well aware that this kiss had blown past normal and gone into wildly amazing territory. His mouth on mine was like nothing I'd known before. It was sensations and softness and an ache between my legs. I might not have known what I was doing, but I knew what was happening. I was well aware of what my body wanted and how this would end if we continued this path.

I had to stop it. His silky hair slid between my fingers.

I *should* really stop it. The thick muscles of his neck flexed as he leaned his head, slanting his lips over mine.

I definitely, *definitely* needed to stop this.

But it felt like it might be easier trying to stop a tidal wave.

He let out a groan as one hand slipped down to my thigh. I lifted my leg and crossed it over the other one in a weird effort to get closer, as if I could somehow crawl inside his skin and

feel *more*. I was beyond understanding what I was feeling. All I knew was I was feeling an *awful* lot.

His lips moved over my jaw, searing a path down my neck. I shuddered in his arms, probably pulling his hair a little too hard. I gasped out his name. “Axlos. Oh, *yes*, Axlos.”

He froze. He just stopped. His hands and mouth stayed where they were against my skin. Slowly, he leaned back.

I focused on his face. His blue eyes flashed darkly, glinting with desire. A dark flush had stained the tops of his cheekbones with a tinge of blue. But it was his teeth that shocked me. Long—almost obscenely long—fangs distended from his gums. I knew this happened to Heveians when they were aroused and ready to bite their partners, but I’d never seen it in person.

He was practically panting. His mouth was open, showing me the truth. Showing me what he was. “I think that’s enough for today,” he said in a low rasp that I felt like dark silk over my skin.

I just sat there, trying to collect my thoughts. Trying to catch my breath. I didn’t trust my body. My nipples throbbed. My body was a strange coil of need. “Are—are you sure?”

“Very sure,” he said. He didn’t take his hands off me, though.

“That wasn’t a normal kiss, was it?”

He let out a rusty laugh. “No. No, it was not.”

“It felt like it started out that way.”

“It didn’t stay that way for long.” He leaned forward and rested his forehead against mine. My mouth instinctively angled to get closer, to kiss him again, but he held firm. “I think I should go.”

I let out a shuddering sigh. “I’d like to know why that... I mean, why that kiss went the way it did.”

“My sweet Arria. It went that way because you are my mate.”

Something flopped around in my belly—awareness, intense arousal. “I-I don’t understand. How could I be your mate? We don’t, I mean... We hardly know each other.”

“Oh, we know each other. Do you see these fangs?” He bared them, flashing them in the small space between us. “I ache to bite you. Yes, sometimes the bite is only to enhance rutting pleasure. But for some of us, the bite urge means a joining of more than just bodies. I have never in my life felt the need to bite before. But I *have* felt attraction.”

I took that in, turning his words over in my head. “So you’ve had sex before, but you’ve never bitten anyone?”

He nodded once. “The first time my fangs grew was when I met you.”

“And you think this means that we are meant to be together?”

He shrugged, but it was obvious to me that he was trying to make it look casual. But there was nothing casual about this conversation. Nothing casual about *us*. “What were you expecting when you asked me to kiss you?”

“I wanted to know what it felt like,” I replied. “I don’t know why or what caused it, but I’ve felt different since returning to the cruiser. Maybe it’s the war and not knowing if we have a future at all. Maybe it’s what I did to come here with Hoc. I stepped foot on this ship and knew I was home. You’re part of that, Axlos. I wanted to know what *your* kiss felt like.”

“And?”

“It was...” How to explain something that didn’t have words? “I’ve never felt so many things at once.”

One of his big, rough hands came up and adjusted the mesh cap on my head. It had gone slightly askew. “The problem is that now I have had a taste of you,” he growled. “And I want more.”

My breath caught and held. “Oh.”

“And I would bet this ship that you are not ready for the ‘more’ I have in mind.”

“That would be sex?”

“It would be that and more. Much more.” Gently, he picked me up, cradled me against his chest and carried me back to the bed. There, he laid me down, tucked sheets around me, and stepped back. His gaze was stern. “We are taking this slow. You have a head wound that needs to finish healing and I need to know that you are very, *very* sure that you wish to proceed with this thing between us. There are things we can’t give back, once given.”

I nodded, agreeing with him. Although the progression was not quite as abrupt for me as it was for him—I *had* found him attractive since I laid eyes on him, too—I didn’t want to hurt him. Or myself. I was fine with slow. I didn’t even feel like myself anymore. This person who had just experienced her first kiss was not the woman I thought I knew.

He turned away, bowing his head. “I’ll leave you to get some rest and I will check on you again soon.” He paused. “And Arria, we will talk about this...” He waved his hand between himself and me. “Again. It is not simple, and neither is the current situation on the cruiser. But I *will* keep you safe, no matter what. And I will find whoever hurt you.”

He looked tall and strong and powerful standing there, but also vulnerable and worried. “I know,” I said. “I’m not scared.”

His eyes were so complicated. He let out a curse under his breath, strode up to me, and pressed his lips to mine in a quick, hard kiss. It left me breathless as he stepped away and exited the room. The door closed with a quiet snick behind him.

I lay back in the pillows and stared up at the ceiling, half wondering if I’d imagine all of it. But it was real. It happened. I kissed Axlos, and in the process, connected myself to him in a way that would be very difficult to undo. But I didn’t want to undo it. I was *very* interested to find out what this version of Arria was like. Maybe falling in love with the ship’s captain wasn’t so scary after all.

CHAPTER 14

Axlos

I returned to the main deck in a daze. *Had that actually happened?* My lips still tingled. My body was still vividly aware and ringing with a memory of the feel of Arria's body in my arms. Her little sounds of desire. *Sweet stars*, the scent of her. She was pure pleasure to my senses.

"What happened to you?" Dani asked with a note of alarm in her voice. "You look weird."

I shook my head and went to my station. "Nothing," I said. "I'm fine."

Dani just kept staring at me, not buying my answer for a moment. I felt Drave's eyes on me. He got up and came to stand beside me at the flat screen that displayed messages and commands and information about the ship and our enemies. It was all a smear of color. I couldn't focus on any of it.

"I take it your meal went well," said Drave quietly.

"It did," I replied.

"Exceedingly well, if the length of your fangs is any indication."

I looked at him sharply. I'd completely forgotten about them. My gums were still sore from elongating my fangs. I made sure my lips covered them. "I didn't bite her, if that's what you're thinking."

"I wasn't thinking anything, brother," said Drave. "It's your business. I was just checking to make sure you were

well.”

He was probably also checking to make sure *she* was well, not that he would ever think I would attack her. He knew me better than that.

I slanted him a quick glance. “She kissed me.”

“Did I just hear that?” Dani strode over, eyes bright. “You’re saying Arria finally laid one on you?”

I sighed. “Yes.”

“That’s progress,” Drave said. “Congratulations.”

“I was not expecting it.”

“Yet you rose to the occasion.” Dani nodded approvingly. “Explains why you look like you swallowed a minor explosive.”

It was only Drave, Dani, and myself on the deck, thankfully. Having to discuss this with two of them was bad enough.

“I did my best, I think.” I winced, realizing how very out of my depth I was. “Do we have any progress on our saboteur who attacked Arria?”

A gleam entered Drave’s expression. “We do, as a matter of fact. When you authorized the tracking functionality of the communicators, some previous data was collected from *before*.”

“Before?” I asked. “So it tracked the crew retroactively?”

“Exactly. So we have the whereabouts of everyone for the preceding day,” he said. “During the time of the attack and the sabotage of the gravity stabilizer.”

I tamped down my excitement. “This is excellent news,” I said. “Do we have an identification on this individual yet?”

“Nearly,” Drave replied. “Hoc is doing the work of pinpointing our attacker in his own internal systems, just in case our fiend is as savvy as they seem. Anyone with access to the system might be able to find out what we are doing.”

“So that’s why it isn’t done already,” I said. Hoc was efficient, but his system wasn’t as fast as the ship’s computer. He required time to work through the data. “Where is Hoc now?”

“In Arria’s computer lab. Her programs are still running as he works.” Drave cocked his head. “Will she be back to work on the encrypted communications soon?”

I wanted to lock Arria in my room and never let her step foot out of it, but that was both cruel and impossible. She would never stand for it, and I wouldn’t blame her. “I believe so,” I said. “She’s healing remarkably fast.”

“Clearly.” Drave smiled. “I am inordinately pleased for you and her. You both deserve love, after all you’ve been through.”

“I don’t have the luxury of falling in love right now,” I said harshly. “I cannot make a mistake that will cost lives.”

“You don’t get to choose when you feel this way,” said Dani. “You can use it as a strength, though. And you’re smart enough to do just that.”

I looked at her in surprise.

She nodded, continuing, “You always had something to fight for, but now, you really have to win, don’t you? For her, for what you two have. Just get over it and accept that the only option is to beat the enemy. Arria wants her pool back, I’m sure.”

I had to smile at that. “She does.”

Drave returned to his terminal. “It shouldn’t be long now before we hear from—”

He didn’t even finish his sentence because Hoc strode purposefully into the main deck.

I had to hold myself back from rushing towards him and demanding answers. Luckily, Hoc was not playing coy. He walked up to me on his narrow, metal legs and flashed his fingers. “The individual who attacked Arria is named Silip. He

is a member of the Borkat species and is on the team monitoring the power cells and cogent exhaust.”

“So he has access to everything.”

“Yes.”

“Where is he now?” I asked in a deadly voice.

“In his quarters, according to his communicator. He has been there for the past six hours and thirty-five minutes, although he should’ve been on shift twelve minutes ago.”

I was already halfway to the door. “Drave, the main deck is yours. Dani, you’re with me.”

“Yes, Captain,” said Dani, who made straight for the weapons compartment. We would not be going into this unarmed. When both of us had a blaster, we headed to the crew’s residential deck. On the way, I asked Hoc more about our criminal.

“I have not been able to locate any known connections between Silip and the UC,” he said. “But this particular crew member is one of our new recruits. He’s from the Ecla-N system, which has a loose alignment to our side. Nothing was flagged on his background check.”

“Of course, it wasn’t,” I said through gritted teeth. “A spy would make sure it wasn’t.”

Dani’s eyes narrowed. “I don’t like this,” she said. “If this was any kind of decent operative, they wouldn’t be so sloppy.”

“Maybe they didn’t know that the communicator’s location tracker would be able to work retroactively,” I said.

She shook her head. “Maybe.” But she didn’t sound convinced.

We stopped at Silip’s door. I didn’t bother with a greeting or to introduce myself. I had access to any room I wanted to get into on this ship. I slapped my hand against the door, it read my biometrics and opened. Dani and I were waiting, weapons drawn. Hoc, unarmed, stepped aside.

There was nothing moving in the room. It was dark. “Lights,” I snapped.

They went on, bathing the room in a bright white glow.

On the floor lay Silip, the Borkat tech. The one who had attacked Arria, according to his tracker.

Hoc rushed over to his side. His visual scanner flashed red as he did a scan. He looked at Dani and me. “He’s gone. Dead for several hours.”

I crouched down beside the dead Borkat. Their species was short with thick legs and a long, blunt tail. Long ears hung nearly to his waist and tiny black eyes stared sightlessly at the ceiling. A small, standard-issue blaster had fallen loosely from his hand and a corresponding blast mark was visible on his head. “He must’ve known we were coming.”

Dani walked around the room, showing no interest in the dead Borkat. “Something is off.”

“What is it?” I trusted her instincts. Dani had far more experience in subterfuge than I did.

“I can’t say yet, but something about that wound and where he is doesn’t fit.” She looked around, perplexed. “Maybe I’m paranoid.”

Hoc looked up. “The identification matches the individual my data indicates was in the chamber with the gravity stabilizer and Arria. It would appear that we have our saboteur and attacker.”

“So it would.” I should have felt relief, but I was still tense. On edge. “Hoc, call Tipaloo to come here immediately. I want a full examination of the body and a thorough report.”

Dani raised a brow. “You’re doubting your eyes, too?”

“Just want to make sure we’re not missing something.” I had a nagging feeling that we were.

CHAPTER 15

Arria

He was dead.

Axlos had told me everything that had happened with the being named Silip, who, according to the tracker, had been their saboteur and the one who'd attacked me. When I looked up information about the Borkat species, I had to frown. Borkats were shorter than I remembered my assailant being. Nothing in the information about them stated they were particularly fast, but there was a great chance I'd recalled something incorrectly. It was dark in that room and I only saw the individual for a brief moment.

I could say it was possible I'd misjudged what had happened.

But what couldn't be denied was the fact that mysterious malfunctions stopped on the cruiser. No more system failures or functions going off-line. The cruiser was *calm*, for once.

I had learned that there were some additional ally ships in our sector. They were here temporarily, but that took some of the pressure off the cruiser and its crew. It gave me time to work. And I was back in my computer lab running experiments the instant I was cleared to do so.

With every model I ran through the enemy transmissions, the closer I felt I was getting. It was a niggling sensation in the back of my neck. I was close. *So close*. Just missing something. While my work consumed most of my time, I spent my free time with Axlos.

He was not kidding when he said we were taking it slow. We ate at least one meal together every day. They concluded with a chaste—*unsatisfying*—kiss that left me wanting more every time. Maybe that was his plan—to leave me yearning. It was working. It was also getting annoying.

My head was fine. I wasn't wearing that annoying mesh cap anymore, and the person who attacked me was dead. After that first, searing kiss, I'd gotten a taste of desire. I wanted more. I knew he did too, and I couldn't understand why he was holding back.

Two weeks went by. And then, I had a breakthrough.

One of my models showed promise. It was hard to not get excited. After all this time a method revealed a possible working solution. I wasn't there yet. I still had work to do, but I was on the right track. If I was right, the UC wasn't using any known languages for their encrypted messages; they had invented multiple languages just for them. It was mind-blowing to think of. I couldn't imagine how they accomplished this, but now I had to puzzle it out. Who generated these languages? Were they made by a living being or by a computer system? These were the problems I had to solve. But knowing this gave me a firm direction.

In my jubilation, I rushed from my lab, flushed with excitement. My hands trembled. I couldn't wait to tell Axlos and the others of the progress I'd made. *So close!* There was a key that would unlock it all and I was close to that.

I swung out of the lab and smacked right into a tall, lean body. It was a Palos female, taller than me and narrow as a willow, dressed in a blue engineering uniform. She gazed down at me from pure white eyes—fully white, no pupils or irises. She had pale green skin and a very, very wide mouth, like a slit across her entire face, and when I smacked into her, she let out a growl and bared fine, gray teeth.

“Oh, I'm very sorry,” I said quickly. “I didn't mean to run into you.”

“Watch yourself, female,” she said in a cold, calm voice. “You might get hurt.”

Something about this engineering tech set shivers down my spine. I'd seen her around many times before but never interacted with her. She gave me a distinct sensation of unease.

Her gaze moved over me impassively, with mild disgust, if I was interpreting that right. I reminded myself not to impose human standards on alien species. What was rude in one culture was a compliment in another. But this crew member didn't even bother giving a nod as she shifted around me and kept going. Her gait was measured and smooth. Something about her... I briefly thought about my assailant by the gravity stabilizer. No. Couldn't be. That individual was dead.

It was me just being paranoid. I had just experienced a terrible head injury. Stress levels were incredibly high. I reached the air tube pods just as Axlos was getting out of one.

I had a hard time keeping my excitement contained. The female alien I had bumped into dropped from my mind like a stone. "I had a breakthrough," I said in a rush. "I'm almost there."

Axlos looked around but we didn't have an audience. Still, when he walked up to me, he put his arm around me and ushered me back to my lab. With the door closed behind us, he turned to me, eyes keen and bright. "Tell me about this breakthrough."

I told him what I'd found, that it wasn't one language, but many, and none of them were languages that were known. That was why it had been impossible to break.

"There has to be some sort of key to this."

"Yes, there is. That's what I'm working on next. But now that I know the method, the formula that they're using, I can start working on untangling that. It will be complicated," I went on. "You have ships all over the UC and not everyone commanding them is a genius. They need something simple to get orders quickly." I looked up at him with a sudden thought. "Did you search the belongings of the Borkat who attacked me by the gravity stabilizer? Were there any strange devices found on him or in his quarters?"

He raised his brows. “There was a full investigation done, and no, nothing of any note was found. Everything in his quarters and on his person was a standard item.” His eyes darkened, slitted pupils narrowing. “Do you think we’re looking for a device, like a communicator?”

“It’s possible,” I replied, gnawing on my lip. “But I don’t know. And they wouldn’t put it on the cruiser, even if the Borkat was working with the UC.”

“If the key to breaking the enemy communications is a *device*, the only way to get it would be to confiscate one from a captain of a UC ship.” His expression turned grim. “That would be very difficult to do.”

“But if we have a UC saboteur on the ship, how are they getting orders?”

Axlos shrugged. “They would have come with them, I assume. But I will have the Borkat’s belongings searched again, with extra scrutiny on his communicator implant. Who knows? Perhaps it was altered.”

“Good.” I rubbed my hands together. “In the meantime, I’ll keep working on my own device. Hoc has been busy on other things but I could really use him right now.”

“I will make him available to you whenever you need,” he said. “I believe Wulfrex has enlisted him recently.”

“Just a few hours a day would be helpful,” I said. I rested my hands on his chest. There was so little room in my tiny lab, we were almost touching anyway. There was nowhere else for either of us to stand. “This is exciting, Axlos,” I said. “We’re so close I can feel it.”

He smiled, making the skin beside his eyes crease. “It pleases me to see you so excited. You’re almost giddy.”

“I’ve been working on this for months,” I said. “To get this close... I’m just hoping that final piece can be found soon.” I slid my hands up, linking them around his neck. “Then all this can be over and we can...” My words trailed off as my gaze dropped to his mouth. The scent of him filled my senses.

He parted his lips. “I would like that,” he said thickly.

I leaned my chest against his. His gaze flicked to the rise of my breasts against his ribs. His heartbeat thudded faster. The hands on my waist clenched. “Arria, I should go.”

I did not lean away. I wouldn’t make it easy for him this time. “Why? What are you afraid of, Axlos?”

His brows twitched. “Afraid of? Shall I give you a list?”

“Give me one reason why we should stop right now.”

“You’re not ready,” he said immediately.

“Who are you to decide that?” I cocked my head. “I’m an adult woman. I have some say in what I’m ready for, don’t I?”

My response seemed to throw him off. He blinked at me, mouth open, as if he had a reply ready, but nothing came out. He closed his eyes. “I am afraid that if we continue, you will have regrets and avoid me again.”

I had to say, I appreciated his honesty. The bluntness of it and the openness of his concern. He gazed down at me, ready for whatever it was I would say next.

“What if I were to tell you that I’ve given this a great deal of thought and I would *not* have regrets.”

“How can you know that? The experience of kissing is nothing at all like rutting.”

“I’ll remind you again that I’m an adult. I’m well aware of what ‘rutting’ entails. My fellow human women who have Heveian mates have not reported trauma from sexual intercourse with their males.” I looked up at him primly. “I expect the act to be surprising, perhaps slightly awkward, but overwhelmingly pleasurable.”

His lips twitched. “Is that what you’re expecting?” He nodded soberly. “I suppose your expectations are not excessive.”

I poked him in the chest. “You’re making fun of me. I’m being serious.”

The twitch of his lips turned into a full smile. “I know you are. And I would never make fun of you,” he said. “But I’m

imagining you doing research on the sexual act and it amuses me. What did you think when you did your research?” His eyes twinkled. “Were you impressed with what you saw of Heveian anatomy?”

I sniffed, trying very hard to keep this conversation serious and on track. “Well, of course I did a comparison to human male physiology, and clearly your species is, shall we say, *larger*.”

His hands shifted from my waist to my back. Confident fingers slid up my spine. “Didn’t that worry you? Surely you’re aware that a human male cock would be smaller and fit your species’ cunt better?”

My skin vibrated with sensation to hear him speak such matters. “It doesn’t worry me at all.”

He pulled me closer, pressing the length of his body against mine. The hard bulge of his cock pressed against my belly. “Do you feel this?” he asked in a low growl. “This would be inside of you. Thrusting, rutting you. And these...” He bared his fangs, long and thin. “These would pierce your skin and draw your blood into my veins. *That* doesn’t give you pause?”

I lifted my chin. “By all accounts, your bite is part of the overwhelmingly pleasurable part that I’ve included in my expectations. I would welcome it.”

His eyes flared. “Is that so?” He tilted his hips forward, pressing that hard bulge more firmly against me. Wetness and heat pooled between my legs.

“It is so,” I replied. “I *am* ready, Axlos.”

His eyes widened, as if surprised to hear me say it out loud. “Right here? *Now*?”

“Anywhere.” My mouth was dry as dust with eagerness. “And *now* works.”

To show him I meant business, I slid my hand down his chest, over his taut belly, to cup the hard handful between his legs.

CHAPTER 16

Arria

It really was a handful. His cock was curved and angled as it was stuck inside his snug pants. He felt long and thick and scorching beneath my inexperienced touch.

He drew in a sharp breath. “You are playing with fire, little female.”

“I’m not playing.” I looked up at him, feeling all the heat and need and hunger that reflected back at me.

We stayed like that for a moment, frozen. Waiting.

Then, like the shattering of ice, he seized me by the hips, lifted me up against his body and held me aloft. I hooked my legs around his thighs and held on as his mouth crushed against mine. I groaned in need and desire.

I locked my arms around his neck, fists in his hair, and kissed him back for all I had. He tasted of heat and power and strength, and I devoured it all, no longer afraid of these things.

No longer afraid of *him*. I had power over this male. And I had power over myself. No longer with anyone controlling me. Axlos had unlocked something in my heart. I wasn’t ready to really explore that, but I wanted what he could give me. I wanted to know the feeling of rapture. I wanted to know what his body felt like against mine, inside mine.

“We are not doing this here,” he gritted out.

Here was fine. Anywhere, really. There was a perfectly good chair that we could—

But Axlos was carrying me out of the lab, through the corridor, past gaping crew members who stopped and stared as their captain strode past them holding a female wrapped around him, a female kissing him for all she was worth. I didn't care. We squeezed into an air tube pod. Axlos growled out the deck number of his—*our*—room and we went weightless as the pod zipped us through the ship.

He was hard angles and solid muscle as he groaned into my mouth. “This. *Stars*, how I've wanted *this*.”

Somehow we ended up in our room. The door shut behind us and we were alone. With a bed.

Axlos held me up with one arm. With the other, he reached up and ripped open the front of my shirt. It wasn't held by buttons, thankfully, but by snaps. But he ripped my bra along with it. My breasts came bursting out, as if eager to meet him. His gaze feasted on my taut, hard nipples, straining upwards. He lowered his head and circled one with his tongue, then suckled hard and deep, sending throbs of pleasure to my core. He switched to the other, nipping the tight, sensitive bud. I shifted my hips, rubbing my sex against his constrained cock.

He lowered me to the bed, pulling away the remains of my shirt, then peeling his own off. Both sailed across the room. I ran my hands over his chest eagerly, getting my first full look at him shirtless and feeling the firm planes of him.

His hands slid down my belly. Fingers hooked in the waist of my pants. His gaze locked with mine. “Are you sure you want this?”

I covered his hands with mine and flipped open the fastening. “Yes.”

It was all he needed to hear. My shoes and pants were off and followed the path of our shirts. My underwear followed, leaving me naked on the bed.

His hand moved to the communicator implanted behind my ear. “I think we can turn these off for now.” I didn't need it for translation when I spoke with him anymore. I knew the

common galactic tongue and Heveian. The device remained quiet when he spoke in either language.

He tapped behind my ear, where the device was implanted beneath my skin. It made a tone, indicating it was being silenced. Then, he did the same to his own. “Right now, I’m all yours, Arria. No one will interrupt us.”

I pointed to his pants. “There’s something else you can remove.”

He shook his head. “Not yet. I have some work to do on you, first.”

I swallowed. “Work?”

His lips pulled into a sexy grin. “Oh, yes, mate. By the time I’m finished here, you won’t just be ready for me to rut with you. You’ll be begging for it.”

“Confident, aren’t you?” I said, but *yes*, his words were like fire in my veins.

“That I can please my mate? Yes.” His hands slid up my thighs, parted them. “I’ve waited my whole life for this. For *you*.”

His hand cupped my sex. Unlike the other women, I hadn’t had my pubic hair removed or altered. It just wasn’t done in the HFV, but he wasn’t put off by my natural hair. His fingers slid into my folds and massaged, deeply, sensuously. I arched into his touch as a moan came from my mouth.

I’d done this to myself before, of course, but this was different. He slipped a thick finger inside of me. “You’re wet for me.” He slipped a second finger inside, making my body shudder. “I’m going to make you wetter.”

I didn’t see how that was possible. I was already a squirming ball of need, but then he was lowering his head. He removed his fingers from my slippery channel and his *face* was heading toward my pussy. Instinctively, I moved to close my legs, but he held them open with a firm grip. “Relax,” he said, brushing kisses up my thigh. “This will be pleasurable. I promise.”

Then, his tongue was on my sex and his lips and teeth were doing things down there that made me cry out and buck. I gasped as a powerful surge coiled from where his mouth was. It dwarfed the efforts I'd done with myself and made me feel like I was about to shatter—and then I did.

My hips came right off the bed. I pumped my sex against his face, uninhibited, abandoned and wanton as waves of pleasure throbbed through me. My hands fisted in his hair. He was right. It was pleasurable and it *had* made me wetter.

The orgasm eased to a delicious shiver that made my body feel mushy and warm.

But I knew there was more. More of this. Of everything.

His mouth moved over my body. Up my torso, lingering on the dip of my belly button and up over the bottom swell of a breast. His touch left shivers of need in its wake. His hands moved over my body as if it were his. It *was* his. I couldn't imagine anyone but Axlos touching me this way. It felt right. It felt like this was meant to be.

His lips and tongue found a sensitive spot on my neck, just below my ear. I gasped out and shifted beneath him. His hips slipped between my thighs. The length of his cock wedged in my wet folds. He was so hot, and so big. He slid his thick, veiny shaft over my sensitive flesh, reigniting my desire, making my core tighten with anticipation.

“We will take this slow.” His big body shuddered. “I don't want to hurt you.”

“You won't,” I breathed.

“I likely will,” he said gently, running his thumb over my cheek. “You have never rutted before. The first time can be painful for a female.”

“But then it will be pleasurable,” I said. “You *know* I've researched this.”

He chuckled. “Yes, I know.”

I ran my hands down his muscled back. “I *am* ready, Axlos. I'm not as breakable as I seem.”

“I know you’re not.” His own fingers found my back and ran over the scars there. Punishment marks, made by metal rods held in the fire until red, and placed there by Brother David. Jorok had treated the scar tissue, making it less thick, but it remained. “I don’t want to—”

I cut him off by placing my fingers over his lips. “You *won’t*, Axlos. I want you. Now. Please.”

He shifted, sliding his cock down so the tip pressed to my wet opening. It felt huge and blunt and impossible, but I opened my legs wider and gazed into his blue eyes, nearly electric with hunger. His hips tilted, pushing his cock inside me. He was being as gentle as he could—I could see it by the intensity of his features and the shaking of his arms as he held himself above me.

I felt the stretch, the pressure, as he eased the rest of the way in, filling me. There was a slight pain, more like a pinch, and then all I felt was an incredible fullness and a spark of what was to come. My body closed around him like a glove as he began to move, thrusting gently, but barely restrained. He watched me intently. I smiled up at him through trembling breaths as pleasure built in waves with each thrust of his powerful body.

“More,” I moaned. I didn’t want him to be quite so gentle. I wanted him to let go. To feel everything, like I was.

He bared his teeth, fangs incredibly long, and let some of that tightly leashed control slip. I saw it in the flash of his eyes and the flare of his nostrils. His thrusts became harder, faster, and my body responded, lighting up as if hit with an electrical current. I arched my back, neck stretched as I fell into rhythm with him.

His gaze latched on my throat. His lips followed. Hot kisses trailed over my skin. He dragged his fangs over my neck, then with a slight prick, he bit. Fangs sank in. The reality of it hit—*this was happening!* And then was followed by a rush of pleasure so intense, I cried out. Heveian saliva was an aphrodisiac, I’d heard from many sources, including the other

women who had Heveian mates, but I hadn't been expecting *this*.

My hips pumped, meeting his thrusts with power and needs of my own. I was hurtling toward a cliff, unbidden and wild. His mouth was locked on my neck and he groaned, shuddering. Our bodies moved in unison, savage, a little unhinged.

And then, I shattered like glass. My body pulsed with an orgasm that surpassed everything. I gasped, heart racing and blood like fire exploding in my veins. Where did my body end and his begin? I had no idea. It didn't matter anymore. I hung on to him as his thrusts turned unrelenting, intense, until he pulled his mouth from my neck, threw his head back and came with a broken bellow of ecstasy.

We lay there gasping. I stared at the ceiling as he lay by my side and gathered me close. There were no words. Nothing coherent, anyway. I could only just try and get my breath and let the feelings do their thing. My body felt like it was made of melted butter. My mind wasn't much more together. The only thing I could put together was that I'd just made love to a male who seemed pretty sure that we were meant to be together forever.

"I'm never getting out of this bed," I groaned.

"I wish we didn't have to," he said.

"Me too." And with that, the rest of the ship and the at-war galaxy came into focus again.

He stretched and pressed kisses to my face, jaw, neck. He laved his tongue over the tiny punctures where he'd bitten me. They didn't hurt. Pleasant tingling came from that spot.

"Just a few minutes more shouldn't hurt," he said, and just as the words had left his mouth, the door to our room slid open abruptly.

Harp strode in purposefully. She didn't knock.

Axlos tapped behind his ear, turning his translator back on. “How did you get in here?” he asked.

“Emergency override,” she replied. “When your communication device is powered off the other officers biometrics can assume captain clearance level.” She looked at us with a smug look. “I *knew* it. I said to Drave, the only reason why the captain would have his communicator off was if he and Arria finally made some magic. And here—” She spread her hands. “Magic has been made.”

I yanked the sheet up to my neck. “Harp, why *are* you here?”

“Sorry. I came because we needed Axlos and I would be the least embarrassing one to see you like this.”

Axlos got out of bed immediately. “What is the problem?”

Harp spun around, sending her gaze to the door. “Whoa there, buddy. Put some clothes on, please.”

Axlos made a sound of annoyance and began hastily dressing. “You humans with your strange aversion to nudity.”

“Yeah, we’re weird like that,” said Harp. “Are you decent yet?”

“Decent enough,” Axlos growled. His pants were on. He was pulling on his shirt.

Harp turned around. “Good. We’ve been trying to get ahold of you for ten minutes,” she said. “We intercepted a very strange transmission. You to hear it.”

Axlos growled. “A transmission couldn’t wait?”

“Not this one.” Harp’s face went serious. “It seems to be coming from one of the Mitran ships in the sector with us. We intercepted it.”

Axlos looked at me sharply. “Get dressed and come with me,” he said to me. “I want you to hear this, too.”

He was still my captain. I got up and grabbed my clothes. My limbs were still rubbery. My skin still flushed with pleasure.

“You don’t turn away when Arria is naked,” said Axlos to Harp. “Why?”

Harp waved his comment away. “I’ve seen her naked. And she’s a woman. We have the same parts.”

He shook his head. “Humans,” he muttered.

“Yeah, well, you’re in love with one.” Harp cocked a hip and gave him a knowing once-over. “Might as well get used to it.”

He flashed a rare smile and shook his head. “I’m a lucky male,” he said. “And so is Drave.”

“I’m taking that as a compliment,” she said, then tossed my socks at me. “Come on, Arria. I’d say time is very much of the essence right now.”

A few minutes later, we were standing on the main deck with Drave, Wulfrex, and Dani. Hoc was there also, with two of his fingers plugged into the central console all of us were huddled around.

“Play it, Hoc,” said Drave. The transmission played.

Finish the sequence/tansk-slostk-risto ha dilts...pfft/When the—pfft—is in range/saaats tekkis-lak-hew-wiwishgu/wait for the sign—pfft.

“There is more to it,” said Hoc, shifting his fingers in the interface. “Just a moment.”

There was a pause filled with static and strange transmission noises, which sounded exactly like the intercepted UC communications. *Esksk-gistt-gistt-ca operatives in-place/ajath-la-sclxi—will not see it coming.*

The transmission ended and silence fell on the deck.

“Where did this transmission come from?” Axlos asked.

“A Mitran ship that’s in our sector—the *Shagris* battlecruiser,” Drave replied. “This was picked up on a secure channel.”

“Who is it intended for?”

“We don’t know,” said Drave. “But I plan to kill them.”

Hoc tilted his head. “It must be from a nearby entity, as this came through a short-range channel,” he said. “Simply put, the sender is either on our ship or the *Shagris* battlecruiser.”

“What about the other Mitran ship?” Axlos asked. “The... *Drakat*, I think it’s called?”

“Yes, sir,” Hoc replied. “The *Drakat* is out of range for a signal of this type. Our three ships are arranged in a sort of line, you see. The *Shagris* is in the center with us on one side and the *Drakat* on the other. Short-range channels could not reach our ship from the *Drakat*.”

“Where do you think they’re coming from, Hoc?” Axlos asked the cybot.

“The *Shagris*,” he said immediately. “Based on the degradation of the transmission and incomplete data.”

“Fuck.” Dani’s gaze went sharp. “Are the Mitrans betraying us?”

“That would end this war real quick,” said Wulfrex. “But I fail to see why they would do so right *now*.”

“We cannot assume anything,” said Axlos. His fingers were tense as they tented on the glass-top console. “All these ships have interspecies crews. No one is to know about this transmission. Understood?”

Nods of agreement went around.

But my thoughts were on that transmission. “It was on a secure channel, you said?”

“That’s right,” said Hoc. “And it did not escape any of us that part of it sounded like the garbled mess we hear from the enemy’s communications all the time.”

“It sounds like something is going to happen soon.” Harp shook her head. “But what?”

“They’re waiting for a signal of some sort,” said Axlos, pinning Wulfrex with his gaze. “Let’s make sure this signal

doesn't come from *this* ship. Everything is locked down?"

"That's right, Captain," he replied. "Only you, Arria, and I have access to the main computer."

"Good." Axlos nodded, rubbing an agitated hand over his forehead. "I want this ship on high alert until we can make sense of this. Dani, make sure the weapons are hot."

"On it, sir."

"I'm going back to my lab," I said. "I want to work with this transmission."

Axlos nodded, then stopped himself. "Let me take you—"

I held up a hand. "You are needed here. I can get to my lab on my own." I didn't give him a chance to argue. I just turned and left before he could order someone else to babysit me on the walk back to my lab.

I was holding back from running—*that* was how eager I was to see what I could do with this transmission. I was pretty sure that only parts of it were encrypted. The sections we could understand were an accident, possibly caused by the frequency of the short-range channel. *The UC had made a mistake* and I was going to run with it.

There were no alarms, but the red flashing light made it clear that the ship was on alert. Crew members hurried to their posts. Voices were clipped and steps were brisk. I was just another one of them, hurrying through the corridors, riding an air tube and getting off at my deck.

In my lab, I threw myself into my chair and pulled up the transmission that was saved in the ship's database. "Okay, let's see what you've got." The partial message played with the UC encrypted chatter running in the background.

I lost track of time as I sat there, poring through the models and data and formulas I had been working with. Bit by bit, sound by sound, pieces of the puzzle were coming together. I was vaguely aware that my designated ideal sleep time had come and gone.

I didn't know the time when it happened.

All of a sudden, the transmissions that had been garbled and incomprehensible were words.

I sat back, expelling a huge, shaky breath as the UC communications came into perfect clarity. There were several voices. Some louder than others. I heard coordinates and shipment ETAs. Personnel arguing over medical supplies and fuel cell replenishments.

Then there were two voices louder than the rest. I froze and listened.

Where is the female now? asked a male voice.

At her terminal. This voice sounded slightly female, but as cold and sterile as the male. *I am always monitoring her.*

I wondered who they were talking about.

Are the operatives in place?

They are. The female spoke in clipped tones. *We just need her and the ship is ours.*

Which ship were they talking about? I wondered. The *Shagris* was a big battlecruiser, filled with some of the most battle-hardened warriors in the sector. Was someone planning on attacking a ship full of Mitrans?

We will find a way to override the locks and acquire the target. She won't be difficult to restrain.

I hope not, said the male. *The entire plan lies in making this female comply.*

She will. To save lives, she will do anything I say.

Very well. The male sounded as if he wanted the conversation finished. *Everyone else is in place. The Mark-Line-XIX is waiting for our signal.*

Enjoy this moment, my brother, said the female voice. *Our moment is at hand. The Heveian empire will fall. The war is about to be won.*

Oh, no. *Oh god.* Whatever was happening, was happening now. I reached up to touch my communicator but stopped before I used it to contact the main deck.

What if these people were listening in on our transmissions? What if this *female* that the UC operative mentioned was on this ship? I would be putting her at risk by going through the normal channels to alert Axlos.

I got up from my chair, knees shaky, and opened the door.

The UC transmissions were still going in the background, but the loud voices were done speaking. I would just let it run. When I came back, I could show Axlos or whoever could spare the time.

I spun out of my tiny room and again smacked right into a tall, slender female—a Palos female wearing an engineering tech's uniform.

I staggered, stunned to have run into someone outside my lab again. “Oh, I’m sorry, I—ouch!” Something pinched hard behind my ear. Whoever she was, she had slapped me with something there. “What are you doing?”

A surprisingly firm hand curled around my upper arm. “Well, well, thank you for making it so easy for me.”

Ice slid up my spine.

This voice.

It was the one I just heard on the transmission. The same female I had run into earlier today. And, I realized with a dawning horror, the same one who had attacked me in the gravity stabilizer.

The conversation I’d listened in on had been about abducting a female. Not just any female.

They were talking about *me*.

CHAPTER 17

Axlos

I was on edge the moment Arria left the main deck. I struggled to adjust from the rapture of our rutting to the emergency at hand. A riot of feelings—all of them big and unwieldy—made a mess of my thoughts. Overwhelming them all was a powerful desire to protect Arria. She had not been protected in the past. I would not allow that to happen again.

Still, I watched her stride from the room with her head high, her back straight, and her short hair bouncing with waves. She looked more powerful and in command than I had ever seen her and I couldn't bring myself to stop her and demand that she take an escort.

Plus, she *was* right—I was needed here. So, there was probably no reason for me to have this strange, unsettled feeling in the bottom of my gut. She was on *my* ship. Her attacker was dead.

She was safe.

Security was on high alert. The crew was accounted for and at their stations. Harp and Drave were monitoring every message that came and went from the cruiser and all internal communications, too.

“Nothing unusual, Captain,” said Harp. “What we do see is UC chatter has increased tenfold.” She turned around and looked at me. “That can't be a coincidence.”

“No, it can't,” I agreed grimly. “Can you get a lock on the locations of these transmissions? Is there a concentration of

them?”

“No, sir,” Harp replied. “It appears they’re routing their messages all over the place. The concentration is *everywhere*.”

I let out a hiss of frustration. “Keep looking.”

“Captain, I have something,” said Hoc. His slender metal body was still at the main console with his fingers inserted in the interface.

“What is it?”

He looked up. The flat, black strip of his visual sensor reflected the lights of the console below. “She did it. I connected to the terminal in Arria’s lab. The UC transmissions are decoded. We can *understand* them.”

“What?” Drave and Harp asked simultaneously as they spun around to face him.

“I’m patching it over to you,” Hoc said, twisting his fingers and turning his screen blue.

“Why didn’t she say something?” I wondered aloud.

Wulfrex turned and lowered his brows. “She would have,” he said. “That’s the first thing she would’ve done.”

Dani’s eyes went wide in alarm. “I’ll go check it out,” she said, moving towards the door.

“No. Stay here,” I said. “If we get an attack, I will need you to defend this cruiser. I will go. I’ll be back shortly, or at least send a report.”

I strode—no, I *ran*—through the corridors, cursing at the air tube for taking so long to rise through the decks, then dashed to her tiny lab. *Why didn’t I move her workspace into my room?* I could’ve put her on the main deck, for that matter. It would have taken some reconfiguration, but it could have worked.

The door to her lab was open. She was not inside.

Sound poured from her terminal. Words. Discussions. Enemy transmissions were clear and comprehensible, thanks

to Arria's work. The chair was pulled back as if she had left hastily.

"Arria!" I bellowed into the hall. No one was there. Everyone was at their station or in their quarters, following protocol for when the ship was on high alert.

I tapped my communicator, connecting to Drave on the main deck. "She's gone," I said to Drave. "Lock down the—"

"That'll be enough from you."

I turned around to see two crew members there with the ship's standard-issue blaster weapons pointed at me. One was a Palos female—tall, thin, and pale green with all white eyes. They had mouths that stretched across their entire faces. They made excellent engineering techs and indeed, this one wore the uniform of one. The other was a male of the Vusper species and appeared typical of their kind, if a bit older and more grizzled than the ones usually on the ship. I didn't recognize him. He was short with gray skin, like mine, and a profusion of tiny feelers waving beneath bulging black eyes. A knotted scar crossed over his features. I'd never seen this male before.

I barely recognized the female. We had many new crew members, but I knew these two hadn't been with us since we'd left Heveia.

"What is the meaning of this?" I snarled at them. "Where is Arria?"

"She is alive and intact for now," the Palos female said. "I assume you want to keep it that way?"

Rage boiled like molten fury in my chest. "What do you want?"

"Your planet's *vistran* crystals, of course." The cheeky monster had the nerve to grin. "The UC will supply my planet with three *terulins* of it for my people's assistance with this. That is enough to meet my people's energy needs for the next two millennia."

"All for the low price of the annihilation of my species and the destruction of my planet."

The Palos shrugged. “We all do what is best for our people. The UCP—I mean, the *UC*—offered us a deal we couldn’t refuse.”

I looked at the Vusper, who was pointing his weapon at me. “Same for you?” I asked sneeringly. “Were you offered riches and an endless supply of energy for your people as well?”

“No,” replied the Vusper. “I simply wanted out of the UC’s penal colony and signing up to help their cause made that happen. It’s not personal, Heveian.”

I bared my teeth. My fangs were still slightly elongated. “It is personal to me.”

“Don’t make us injure you, *Captain*.” The Palos female jerked the blaster. “Let’s go.”

They made me start walking. “Where are we going?”

“To the main deck, where you and your fellow officers will stay quiet and give us no trouble, or we will begin killing you off one by one.”

“What do you want with Arria?” I asked in an effort to downplay her role in this. “She’s not an officer. She’s not even Heveian—just a human female we picked up during a raid.” It felt like forever ago when we had boarded that Gutturian ship and found three terrified and sick human females. She’d been little more than a bag of bones and rags. I had loved her even then.

“Your *mate* is more than a simple human female and you know it. No one was supposed to figure out our encryption. The fact that she did makes her dangerous. The fact that she has access to this cruiser’s main computer makes her valuable,” the Palos explained. “One of you will give us access or will watch the other die.”

“Even with blasters, do you really think you can overpower five of us?”

“There are more of us,” she said. “And we are all armed, and your people are not.”

If they thought that, they had misjudged Dani, who was never without a weapon. But even *she* could not defend against a group of armed guards, before she herself was killed.

We were not so cutthroat that we would sacrifice each other. “How many traitors do I have on my ship?” I asked.

The Palos smirked. “Enough.”

“What took you so long?” We were nearly at the main deck. I was trying to get as much information out of them before we got there, and the female seemed happy to talk. “You could’ve done this months ago.”

“It took us time to swap out your people and get *our* operatives in place. It’s not easy sneaking aboard these cruisers, killing a crew member, and replacing them with one of our own. Plus, we had to transplant the communication device so it appeared to be the same person.” She shrugged. “It all takes time. All we had to do was keep your forces in check.”

They killed my crew members. I seethed, trying to keep it together and not do something rash and get myself killed. The Vusper male was far too vigilant to make a mistake. He’d take me down the instant I tried something, and that would not make it easier for me to find Arria.

“The UC didn’t have enough power and resources to beat us outright, so they attacked from the inside, like poison in the blood.”

“The UC is not looking for glory, it’s looking for power, and those of us who are with them have our own reasons.”

“There are other operators on the Mitran ships?”

“Yes. Your mate made us speed up our plan, but the result will be the same.”

The Vusper—the former prisoner—was quiet. He seemed uninterested in talking and not pleased with all the conversation the Palos was making. She was almost reveling in her answers, touting the superiority of the plan and the likelihood of our imminent defeat. It was clear that she wasn’t the experienced fighter here. But the older Vusper, who had

done time in at least one penal colony, likely knew that the wisest route was to say little, if nothing.

The doors loomed before us. The main deck was steps away.

“If I were you, I would keep your officers calm and not try to start a fight you can’t win.”

The doors opened. I was jammed in the middle, flanked by the two UC guards. We stepped inside to eerie silence.

“Where are they?” the Palos demanded.

The main deck was deserted. Terminals blinked, aglow with their screens’ data. But no one was in here.

The Vusper convict shoved his way in. “Our people are supposed to be here. What happened to them?” He spun on the Palos. “Have we been deserted?”

The female looked confused. “Of course not.” But her wide mouth stretched thin and she turned to face me. Her gaze was belligerent and her weapon steady as it pointed at my chest. “Where are your officers? Tell me or I’ll kill you right here.”

“You can’t kill him yet,” the Vusper warned. “We need him alive in case anything happened to the female.”

“*Nothing* has happened to the female. My sister has her.”

The Vusper did not like this. His gaze cut around the room with unease evident in every shift of his body.

I truly didn’t know what happened here or where my officers were. Even Hoc was missing. If there was any good news here at all, it was that this plan was not going the way these two had thought it would. I waited and I watched. Killing them would not get me any closer to finding my mate or the others. Still... “If anything has happened to Arria or my officers, I will take you apart piece by piece,” I growled.

The first shred of fear entered the Palos female’s face. She glanced at me with hatred. “I liked you better when I thought you were a fool. Like when we killed that Borkat and set it up

to look like he was your mate's attacker. That was my sister, by the way. The one who has your precious little female."

She was trying to provoke me and I wouldn't let her. I held her gaze, locking on. "I don't know where anyone is, but I hope for your sake, your people didn't hurt them."

The Vusper muttered curses under his breath and went to the communication terminal. "How do I change this thing from Heveian to the common galactic tongue?" he snapped at me.

I shook my head slowly. "I'm not helping you."

The blaster hit took me by surprise. The female Palos shot me in the leg and pain seared up my thigh. A smoking burn smoldered through my pants. I staggered, shifting weight to my good leg and clamping a hand over the oozing wound.

"You'll do what we tell you to do."

"You may as well just kill me now," I said. "Because I will do *nothing* to assist you. Nothing at all."

"What are you *doing*?" the Vusper snapped at the Palos female. He was clearly running out of patience with her. He slammed a fist on Drave's terminal. "Contact your sister. Bring the female here. We will get nothing out of him, otherwise."

The Palos raised her hand and touched the skin behind her ear. "Sinka," she said. "I need you to bring the human female to the main deck. Now."

I couldn't hear the response she received from her sister, but I could see the baring of straight gray teeth and the flare of anger and fear in her white eyes. "I told you," she ground out. "You were to keep her safe. That was *all*." There was a pause as the sister said something, then the Palos replied. "I'm disappointed to hear that. I will handle this my own way with the captain."

"What is it?" My stomach twisted into a tight, nauseous knot. "What happened to her?"

The female shook her head and pointed her weapon straight at my chest again. "Shut it or you'll never find out."

I stood there, staring, breathing so hard, spots appeared at my peripheral vision. If anything happened to her... I stifled a groan at the thought.

The female blinked at me with cold, flat eyes. "You're the one we have, so you're the one we'll break." She cocked her head, slitted nostrils flaring. "I wonder what we will have to do to you to get your compliance."

I couldn't bring myself to ask again but the question screamed in my head. *What happened to her?* What had they done to my mate? Beautiful, sweet, fierce Arria, who had been through so much in her life. She didn't deserve any of this. I couldn't even begin to imagine that I'd lost her.

"Do as you wish," I said quietly. "I will *not* comply." My leg throbbed like a fire had been set under the skin. I dropped to one knee as blood seeped from the wound, soaking my ragged pant leg around it. "There's a phrase that the humans like to say in times like this," I said.

"Oh? What's that?"

I grinned up at her. "Fuck you."

CHAPTER 18

Axlos

They tied me to a chair, and from there, the blows began. The Vusper dealt them. His fists were meaty and he barely exerted himself with his punches. My whole body was a big throb of pain, but the Vusper and the Palos did *not* have control of the cruiser.

I wondered what they were waiting for. Why didn't they just finish me off?

"There's no point in this," said the Vusper, sounding bored. "Your sister lost the female. The big ship will be here soon, and it won't matter if this Heveian gives us control of the ship. We *have* control." He spread his arms. "We have the main deck."

"We also have a *plan*," the female replied testily. "But I agree that he isn't going to give us access to the ship." I could hear the scorn in her voice. "Look at him. Nothing but a shell. *Far* past his prime. I can't imagine why they named him captain of this cruiser."

"He's a *good* captain," said the Vusper with a tinge of respect in his voice. "A weaker one would've broken by now."

I felt a boot nudge my foot. "Is he going to die?" asked the female Palos.

"No," he replied. "We'll leave his fate to the leaders. They will be arriving soon."

The leaders? The leaders of the UC were coming *here*? That was a big deal. They had to be very confident they were about to win the war for the leadership to expose themselves like this.

“You can keep working on him,” said the Palos. “If you want to.”

“Or not,” said a human female voice I knew very well, accompanied by the sound of a blaster powering up. “Which one should I shoot first?”

My two assailants turned and fired at the direction of Dani, who was prepared, unlike my captors. She fired at both. The Palos hit the floor hard. Her weapon skittered across the floor, to be picked up by Wulfrex, who was right beside Dani, holding his favorite weapon, an enormously overpowered rifle that, if fired, would blow a hole right through the hull. He didn't fire it, thankfully.

The Vusper male, of course, didn't drop his weapon like the female had. He was more experienced in matters of violence and managed to raise his weapon while lying on the ground, getting off a few shots. He missed Dani by a long shot, but she didn't, ending his brief reign of freedom from the penal colony with a well-aimed blaster shot. He slumped to the floor without moving.

The Palos huddled under one of the terminals, clutching her shoulder.

“Come on out,” Dani said cheerily. She ducked down and smiled. “Don't make me come get you.”

Harp and Drave ran up to me with Hoc following behind. “Sorry we're late,” said Harp. Her nimble fingers made quick work of the wires that had been secured around me. “We were taken by surprise by six UC operatives pretending to be our crew members.”

“Glad to see you,” I said, *really* meaning it. “How did you get away?”

“We kicked their asses,” Harp replied. “Seriously. We dragged them to the brig and only there were we able to get

the full story out of them. Let's just say it took some convincing." She winced. "Remind me to never, *ever* get on Dani's bad side."

I tried to chuckle, but my mouth was sore. "They took Arria. It sounded like they lost her, but I don't know where she is. She might be hurt or...worse."

Drave ripped off the rest of the wires and helped me to my feet. "She's got too much fight to go down easily."

Dani hauled the Palos female out from under the terminal and threw her in the chair I'd been secured in. She took a knife out from the sheath secured to the back of her pants. The Palos' white eyes widened.

"I don't think I need to tie you down, do I?" Dani asked silkily. "You're going to tell me where Arria is, or..." She tapped the flat side of the knife on her palm and sighed. "I can't say I miss this part of my old job."

Wulfrex grinned and leaned close to my ear. "Magnificent, isn't she?"

I didn't know what to say, but I was happy to see a glint back in my friend's eyes. It was the first time I'd seen even a speck of his old self in a very long time. "Will she really...?"

"Cut her up?" Wulfrex shook his head. "No. But she'll play the mind game. It's amazing to watch."

"I'm sure," I murmured, but my focus now was on finding Arria and getting help. "Drave, send a communication to the two Mitran ships. They need to know they've got UC guards hiding in plain sight on their ships."

"On it," Drave said, hands flying over the large screen in front of him.

"There's more of them here," said Harp, looking over his shoulder. "There has to be."

"Yes," I said darkly. "Whoever had Arria. I've got to find them."

"You're not finding anything with a leg in that condition," said Hoc. "I fear you're in danger of excessive blood loss,

Captain.”

I glanced down distractedly at my leg. I’d almost forgotten that I’d been shot there. My entire pant leg was soaked in my own blood. “It’s fine.”

“It’s not,” Wulfrex said sharply. “I won’t watch you die over this UC garbage. We will find Arria and get out of this mess without losing anyone.”

I smiled weakly up at Wulfrex. The voice of reason. “Alert all decks to her disappearance,” I said. “I want guards scouring the ship for a Palos female and Arria.”

“How do you know that a Palos female has her?” Harp asked.

I glared at the injured Palos, who was cowering beneath Dani’s cold stare. “Because she said her sister had Arria at one point. And Palos often come in twos, don’t they?”

“You’re all dead,” she shrieked. “All of you. Even if we weren’t able to take over the Mitran ships, three cruisers aren’t enough to combat the strength of the UC’s Mark-Line that’s on its way.”

“A Mark-Line ship is coming *here*?” said Drave sharply.

“It’s our moment of victory,” the female hooted, sounding unhinged. “We’re ending this war now. *Decisively*. I’m proud to die for it.”

“That’s nice,” said Dani, pointing the tip of her knife just below the Palos’ chin. “Now, where is the human female that your sister is pursuing? I’m only going to ask once.”

The Palos female grinned up at her. “Oh, my sister is no longer pursuing. She found your little female. And you don’t have to search for them. They’re coming here, and then you *will* give her control of the ship or your human will die.”

“You sound like a broken record,” Dani muttered, and smacked the butt of her knife against the Palos’ head. The female slumped over in her seat.

“What is a *record*?” Harp asked Dani, face screwed up in confusion.

Dani sheathed her knife and pulled in a deep, fortifying breath. “I’m going to pretend I didn’t hear that.”

Wulfrex checked his enormous weapon. “If the one who hurt our Arria is on the way, let’s make sure she gets a warm welcome.”

CHAPTER 19

Arria

I stared into the eyes of the one who had caused so much trouble and pain on the ship. The likely saboteur, the one who had given me a concussion and probably killed an innocent Borkat crew member. She held my arm in a tight grip.

She assumed I would go with her quietly. After all, I was just a little human—meek and quiet.

I remembered having my arm held like this before. Brother David had a tight grip, too. He used it when dragging me to the room of reflection, where punishments were dealt to any who defied him or thought for themselves. It was the same place where we had daily meditations on the glory of being human.

I'd never fought off an attacker before. Not once. I took my punishments with stoic resignation.

I was done. I was done passively accepting my lot.

“What do you plan to do with me?” I asked.

“You'll give us access to the central computer or I will kill your Heveian.”

I looked up at her. “Those are my options?”

“If you want to call them options, yes. Seems to me that you have one, because we know you won't stand there and watch your mate suffer and die.”

Anger, stubbornness, and something else that was relatively new rolled through me. *Confidence*. “You’re right. I will not stand by and watch him suffer and die.”

Her grip loosened slightly. “I knew you’d see reason. Come along now.” She turned her body partly away from me as she guided me down the hall.

But before we had arrived at Heveia, I had taken some self-defense classes with Ryland in his training room. I hadn’t gotten too far in them, but I had picked up a few things.

Knowing this could end badly, I took a chance. As fast as I could, I raised my leg and slammed my foot into the Palos female’s knee.

It landed solidly, right on the joint. She released me with a cry of pain and stumbled.

She clasped her injured joint and looked up at me with pure hatred. “You’ll die for that, vermin.”

But I wasn’t going to stand around and wait for her to collect herself. I bolted down the corridor. Thank goodness I was no longer wearing cumbersome skirts and dresses. Pants allowed me to be fast. I made a sharp left down another corridor. Remembering the layout of the cruiser, I ducked inside a maintenance duct, carefully removing the entry panel and replacing it behind me.

It was dark behind the wall, but I knew these tunnels well. Not quite as well as Wulfrex maybe, but well enough, from my days of scoping out all the available hiding spaces, to know that it would take time to find me.

Hopefully enough for me to get help.

I felt my way through the dark space, ducking under beams and squeezing through narrow spaces. Small creatures scratched and skittered in the darkness. They were hitchhikers from different parts of the galaxy, like rats on a ship.

My heart still pounded. My breath was still coming hard and fast, but I moved deeper into the mechanisms where it would get hot, then cold. Then hot again.

What I needed was a moment to think. To collect myself and plan my next steps. There was nowhere to run on this cruiser and there were probably more enemies than that one Palos. She was way too sure of herself to be working alone.

I finally found a space that opened up a little and where it wasn't quite as dark. Pale green light illuminated a central hub. There were interfaces here, where calibrations and repairs were made. There was space to sit down and think.

The floor was warm. My legs were shaky. I sat against a wall that vibrated and hummed, and pulled my knees up to my chest. I wrapped my arms around my legs and picked at the thing the Palos had put over my implant. It felt like a small *plastoid* plate that had adhered to my skin. It proved impossible to remove with my hands. I dug at the edges of it, but if I kept this up, part of my scalp would go with it.

I gave up and dropped my head on my knees. There would be no contacting the others through my communicator. I hated not knowing what was going on with Axlos and the others.

I forced my thoughts together. I was analytical. I had, by all accounts, a mind that could figure a lot of things out. So, now I had to figure *this* out. Despite the doubts and worries that crept in, reminding me of a time when I had no power, no friends, and didn't see another way of life, I thought through the facts I had.

A plan was being executed, both on the cruiser and likely on the nearest Mitran battle cruiser, the *Shagris*. I knew nothing of the other ship. And there had also been mention of the arrival of something big—the Mark-Line-XIX.

I was by no means a ship expert, but Mark-Lines were bigger than even battle cruisers. They were sometimes called “city ships” because they could house hundreds of thousands. If one of them was coming here, it had to be a big player in the UC's armada.

Okay, so that meant we needed backup. But backup that was untainted by enemy operatives on board. The only other ship I knew of was Ryland's ship, the *Defiant*. It was a cruiser similar to this one, and it was defending its own sector. But if I

could get a message to them, maybe they could help and tell others to do the same. Ryland would listen to me. Minister Bazer, back at the Heveian palace, would not.

I got up and began to pace in the tight space, like Axlos did. I thought about what I knew of this cruiser, and where I could find the closest communications hub. There weren't many in the underbelly of the ship. There wasn't supposed to be, but what there *was*, was a passageway to the hangars where the smaller transports were kept. They all had long-range communication capabilities.

If I could get to one of them, I could contact the *Defiant*. I had to hope the enemies out there searching for me weren't staking out the hangar. They had to assume I wouldn't abandon Axlos and the others. Or that—*correctly*—I had no idea how to fly one of those small ships. Even if I *did* know how to fly one, I'd be fired on instantly.

They'd likely think I was going to the main deck to find Axlos, or even to my room, or someplace absurd like that.

With a plan, even a loose one like this, I chose the passageway that would take me towards the hangars.

I wound my way through the dimly lit passages. At one point I had to leave them and dart down an interior corridor, and then duck into another maintenance shaft. Luckily, no one saw me. Red light still throbbed in the occupied areas of the ship, indicating that high alert had not been turned off. I couldn't take air tubes. Shafts with seemingly endless ladders were my only way of traveling through decks.

At last, I pulled off a wall panel to the main hangar. This was where I had landed weeks ago, nervous, wearing a stolen uniform and almost clinging to Hoc.

I peeked out and let out a sigh of relief to find the hangar empty. The huge open room made it difficult to hide and footfalls echoed. I eased from the narrow passage and hurried to the nearest transport vehicle. I slipped inside, not even daring to turn the lights on in here.

I felt my way to the front of the cabin and sat in the operator seat. I had to power it up partially and located the communication channels. I chose one of the few long-range, secure channels—or as secure as it could be. It wouldn't be too hard for the UC to pick it up and messages didn't always come through these channels clearly, but I had to take the chance.

“The *Renegade* is under attack,” I said into the interface. “This is Arria Davis of the *Renegade*, calling Captain Ryland of the *Defiant*. I repeat, our ship is under attack. Operatives have infiltrated the cruiser in addition to Mitran ship *Shagris*. A UC Mark-Line is en route. Request immediate assistance.”

I had no idea how distress calls were supposed to sound. My voice shook. My hand trembled as I inputted the *Defiant*'s call signal so Ryland would know the cruiser was contacting him. “I repeat, the Heveian cruiser *Renegade* requests immediate assistance.” I hit the transmit switch.

At seemingly the same instant, all the circuitry before me went dead. The vessel's dash went black.

“You've caused a lot of trouble for one day.” The Palos female had found me.

I turned slowly to see her standing behind my seat, pointing a blaster at my head. “That's quite enough.”

“Okay. Fine. You have me,” I said calmly. “What do you plan to do?”

“The plan is the same. I'm taking you to the main deck where you will unlock the ship and give control to me. My sister has your mate there.”

I had no idea if my transmission to the *Defiant* went through or not. Everything happened so fast, I couldn't tell whether I hit that switch before the power switched off, or after. If it was after, well, no help would be coming.

If it was before, the *Defiant* wouldn't be here soon enough to help me, anyway.

I held up my hands. “I'll come with you,” I said. “But I'm not giving you control of this ship. You can do whatever you want to us. Neither Axlos nor I would ever surrender to you.”

“You may be singing a different song when we start cutting off your mate’s body parts one at a time.”

I shuddered at the gruesome thought. I honestly didn’t know if I *could* withstand that. But I managed a shrug somehow. “Lead on,” I said. “I won’t fight you again.”

“I know you won’t,” she said coldly. “If you do, *you* will be the one limping.”

She took the less-used corridors that kept us away from the main thoroughfares. We turned a corner and surprised a maintenance worker who jumped and fumbled for his communicator.

“No, please don’t—” I said as she aimed at the poor being and fired.

My heart sank and I surged toward him to help, but the Palos grabbed a fistful of the back of my shirt and yanked me hard. “Leave him.”

“Not a good sign, if the ship is on alert for you,” I snarled, angry at the senseless taking of life. “He was no threat to you.”

“This is war,” she snapped. “And none of this will matter, soon. This cruiser will be destroyed with everyone on it.” But there was a frantic note to her voice. *Panic. Fear.*

Not everything was going as it was meant to. I had not been easy to contain. I couldn’t imagine how Axlos and the others had taken to these intruders.

We arrived at the main deck.

“Remember,” she said. “Do as we tell you and we may let you live.”

“I thought the cruiser and everyone on it was going to be destroyed,” I hissed.

“Some will be taken as prisoners. If you’re lucky, you and your mate will be among them. You can watch each other grow old, each on opposite sides of a *plastoid* cell wall.”

I didn’t have time for a retort. The doors opened and there they were—Axlos, Hoc, and the other officers. My friends.

My *family*.

And they were *not* prisoners. They were very much free, and *very* angry.

A female who looked identical to the Palos who held me did *not* look free, however. She was secured to a chair and unconscious.

The Palos female holding me took in the scene and sucked in a gasp. She pressed the warm muzzle of her blaster against the side of my head. “I want access to the ship now,” she shouted. “Or this human dies.”

Axlos looked like he’d taken some hits. His face was swollen. His leg looked mangled. But he surged to his feet and advanced menacingly towards the Palos, who had wrapped one hand around my neck as the other held her weapon.

“You won’t leave this ship alive,” said Axlos in measured, menacing tones.

“I never planned to,” she replied. “I do this for my people who need the *vistran* crystals on your planet. Now unlock this ship.”

“If you needed *vistran* so badly, we would have given it to you,” Axlos said. “We were never going to hoard it or exact enormous costs for it. We just want the right to harvest and distribute it as it is on Heveia, beneath the cities and villages of *our* people.”

The blaster pressed harder against my skin, digging in. I heard a quiet whimper from the female holding me. “Lies,” she said. “The UC said you would say such things.”

Axlos shook his head. “It’s the UC who lied to you, but it’s too late now. You’ve made your choice. Now, release my female.”

“Give me the ship.”

I kept my expression neutral and met Axlos’ tortured gaze. “Don’t do it,” I said. “Do *not* give her control.”

Everyone was frozen. Drave and Harp stood at their terminals, gazes riveted on me. Wulfrex hulked beside Axlos

at the main console, hands in meaty fists and his expression like stone. Dani's quick gaze snapped from me to the Palos, calculating a shot. Her hand was on her weapon, but there was no way without hitting me, too.

But just then, I saw a change in their expressions. A slight shift. I didn't know what to make of it. Maybe they were deciding I *was* worth sacrificing. My confidence slipped. Maybe I was just one small—

“That'll be enough of that,” said an entirely different voice from behind me.

The blaster was gone, plucked from the Palos' hand like a child's toy.

Released, I spun around.

Ryland stood there with Jorok, holding the blaster above his head and looking grimly at the main deck. “Not exactly what I was hoping to find here.”

“Oh!” My eyes filled with tears. My knees went soft, and then I was in Axlos' arms.

“It's okay,” he murmured into my ear. “We've got you. *I've* got you. Sweet *stars*, I'm never letting you go.”

I wrapped my arms around him, feeling the stickiness of blood. “No,” I said. “I've got *you*. What happened to you? You're hurt!”

“You two,” Jorok ordered. “Nice to see you alive, but you're both going to the medical lab. And you...” He gestured for a team of four guards who stood behind them. “Get our UC enemies out of here.”

The guards complied, and soon it was just the small group of Heveians and humans.

“The UC ship is almost here,” said Axlos, completely ignoring Jorok's summoning to the medical lab. “They're planning a final showdown by getting rid of the three biggest ships in our armada and—”

Jorok raised a hand, palm up towards the large window in the front of the deck. “Look, brother.”

Both of us turned and looked. Sure enough, a massive ship loomed in the distance, dark and ominous and bigger than the cruiser and the two Mitran ships combined.

But other vessels were moving into position beside us and around us. Battlecruisers and ships of all shapes, sizes, and types.

“What is this?” Axlos asked, astonished.

“Your resourceful mate sent a message to me,” said Ryland. “And I got it to everyone else. The UC wants a final showdown.” Ryland crossed his arms over his wide chest. Brilliant aqua eyes glinted as he gazed out at the enemy. “They can have it.”

“But this is...” Axlos blinked at the sheer number of ships that continued to arrive. “This is far more ships than the Heveian alliance has.”

“It used to be,” he said. “But Crown Prince Gavrox worked some diplomatic magic. He managed to convince three other systems to join our side. We had less firepower than the UC, but we now surpass it.”

I stared out as ships continued to arrive, gliding to stop with weapons hot and ready. “Will they destroy the UC ship?” I asked.

“That would be a waste,” said Wulfrex. “Look at that beauty.”

“Mark-Lines are among the rarest ships,” Hoc said. “There are nineteen of them in all. *Literally*. This is Mark-Line-XIX.”

“I can’t imagine that they wouldn’t surrender,” said Ryland, shrugging his shoulders. “But we’ll see.”

“How’s that for timing!” Dani announced from her station with a fist bump. “The Mark-Line-XIX has taken its weapons offline. They’re ordering all UC ships to stand down and accept terms of surrender.”

My eyes were still brimming with tears. “That’s it,” I said tremulously. “It’s over. We’re free.”

“Excellent news. Axlos, Arria,” said Jorok briskly, sending stern looks to Axlos’ bleeding leg. “*Now* to the medical lab. I’ll drag you there if I have to.” He raised one dark blue brow at Axlos. “It doesn’t look like I would have to try so hard. You’re about to fall over.”

“I strongly concur with our ship’s physician,” said Hoc.

“We’re going,” Axlos said. But first, he leaned down and kissed me. It was a kiss of sweetness and relief and a jumble of emotions that I couldn’t name, but I felt them inside of me, too. Axlos’ incredulous blue eyes turned to me. “My love. I’ll never fall with you by my side,” he murmured to me.

“Then I will stand beside you,” I replied. “Always.”

EPILOGUE

Axlos

Six standard galactic months later

I kissed the top of Arria's head as we snuggled in bed. We had moved into a house in my family's complex, which was fairly sprawling in the underground capital city. My parents were ecstatic to have me back home. By ecstatic, I'd received a stiff hug from my father and a lingering pat on the cheek from my mother, but I could have sworn that she had a tear in her eye when she said she was pleased to see me.

They'd received Arria quite well, considering she wasn't Heveian royalty. She *was* close friends with the crown princess, which helped enormously, and ultimately, I think they were just glad that I'd found a female *at all* to carry on the grand Pentrak name. It was hard to tell what they thought at any given time. My family was not the expressive type.

But *I* was. My hands roamed under the covers. "How is my delicious mate this morning?"

"Very well." She grinned up at me. "My *lord*."

She found it amusing that everyone called me that here, rather than "captain" or just "Ax."

"Glad to hear it, my *lady*."

She giggled and snuggled closer, wrapping a silky arm around my middle and resting her head on my chest. "What meetings do you have today?"

I sighed. This was the only thing I disliked about living in the capital—meetings. But I was learning how to avoid ones that I didn't have to attend, and saying no when I needed to. We were in new alliances with many species, including humans. True to our word, we'd become intermediaries between Earth and Mitra, in the effort to help introduce some human females to the Mitrans, who desperately needed a breeding pool to continue their species. It was looking promising for them. Human females, it seemed, found Mitran males *quite* attractive. No humans had gone there yet, but a tentative program and contracts were in the works. "I am meeting with Gavrox and Chancellor Praj on transferring the rest of the former UC leaders to the penal colony on Vesklaria."

After the surrender, many of the systems who had sided with the UC formally turned on the group and offered concessions to us. The rank and file had little say in who they fought and so were sent home without punishment, but the leaders and those who had orchestrated attacks on Heveia and our allies had gone to trial on the neutral system of Vesklaria. All had been found guilty. "After that, I'm sparring with Ryland."

Ryland had taken over training our guards in combat. Hopefully, they wouldn't need to use it, but we'd been caught ill prepared against the UC and needed to have a well-trained force just in case anyone decided to attack us again. He loved the role. I hadn't seen him so engaged and excited in a long time. He and Cora were also living on the palace grounds, while Drave and Harp had chosen a residence in the capital itself, farther from the palace business.

Drave had stated flatly that he wanted nothing to do with politics or diplomatic relations. He wanted to live a "quiet" life with Harp, which was an interesting request since there was nothing quiet about his mate. She was lively and funny and outgoing and frequently dragged him to the palace for dinners and parties with the rest of us. I'd known him for a long time. Long enough to know that he secretly *liked* our dinners and parties.

“What will you be doing today?” I asked Arria. “Going to the research lab?”

“Yes, but first I’m having breakfast with Kiki. She has an idea for waveform transmissions that are really interesting and she asked me to take a look at what she has so far.”

I had to admit that I understood little of what Arria worked on, but I loved that she’d found a path that excited her.

I thought about the group of us. We had come a long way since finding a trio of human females huddling together in a Gutturian cell. All of us had become planetary heroes in addition to finding love with our true mates. Wherever we went, Heveians talked to us, thanked us, and asked us questions. We’d come a long way from being exiles who stole a royal cruiser and went around looking for trouble.

Jorok decided he could be the royal family physician, after all. He said he’d sewn our sorry bodies back together enough times to be cured of the need for adventure. Dealing with baby colic and headaches was more his speed now, and so he and Kiki settled in to one of the palace homes. They planned on starting a family, themselves, and the sisters, Kiki and Lila loved being near enough to see each other every day.

Hoc enjoyed being by Lila’s side again. He was enamored with little baby Braam, and had already begun teaching him calculus, which *no one* took seriously, especially Braam. The cybot also received yet another new body. This one he designed himself and it was an *interesting* design, for sure. He kept the shiny metal outer shell and had a face made in what he believed he should look like that was capable of expressions. Wulfrex complied and made him whatever he wanted, of course. He found the entire exercise funny, and in the end, Hoc had the face of a humanoid male who could have passed for Lila’s metallic brother, with blue eyes and a solid, sweeping shape on his metal head that he called his “hair.”

Dani had the hardest time getting used to this version of Hoc, saying he had an awful lot of facial expressions for a cybot. He was winning her over, though, just as he’d won over everyone else.

Wulfrex and Dani were the only ones who decided to stay on the cruiser, at least, for some of the time. They had a suite in the palace, but in the end, Wulfrex couldn't part with the Renegade. Dani was his mate, but the cruiser was his first love. I used to catch him gazing up at the sky, as if longing to be up there, so I signed it over to him to command. I had that authority, now. Gavrox had made me and Arria an Imperial Lord and Lady, which was ranked just below the monarchy. The role included the attendance of many meetings and formal affairs, but they were better than battling space mercenaries or Gutturian pirates. I liked my quieter life, and I enjoyed serving my people and my king—yes, Gavrox was no longer the crown prince, but the *king*.

Wulfrex had returned to his former lighthearted self, thankfully. Gavrox had made him and Dani ambassadors to Earth. I wasn't sure that was a great idea, as Wulfrex had no filter and Dani was an ex-assassin who *still* carried a knife on her hip, but they hadn't upended any negotiations so far. The humans loved them.

The last of us from the crew was Craal and Claire. We saw them less often, as they moved back to Craal's home village in the mountains with their adopted daughter who had lost her parents fighting the UC. Craal oversaw the *vistran* mining operation there and the two of them were village leaders. Claire enjoyed working with the people there and was compiling a history. Mostly, she'd become an avid cook—*without* a replicator—and was upgrading the schools for the village children.

All of us—misfits in our own ways—had found love and purpose, and peace for those who needed it. I had found those things, and I hadn't known how much I needed them. I held my beautiful, delicate female in my arm. My hands ran over the scars on her back. I knew them as well as I knew the rest of her body. The ridges were as familiar as the rest of her lovely features. They'd always be there, but the ones inside of her had faded. Each day that passed and we loved each other, pushed Arria's awful past farther and farther away.

She nuzzled my neck, hands doing some exploring of her own. “When do you have to leave?”

“Hmm. Not yet.” I shifted in bed and pulled her under me, reveling in the feel of her curves and soft skin. My mouth found hers and I kissed her, long and deep and filled with the love I felt for her. “I’m all yours, Arria. Always.”



Hi readers! I hope you enjoyed Arria and Axlos’ story! Please consider leaving a review. This is the sixth and final book in the Craving the Heveian series.

After spending a year with these characters, it’s hard to see them go! I hope you had as much fun on the cruiser as I did, and will join me in future adventures to new lands...such as the Mitran’s home world.

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