

A close-up, chest-up photograph of a very muscular man with a light complexion and a slight stubble. He is looking directly at the camera with a neutral expression. The background is a deep blue space scene featuring a large, textured planet in the lower-left corner and a bright comet streaking across the sky from the upper-left towards the center. The lighting is dramatic, highlighting the man's chest and shoulder muscles.

THE PRESIDENT'S
ALIEN
PRINCESSES

WARRIORS OF THE LUTHER

New York Times & USA Today Bestselling Author

MINA CARTER

THE PRESIDENT'S ALIEN PRINCESS

WARRIORS OF THE LATHAR

BOOK 18

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NEW YORK TIMES & USA TODAY BEST SELLING AUTHOR

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Warriors of the Lathar - Series Reading Order

About the Author

“*Y*ou will cease this nonsense immediately!” Lord Varrik Varaant roared. “This wedding has been arranged for years, and by the gods, you *will* obey me.”

Lynara sighed and resisted the urge to rub between her eyebrows. She had a headache forming, as she always did when she couldn’t avoid her father’s calls. “I can’t. You know I can’t.”

“You might be a princess, but I am still your father, and you will do as you are told!” Her father clenched his jaw in fury.

This was it, the heart of their endless debate. Because while her father was plain old Lord Varaant, she was Lady Varaant, a princess of the empire thanks to her late mother, and that fact was a constant thorn in her father’s side. She hadn’t asked for any of it, but that didn’t seem to matter to him.

“I might be a princess,” she threw back. “But I am also a captain in His Imperial Majesty’s Navy, and just like any other officer, I have to follow orders.”

Silence fell on the other end of the link. Her father’s jaw clicked closed, and he looked at her like she’d finally said something worth his attention.

“Orders? You have orders?” His voice was lower now, a note of intrigue creeping into it. “What orders? We have been at peace for over twenty-five years.”

“Not mobilization orders,” she told him in case he got the wrong idea and tried to talk to Admiral Verran again to get her assigned a desk job back at command. “But I’ve been ordered to report to the admiralty offices this morning.”

She left it at that. Open-ended. Mostly because she had no clue what the powers that be wanted with her.

Her father’s eyes narrowed. “Perhaps they intend to offer you a command. Like your mother’s...”

Lynara shrugged. Her mother had commanded a capital destroyer, one of the most powerful ships in the Imperial Navy. But she had been a general with a whole, long-hard war’s experience under her belt.

Which Lynara was most definitely not.

The only ships currently waiting for captains were all the higher prestige classes. There were none that she, a newly promoted captain fresh out of the second officer’s chair, would ever be assigned command of. But... a girl could dream.

“We’ll have to see how it shakes out.”

“Let me know,” her father ordered. “If you do not get command of a decent ship, you will return home and marry as ordered.”

“I’m sor— hat was th—at?” Lynara stuttered as she kicked the table the comm-link sat on, making the screen fritz. Her father’s face was decorated in lines of static as he scowled.

“Lynara! Don’t you dar—”

“Really br-eaking up.” She shook her head. “Can’t hear yo—”

She cut the commlink completely and the screen went dead.

Leaning back in her chair as it swiveled slowly, she let her gaze idly scan over her quarters.

The space was small, a standard issue for a mid-ranking officer of the Imperial Navy, and totally devoid of the grandeur that came with her title as a princess. The room was

practical, functional, a far cry from the opulence of her family estate. Tinted steel-grey, the walls whispered of conformity and anonymity. An officer's quarters were not designed for luxury but for efficiency and purpose. Hers was no different.

She'd gotten used to living in confined spaces during her service to the Imperial Navy, so the tiny area was arranged meticulously. A compact console station sat against one wall while across from it, a narrow cot fit snugly into an alcove. It was more for functionality than comfort, but it was hers.

A small kitchenette on the opposite end of the quarters held a few personal touches that distinguished her space from any other—a half-drunk bottle of Tratorian wine and a plate with the remains of her breakfast along with a collection of mugs bearing insignias of the different navy divisions.

These were the small luxuries she allowed herself, small comforts amid the brisk efficiency of naval life.

She loved it, though. The starkness of it spoke to a part of her that yearned for simplicity and routine. It was her sanctuary, a space that didn't bow to her lineage but acknowledged her for what she was and what she'd always aspired to be—a naval officer, a captain, just like her mother.

With a sigh, she levered herself out of the chair and turned toward her locker. It was built into the back wall of the room and took her less than four steps to reach. Opening it revealed a row of neatly pressed uniforms. Reaching in, she retrieved her uniform jacket. It was crisp and clean, the fabric cool to the touch.

The new uniforms were thermo-regulating, a fact she'd thanked the gods for many times, especially on exercises that had seen her and other crew hiking across desert planets with little more than the uniforms on their backs, emergency rations, and their wits. She couldn't imagine doing that in the heavy uniforms of her mother's era.

She smiled at the thought, looking up at the worn and faded image pinned to the corner of the mirror as she slipped her jacket on. Her mother smiled back at her. The image had been taken when her mother was not much older than Lynara

was now. She was in combat uniform and sat in the captain's chair. It looked like she'd been taken by surprise, and her smile was wide and genuine.

Lynara had always wondered who'd taken the image, but she'd never been able to find out. Whoever it was, her mother had obviously liked them and felt comfortable with them.

She settled the jacket in place properly and zipped it up. The faint scent of the detergent it had been washed in mixed with the familiar metallic tang of the ship wrapped around her, and she took a deep breath of the comforting smell.

Reaching onto a shelf for her rank insignia, she stretched her neck slightly and pinned it to her collar. Her reflection looked back at her, the metal glinting in the overhead lights. Such a small piece of metal held so much significance. Next, she added another badge, that of an officer of His Majesty's Imperial Navy.

All officers wore the insignia to denote they served Kayan Vorr, emperor of the Lathar. But unlike most, hers wasn't bright and sparkly new, given to her when she'd joined the navy. No... hers was old and weathered but well cared for. It had belonged to her mother and was one of her prized possessions.

She smiled as she brushed her fingers over the cool metal, feeling the comforting connection to the past and her mother.

Straightening up, Lynara examined herself in the mirror. She looked every bit the part of an officer, every detail of her uniform immaculate. A touch of nobility in a sea of uniformity. She allowed herself a small smile.

"This is it, Mom," she told the young woman in the picture. "They're going to give me a ship today. I know it. Wish me luck."

With a final nod of approval at her reflection, she turned and left her quarters. Whatever the admiralty wanted with her today was going to be good. She knew it down to her bones.

Today was the first day of the rest of her life, and she was going to make her mom proud.

LYNARA STEPPED out of her quarters and almost ran over a young woman waiting by the door.

“Goddess’s tits, Adia!” she hissed, reaching out to right herself on the smaller woman’s shoulder. “I could have done you damage there! What are you doing waiting around?”

Adia shrugged and offered a small smile. Originally Lynara’s body-servant when they were children, she’d joined the navy as a yeoman to stay with her mistress.

“You have a meeting with the admiralty in half an hour,” Adia reminded her as she fell into step with Lynara. “Do you want to go through possible questions they might ask?”

Lynara shook her head. “No idea what this is about, so what’s the point? I could just tie myself up in knots spot revising, and they could ask me something entirely different.”

“Well...” Adia pursed her lips, her gaze on the ever-present datapad she had cradled in her arms. “I ran a statistical analysis, and given your length of service and your training, it’s likely they’re going to offer you a command... or an academy instructor’s position. You did graduate at the top of your class for flight training and ship-to-ship combat, which would automatically qualify you for an instructor’s position.”

Lynara grinned. She had, much to her classmate Saar’s disgruntlement. She wasn’t sure if that was because he hadn’t made first in class or because *she’d* beaten him. Both the kids of war heroes, they’d been in competition most of their lives. Although perhaps Saar had it a little worse than she did; both his father *and* his grandfather had been heroes.

But... that didn’t mean she was going to miss out on teasing him at every opportunity. Especially when that teasing often led to raised tempers, and hell was Saar a good *vaark* when he was angry.

“That doesn’t mean they’re going to offer me either,” she argued although Adia was right. There wasn’t much else it could be. Her record as an executive officer was exemplary,

and she'd passed her captaincy course with flying colors. They had to offer her something. She knew it down to her bones.

"Well," she said, taking a fortifying breath as they reached the admiralty level and walked through the huge double doors. A large arch rose above it, the words, *Vylo rien, Nexa roth* carved on it.

"With valor, we prevail," she murmured to herself, her fingertips brushing over her mother's badge pinned to her chest. The motto of the imperial fleet, but she much preferred the one of her mother's unit, *Forged in Battle, Bound by Honor*, inscribed on the flag below the insignia. She hadn't been in battle yet, unless you counted minor border skirmishes, but she liked to think she upheld all the same ideals as her mother.

"I'm sorry," Adia murmured by her as they crossed the huge lobby toward the stern-faced military secretary sitting behind the desk. "Did you say something?"

"No, no, you're good. Wait for me over there," Lynara ordered with a nod, indicating the seating area at the side of the room. It sat below large windows showing the landing pads outside. A sleek admiral's yacht sat there, glinting in the sun.

One day, she promised herself as her gaze caressed the sleek lines of the yacht in envy. One day she would have one of those. Just like one day she would achieve the rank her mother would have if her life hadn't been cut short just before the end of the war.

"Yes?" The secretary looked up as though seeing Lynara for the first time. Which was a load of *trallshit* and Lynara knew it. The woman had been aware of her and Adia the moment they'd walked into the room. A second later the computer system would have identified them and shown both their records on the screen in front of the secretary.

Which meant she *also* knew Lynara had an appointment with the admirals... Which meant this was little more than a powerplay.

“Captain Lynara Varaant to see the admirals,” she said, her voice smooth and professional. She could play the game as well. “I believe they’re expecting me.”

Less than two minutes later, the battle-axe of a secretary led Lynara into a large, imposing room.

“Sirs, Captain Varaant to see you,” she announced, closing the door behind her as she backed out of the room.

It was wood-paneled and adorned with the flags and symbols of the empire. A long table stretched out before her, two figures standing at her arrival. She knew both of them instantly; any naval officer would. They were the joint chiefs of the navy and reported to the emperor himself.

Admiral Verran, an older man with a stern look that mirrored the hard lines etched on his face, smiled as she approached the table. Admiral Illais, a woman in her mid-forties whose gaze dissected the world around her and found it lacking, regarded Lynara with a hard look.

“Captain Varaant, thank you for coming,” Verran said, rounding the table and extending his hand.

Lynara shook it firmly, nodding at Admiral Illais in acknowledgment. “Admirals. It’s a pleasure.”

“We’ve heard a lot about you, Captain,” Illais commented, her intense look never leaving Lynara’s face.

She felt like she was under a microscope, her every reaction and emotion examined and analyzed.

“All good things, I hope,” Lynara said, raising an eyebrow slightly. She needed to show them that, despite their rank and status, she wasn’t intimidated.

Admiral Illais nodded. “Of course. Please, sit.”

Lynara offered a nod of thanks and took her seat, her fingers brushing against the fabric of her uniform to straighten it. The admirals exchanged a glance before Verran began speaking.

“Your reputation precedes you, Captain. And we remember your mother well. But this is not about past laurels.

It's about the future," Admiral Verran said, his voice gruff.

He didn't scare her, though. He had been one of Lynara's academy instructors years ago. She knew Verran's bark was worse than his bite. Admiral Illais was the danger in the room.

"So," he said, "I'll cut to the chase here. We believe you have a bright future."

Lynara leaned forward, her intrigue rising yet matched with a cautious undertone. "And what might that future hold, sir?"

Admiral Illais pushed a datapad across the table to Lynara, revealing the specs of a massive ship. "Meet the *Elysium*. A capital explorer, one of the largest in the fleet. We believe you are the person to command it."

Lynara looked at the datapad, her expression twisting into a blend of shock and awe. "An explorer?" Her voice trailed off, the concept so grand it was beyond anything she'd imagined.

Verran nodded, understanding in his gaze. "We understand it's a lot to process. But we are looking for someone with a long career ahead, with an impeccable command pedigree. Someone with top-tier academy stats."

"And most importantly," Illais interjected, not missing a beat, "someone with drive and vision. Someone who can handle the responsibility of leading a mission to deliver an expedition to a new colony planet, facing the unknown. We believe that person is you, Captain Varaant. Are we correct?"

She looked up and determination filled her. "Yes, ma'am. You are."

The words were so foreign to her own ears, almost like a far-off echo. An exped captain. She, Lynara Varaant, was going to be an exped captain. For a moment, the world around her seemed to dim. All she could process was the enormity of the words she had just spoken.

The low hum of the room crept back into her awareness, and she realized the two admirals were talking over the logistics of what would need to happen before the launch. The

stark details drew her back into the present, the datapad's cool surface reminding her of the momentous journey that lay ahead.

"You'll be booked in for orientation tomorrow," Admiral Verran said.

She nodded as she read through the mission briefing quickly and then frowned before looking up at him.

"It looks like launch is scheduled for the back end of next week. Is that a typo?" she asked, fairly sure it was. But then, the admiralty weren't known for making mistakes. Not on something as important as expeditions. They were part of the expansion of the empire... part of the *future* of the empire itself. "Because from the looks of this, the colonists will require genetic modification. And... well, standard recovery time from even the simplest gen-mod is at least three weeks..."

She let her voice trail off. The admirals knew that. Of course they knew that.

"No," Admiral Illais said, "that timeline is correct. The colonists will be undergoing the next generation of genetic modification. The changes to their coding will take place in the pod during stasis, which will mean they will be fully operational up to the stasis point and then already recovered by the time they come out of sleep near the target planet."

"That is..." Lynara trailed off, her mind racing. "Smart. Really smart."

Everyone dreaded gen-mod recovery. Even though it gave them great advantages both biologically and skillset-wise, the recovery period was brutal. The last round she'd had, she'd wanted to stretch so much it felt like her muscles were tearing off her bones while at the same time, she'd wanted to curl up into the smallest ball possible. Her body and reactions had warred between the two until she'd worn herself to exhaustion.

"Our scientists are making great leaps and bounds all the time," Admiral Illais noted with a small smile. "By the time you get back, who knows what will be possible?"

Lynara blinked, her eyebrows rising in surprise. “I’ll be coming back, not staying with the colony?”

Admiral Verran shook his head. “Captains of your lineage are few and far between, Captain. We do not want to lose you, even if there will be a few decades between reports. But we won’t put you on a charge for tardiness,” he said with a wink. “We will be assigning a ground commander for the colony expedition itself, and you will bring the *Elysium* back to us. Given the length of time this journey will take, a promotion to Commodore will be waiting for you on your return.”

Her head spun. A decades-long journey at top speed... she couldn’t even begin to comprehend the distance. The thought of the trip back seemed even more daunting. But most of that would be in stasis.

She bit back the smile that wanted to cross her lips. A couple of decades later, her princely betrothed would have moved on. It was hard to have kids with a woman on the other side of the galaxy, and a prince would need an heir...

“Chronologically you will be around ten years older when you return, given the length of stasis sleep,” Admiral Illais said. “Which will make you both in line with that rank for your birthdate and also the youngest commodore in history. Which is fitting since your mother was the youngest destroyer captain in history in her earlier career.”

Lynara inclined her head. “Then, I am honored, Admirals, and I would very much like to accept this assignment.”

“*T*o the empire’s newest explorer captain!” Saar Cavaal roared with the same kind of raw energy as a launching starship. His deep voice cut through the chatter of the bar, and he raised his glass high. “I give you... the captain of the Elysium!”

“The captain of the Elysium!”

The jubilant cheers bounced off the plain walls, reverberating with the clinking of glasses and raucous laughter that filled the second-rate bar favored by fleet officers below captain.

Lynara leaned back in her chair and smiled. They’d been coming here since they were snot-nosed cadets at the academy, and the scent of cheap liquor and old wood intermingled with the underlying notes of sweat and metal were as much a part of her as all the beatings and training she’d endured to earn the right to the uniform she wore.

“Oh, give it over, you lot!” She laughed, her cheeks flaming a bright crimson as she waved her hands to try and get the group around her to shut up. “I don’t want to get barred before I leave!”

“Oh come on, Lyn!” Elaira, her old roommate at the academy and a newly minted scout captain shipping out next week, grinned. “You were the last of us to be assigned, but you know what they say... save the best until last!”

The warm flush crept up her neck, and Lyn’s heart expanded with pride and amazement. It still hadn’t sunk in.

The *Elysium* was the very pinnacle of the empire's starship engineering. And she was its captain. Not just a captain, but its *first* captain.

"*Vaark's* sake, Lyn, how the hell did you manage to pull off a coup like that?" Saar demanded. He and Aaril watched her like hawks, their eyes gleaming with envy.

The four of them had gone through the rigorous training of the academy together, shared in the challenges and triumphs, and now here they were, all newly minted captains about to ship out.

But she wasn't like the rest of them.

They would all ship out on shorter missions—Elaira on patrol while Aaril had scored a light cruiser captaincy. They would both be the rank and file of the navy's might in battle. Quick and able but not packing as much as the big destroyers. Saar, meanwhile, was in Sector Seven, the empire's most secretive special forces, so they didn't even *know* where he was going, and he couldn't tell them. With both his father and grandfather in the sector, it was no surprise that had been the route he'd chosen.

It was weird to think they would be old by the time she got back.

She shrugged and allowed herself a small grin. "I guess Command knew talent when they saw it."

"*Vaark* off!" Saar threw a beer mat at her, which she easily ducked and flipped him off. "There's gotta be more to it than that."

"Yeah." She nodded. "I slept with the admiral."

"No way!" Aaril breathed, his eyes wide as he leaned forward in his seat. "Verran? *Vaark*, he's like... a hundred if he's a day!"

"Nope. Illais," she threw back, knowing Aaril had a huge crush on the beautiful, if frankly terrifying, admiral.

"Did she *vaark*!" Saar scoffed, cuffing Aaril around the back of the head and nearly making him fall off his chair.

“She’s having you on.”

Lynara gave her best innocent look but couldn’t hold it. She began to chuckle. “Hey! It’s not my fault he’s gullible as *trall*, now is it?”

“But an *explorer!*” Aaril, none the worse for his near trip to the floor, leaned back as a grin spread across his face. “I’d give my left nut to captain a ship like that.”

Elaira slid him a sideways glance, one corner of her mouth lifting in a saucy grin. “I’d rather you didn’t, love. I’m rather fond of that one.”

Aaril’s response, a hearty guffaw, echoed around the bar, melting into the background noise as he leaned to the side and hauled the slender woman into his lap, kissing her soundly.

The playful exchange had none of the formal reserve or pretense that Lynara was used to in the royal courts. She looked away quickly to give them privacy. They didn’t notice, but she did it anyway. She’d always been a princess trapped in the gilded cage of royal expectations, and she craved the freedom Aaril and Elaira had to choose a partner... to be in love.

Her path had always been mapped out for her—a trophy wife for an asshole prince she couldn’t stand the sight of. She’d been betrothed before she’d been out of her cradle, so an academy romance like Aaril and Elaira’s had been out of the question for her. Romance was out of the question for her. She had to restrict herself to one-night stands and make sure even those were secret, or heads would roll.

But tonight, she was free, and tomorrow she’d be lightyears away. It was the first step of the journey that would take her far, far away. She wouldn’t see her friends for decades, and when she did, they would have aged, but she wouldn’t have. She lifted her glass to take a sip, letting the cheap rotgut whiskey burn all the way down to her gut as she savored their companionship for the last time in a long time. Tomorrow, she would leave to become the captain of the *Elysium*. Tonight, though, she would have a last taste of freedom before her next few decades were taken up with duty.

The evening's warm atmosphere chilled as the door swung open, an icy draft slipping into the bar. A prickling sensation crawled up her spine as Saar murmured, "Heads up. Asshole at twelve o'clock."

She bit back her groan, refusing to turn around. She knew who she'd see.

Prince Dariel K'Daar.

The man she'd been betrothed to since the cradle.

He was a towering specimen of the empire's genetic superiority. His physique was a deceptive mix of brute strength and elegant refinement, clad in sun-kissed skin that drew the attention of every red-blooded woman and a fair few men in the room. His dark, curling hair cascaded to his shoulders, styled into an Imperial Court fashion rather than cut short according to unofficial naval norm—a deliberate choice to remind them all that he was, in fact, a cut above them.

The group around her groaned softly, anticipating the confrontation that was sure to come. The man was an utter ass, a conceited prick who strutted around with an air of imperial entitlement, especially now his family name bore the coveted K signifier. Bestowed by the emperor himself, the gift elevated him from mere royalty to a demi-god status... or so he liked to believe.

"Look at him, Lyn," Elaira whispered, a mischievous glint in her eyes. "Don't you think he might not be so bad if we just gagged him?"

Lynara snorted, almost sending her drink down her nose.

"*Vaark* off. I'd want to throttle him rather than *vaark* him! Ignore him," she added in a mutter, taking another swallow from her glass. "Maybe he'll go away."

"Nope," Saar rumbled, his knuckles whitening as his hand closed around his glass. His pale eyes flashed in warning when she glared at him, willing him to behave himself. "Contact in three, two... one..."

Her heart sank as heavy footsteps sounded, and Dariel appeared in her peripheral vision. She slid him a sideways

glance with overtones of “What the *vaark* do you want?” and “*Vaark* off and die.”

The man was panty-wettingly handsome, a fact she hated with a passion, and his smug smile made it even worse. Genetically, they were a perfect match, a fact verified by the healer’s hall itself, so their offspring would be strong and intelligent—the very embodiment of what the empire prized.

If she could ever bring herself to let the arrogant asshole touch her. His smug arrogance was so repugnant she would rather disembowel herself than touch him with a ten-foot pole.

He looked at Lynara, his eyes gleaming. “Congratulations on the *Elysium* assignment, Captain Varaant.”

“Thank you, Your Highness,” Lynara responded, the words tasting sour on her tongue. The silence hung between them, a palpable entity.

“I thought I should make the effort and congratulate you —” he said, rubbing at his eyebrow with a well-manicured finger. She’d thought she’d capitalized on her rank by getting Adia into the navy as her yeoman, but Dariel had gone one step further, even having a full staff around him when going through the academy.

“Congratulations noted and accepted,” she said, motioning the bartender for another round of drinks. Perhaps prince smug would get the message from her turned shoulder and *vaark* the hell off.

“—especially since we’re going to be working together,” he carried on as though she hadn’t spoken.

She turned and speared him with a hard look.

“What did you say?”

His grin widened, wolfish and triumphant.

“Oh, didn’t they tell you? I’ve been assigned as the ground commander on your little... expedition.”

PREVIOUSLY IN PURSUED by the Alien Lord

THEY KNOW.

Cameron Murphy closed his eyes at the two-word message that appeared on his personal comm. It was anonymous, no sender identified, but he knew who it had come from. Only one person in the human systems could evade security systems so completely.

Raven.

Taking a deep breath, he stood as the Latharian emperor entered the conference room, flanked by two other males Murphy recognized. Traxx and Rohn K'Saan, both kin to Daaynal.

“Good morning,” he said with a smile, hiding his emotions with the ease of long practice. He'd have liked Elise here to analyze their body language, but she was off with her new mate, Cade, who was an ally—at least he hoped Cade and his people, the Vorrtaan were—against the might of the Lathar. Especially since he suspected he'd now pissed them off. He wasn't sure exactly what Raven's “they know” referred to, but he was going with everything. At least then he wouldn't be surprised by something.

“I am surprised you called this meeting. Perhaps you could tell me what it's about?” he asked, indicating that the three alien men should be seated around the big table in the middle of the room. It was circular to ensure there were no arguments about who sat where and no battle lines could be drawn or inferred from the seating plan.

“Emilia, would you mind getting the emperor and his kin something to drink?” he murmured to his new personal assistant, who was hovering in the corner of the room. She didn't reply so he half turned to look at her. The girl's eyes were wide, and she was barely able to tear her gaze away from Rohn.

Murphy sighed. He really should check if she was signed up to the mate program. He didn't want to train her up in the

way he liked things, only to lose her to the first alien warrior who came along.

“It’s quite simple,” Daaynal said as he sat down, diverting his attention to Emilia for a moment. “Black coffee, please. Strong as you can, with a splash of cold water.”

He returned his attention to Murphy and the smile he’d treated Emilia to slid from his face.

“We have discovered a distress signal from a ship. One of ours. Buried in ice near your north pole.”

Murphy blinked. That had not been what he was expecting. But one of Raven’s reports *had* mentioned a signal from the north pole. So far his scientists hadn’t been able to isolate it, though.

“So, this is about a rescue operation?” he asked. “When did the ship crash? We didn’t pick up anything on our planetary defense net...”

Daaynal’s lips quirked in amusement. “That would be because, according to our records, this ship crashed before human recorded history. It’s the ship that brought humanity’s ancestors to Earth. And it’s still transmitting. Which means someone is still there...”

| *Now...*

“*HOLY SHIT.*”

The curse was out before Murphy could stop it, nor did he try to stop the expression of surprise that washed over his face.

“So you’re telling me a ship that is hundreds of thousands of years old is buried in the ice, and somebody is on board?”

The emperor nodded. “Yes.”

Murphy blinked and looked at the holo-map on the table between them. It showed the entirety of the Arctic with a blinking red mark not far from the North Pole. Not far, but

certainly far enough away that it would have been missed on any expedition to reach the Pole.

“Well... that makes sense. It’s the only place on the planet a ship could go undetected all this while. It’s inhospitable, dangerous... The nearest human settlement is hundreds of miles away.”

Daaynal nodded. “And if we have our dates correct, this is definitely the original expedition ship.”

“It will be,” Traxx butted in. “The signal is from the right era and initial scans—”

“Wait. What?” Murphy speared Daaynal with a hard gaze. “You took scans of the planet without clearing it with me?”

For a moment Daaynal’s expression froze, and Murphy didn’t think he was going to answer. Then Daaynal nodded, no hint of a smile on his face.

“Yes, and I apologize for that. We scanned immediately to ascertain the threat level.”

Murphy tilted his head. “Why would you do that?”

“The signal is the type used during the Tanel Wars. Since many of our ships were used by the enemy, we wanted to ensure that this ship was not one that had been compromised and thus proved a threat to Earth.”

“The Tanel Wars?” He frowned. “That was the war that caused the formation of the Vorrta if I’m correct? You genetically engineered supersoldiers to fight?”

The emperor nodded. “Yes, indeed. The Tanel Wars were the very start of the empire. The first Emperor Kayan Vorr took control of the Imperial princes and forged one empire to fight the Tanel.”

“So these Tanel... they’re a big threat?”

Daaynal regarded him levelly over the table, his big frame relaxed. “Indeed so. You’ve seen Ambassador Cade Vorrta in his battleform. The Tanel appear much the same.”

Murphy thumped back into his chair. “Well, fuck me.”

The three aliens watched him with unreadable eyes.

“Okay, so your scans were warranted. I assume that this ship checked out?”

Traxx nodded. “Had it not, a squadron of fighters would already have been dispatched to ensure its utter destruction. The Tanel are far more dangerous than either the *Ovverta*, or the *Krin*. We do not suffer any of them to live.”

“Scorched Earth policy,” Murphy said with approval. “Makes sense. Don’t leave any of the enemy alive to shoot you in the back. So... it’s not a Tanel ship but an expedition ship? And someone is left alive on there? Is that even possible... wouldn’t they be hundreds of thousands of years old now? Can Lathar live that long?”

“No,” Daaynal said, leaning forward to wave his hand over the display. It changed to a ship schematic like nothing Murphy had ever seen. Obviously Latharian, it was bigger than even the ship that had split open to become Devan station. “They’d have to be over two hundred and fifty thousand years old, by human chronological measurement.”

Murphy shook his head, his mind reeling. As a species they’d only recently discovered that everything they knew about their origins was wrong. They were not unique, nor even native to Earth. They were descended from the Latharians, an offshoot adapted over vast expanses of time thanks to an accident.

“What you’re looking at is the *Elysium*,” the emperor said, using motions of his hands to rotate the schematic. “It’s an explorer class vessel designed for colony missions over many decades. Which means this class was fitted with stasis tubes. We had a lot of competing theories about how Earth was seeded, especially with the... specific modifications we found in your genome, but now we’ve discovered the *Elysium*’s signal, we managed to home in on the how of it finally.”

“Stasis tubes? So there could be people still in there? Like... our ancestors?” he asked, staring at the schematic without seeing it. The origin of the human race could be on that ship, lying asleep for eons. If they were... what would

they be like? Would they be more like the Lathar, or would they be obviously human?

Murphy flicked a glance at Daaynal, noting familiar features in his alien face. Once you knew what you were looking for, it was easy to see echoes of humanity in the Lathar, and vice versa. The shape of the eyes and jaw, the long limbs and tapered fingers... they were all hints of a shared lineage, albeit written in a much larger form.

The differences were also marked, which meant that whatever survivors might remain in that ship would probably be far closer to Latharian than human. Even if they were, though, they would still have technology and weapons. The ship was ancient but even so long ago, the Lathar had had the capability to cross the galaxy. Humanity couldn't do that even now, so whatever technology was on that ship would be far beyond what they had.

Murphy took a slow breath, reining in his speculations and focusing on the matter at hand. "If there are survivors, it changes everything."

Daaynal grinned, the light of battle in his eyes. "There is no debate here. My people discovered the signal, the ship is Latharian... which means it and any survivors are ours to retrieve."

"The hell they are," Murphy snarled, surging to his feet. "The ship is on Earth, which means it falls under *my* jurisdiction."

The emperor's eyes gleamed in challenge. The argumentative asshole was definitely enjoying this. "You seem to forget humanity remained ignorant of that ship's existence until we uncovered it, even though it has been here on your planet for years. More learned minds than mine might question whether humanity are fit guardians of such priceless history."

Murphy arched an eyebrow. The emperor wanted to play it that way. Did he?

"And one might also question whether a species so dismissive of others should be trusted with technology and

knowledge far beyond current understanding.” He fixed Daaynal with a hard look. “We stand as equals in this... or my people claim sole rights to that discovery.”

A growl rumbled in Daaynal’s throat, fury warring with grudging respect in his alien gaze. Traxx shifted as if preparing to attack, halted only by his emperor’s raised hand.

Silence reigned for a handful of heartbeats, but he refused to look away from Daaynal’s stare. The emperor was the most powerful warrior in the Latharian empire, a man not used to being told no. Until now. Like it or not, he might be dooming everyone with human DNA to a lifetime of slavery should Daaynal decide to take offense and just conquer Earth and her colonies, but he couldn’t... wouldn’t allow the guy to ride roughshod over him.

Finally Daaynal’s fierce visage broke into a broad grin, and he laughed, the sound booming around the walls. The tension broke like shattered ice.

“You have courage for a human. Hell, even for a Lathar. Not many males will stand up to me in such a manner. I can see the K’Daar blood in you. Very well...” He nodded. “We stand as equals in this.”

His eyes hardened to chips of emerald fire as he stood, his kinsman standing at the same time. “But betray our trust, Mr. President, and... well, let’s just say the relationship between our species would become much... cooler.”

Murphy’s lips quirked at the corner. “Are you saying you’ll take me off your Christmas card list?”

Daaynal’s face split into a broad grin. “Something like that.”

Relief and satisfaction surged through him, and he allowed himself a small smile. “In that case, Your Majesty, it seems we have preparations to make. The past awaits.”

The emperor’s eyes gleamed with anticipation.

“So it does. Shall we go unearthen our ancestors and see what fate they herald for us all?”

Less than twelve hours later, Murphy and his team stood on the landing pads of Sharpe Hill base, waiting for their Latharian counterparts.

“They’re late,” Major Dubois, the team’s survival specialist, grumbled. He slid her a sideways glance. Almost as tall as he was, with a whipcord-thin frame, he had rarely seen her smile.

“I’m sure they’ll be here,” he countered, hands thrust into his pockets. He’d shed his suit, and like the rest of the team, wore black cargo pants and a sweater over a turtleneck with heavy boots. The cold weather gear they would need for conditions at the pole was packed in backpacks piled on one side of the landing pad along with the numerous boxes and crates of equipment the scientists had insisted they needed.

“Are you sure we need them?” the major asked, squinting as she looked up, as if she could penetrate the clouds and spot the Latharian base and ships up there through sheer force of will alone. “I don’t trust aliens. I’d be much happier with our own helos. I know the capabilities of those machines inside out.”

“I’m sure you do, Major,” he replied, unfazed by her questioning. Most people wouldn’t have dared to question him, but Dubois had pulled him and his team out of a mess during the Helsdown incident, so she deserved more leeway.

“But given that the Lathar are years ahead when it comes to technology, I’m sure their transports can handle whatever

the Arctic can throw at them.”

“Hmm,” was all Dubois had to say, her expression still unconvinced.

The roar of engines from above was their only warning as, a second later, the Latharian ships dropped through the clouds and hurtled down toward them.

The Lathar called them drop ships, and they truly lived up to the description. The massive metal boxes were equipped with guns and oversized engines, and they dropped from the sky, relying on their brakes and reverse thrust to avoid becoming a mangled mess upon impact with the ground.

He'd been in one once, and it had taken every ounce of willpower to remain composed as it hurtled toward the ground. Only the fact that the Latharian emperor, that asshole, had been watching him for a reaction allowed him to stand there, feigning mild interest in what he had been sure was their very imminent demise.

“Fuck me!” Dubois hissed but stood her ground. “They’re not going to do that at the pole, are they?”

He shook his head. “No, we’re strictly sub-orbit, atmospheric flight on this one.”

He'd made sure of it, given the sensitive nature of some of the equipment they were taking. The scientists had already looked at him as if he had kicked their favorite puppy when he had instructed them to pack up and prepare to set up a mobile lab in the Arctic. Their dire warnings about sensor vulnerabilities and recalibrations still echoed in his ears. If he were to ignore them and allow an orbital flight, he'd likely face a mutiny.

“They’re efficient, I’ll give them that,” Dubois admitted begrudgingly as the alien ships settled on the landing pad in front of them with a soft whoosh.

The boarding ramp descended at the back of the nearest ship. Nothing was fancy about it; it was a dull grey box with brutish engines. There was nothing to draw the eye except for the emerging Lathar.

“Big bastards, aren’t they?” Dubois commented, as if they were discussing the weather. “I wonder what they put in their food to get that damn big?”

He chuckled, relieved that she hadn’t become overly fascinated with the aliens like the majority of the female population. Even Emilia, his new PA, had taken one look at them and signed up for the Mate Program the next day.

“How’s Dave?” he asked her, fairly certain he’d remembered her husband’s name correctly.

“Fucking his secretary,” she replied promptly, her eyes narrowing as she watched the Lathar approach. “Thinks I don’t know. I instigated divorce proceedings last week.”

He froze for a split second. He’d forgotten how blunt Dubois could be at times. “I’m sorry to hear that.”

“Don’t be,” she retorted, flashing him a sideward glance. “Wanted rid of the asshole for years. Now I have a reason to get rid of him.”

Before he could respond, the two Lathar reached them. Like the rest of their species, they were tall and heavily muscled with long hair that reached past their shoulders.

They wore leather uniforms, open to reveal bare chests and chiseled abs, but the configuration of the stitching on their shoulders was unlike anything he had seen before, which meant they weren’t from any of the clans he was familiar with.

“Good morning, Mr. President,” the one on the left with more braids in his hair spoke in clear, perfect English and extended his hand. “I’m Taavik V’aant, and this is my kinsman, Savaar. We’ll be heading up the Imperial historical evaluation of the site.”

Murphy nodded, shaking Taavik’s hand firmly before offering his hand to his colleague. Despite his words, it was evident from his braids and manner that Taavik was the senior and in command.

“A pleasure to meet you, gentlemen,” he replied. “May I introduce you to Major Anya Dubois? She’s a highly decorated military officer and an extreme environment

survival specialist. She'll be keeping us safe from dangerous conditions in the field."

"She's a female," Savaar blurted out, looking down at the major in surprise.

"So good of you to notice." The corner of Major Dubois's lip twitched in what could almost be described as a smile, if you squinted and looked sideways at it.

"A pleasure to meet you both," she said, shaking their hands in a no-nonsense manner. "And if you and your team do exactly what I tell you, I'll make sure to get all you pretty boys' home."

Murphy kept his face impassive as surprise washed over the faces of the two Lathar. He doubted either of them had ever been called "pretty boys" in their lives, even though they were handsome in that glossy magazine model way most of the Lathar were. From his conversations with Daaynal, he knew they regularly altered their genetic code, which was a large part of the reason they no longer had women of their own species, but he'd never thought to ask if they did it for cosmetic reasons as well.

Taavik recovered first, offering Dubois a small bow. "We will, of course, cede to the expert in the field."

"Excellent," he broke in, before Dubois could say anything else and possibly offend their alien guests. "Then let's saddle up and see what surprises the North Pole has in store for us."

"As long as it's not a fat man in a red suit," the major grumbled as she grabbed her pack. "Because if it is, I am *definitely* starting day drinking."

MURPHY'S BREATH fogged up the window of the Lathar transport as he stared out at the vast, frozen expanse of the Arctic. Ice and snow stretched out for miles, untouched by anything but wind and time.

He sighed as he leaned his head against the back of the seat and looked around. Both teams, human and Lathar, were

crammed inside with their equipment with two more transports following behind. There was a distinct divide with the humans clustered near the front of the transport and the Latharians at the back.

Each side watched the other when they thought they weren't looking, but there was definitely more interest from the Latharians, especially for the women on the team. It wasn't a creepy interest but more like fascination. Which was understandable given that he suspected most of them either didn't remember women who looked like them, or their only memories were from very early childhood.

"Have you traveled in one of our transports before?" Taavik, in the seat on the other side of the window, asked.

Lounging back against the big jump-seat, he looked totally relaxed, and not at all like a historian. Instead he looked just as much of a warrior as every other Lathar he'd met. And big.

Dubois had been right in her assessment of the two Lathar in charge of the alien team. Taavik was nearly seven feet if he was an inch and as broad as a barn, and Savaar was even bigger... Murphy had always been bigger than average and muscled for his frame, probably due to the fact he apparently had more Latharian DNA than most of humanity. But these two made him look tiny.

"I have." He nodded in reply to Taavik's question. "I visited the station in orbit. Transport both ways."

He didn't add that he didn't remember the journey up due the fact someone had tried and failed to blow him and the emperor up in a meeting. Just the memory of the way down was enough.

He frowned as something through the window caught his attention, and he squinted to bring it into focus. In the distance a shape jutted out from beneath inches of frost-coated glacier, the lines unnatural among the softer shapes of nature's frozen forms. It was like the prow of a ship rising from the frozen depths below. Except, if he could see it from this distance, it had to be much larger than any ship he'd ever seen.

“Is that...”

“Yes, I believe so. We’re coming up on the source of the distress signal now,” Taavik announced with a glance at his wrist-mounted display.

“Excellent.” Murphy nodded, still looking out the window.

For something so huge to have been hidden under the ice for so long was mind-boggling. But now he’d seen it, he understood how. Before they’d encountered the Lathar, no Terran had had any concept that a ship could be so big. No doubt explorers *had* seen it, but their minds had categorized it as “landscape” since no one would ever have conceived of either a spaceship being down there in the ice, or a spaceship that big.

“So what kind of ship is that?” he asked after a moment, tearing his gaze from the view to glance back at Taavik.

“It’s an expedition colony ship. An explorer class,” Taavik replied absently, as though it was common knowledge. For the Lathar it probably was. “They were used for long journeys across galaxies, usually filled with crew gen-modified for the environment they were intended for.”

He nodded, looking back out the window. “Do you still use them? Colony ships?”

“No.” Taavik shook his head. “The empire stopped this kind of expansion over five thousand years ago. I’ve never seen one of these outside of a museum. And then I’ve only seen parts of one. Never a whole vessel intact like this. And I don’t think anyone’s seen one this old or large. They got smaller as the technology got better.”

Murphy blinked in astonishment, realizing he was looking not just at humanity’s history but also that of the Lathar. His eyes locked with Taavik’s again.

“I have K’Daar blood,” he commented. “I’m assuming from that there must have been K’Daar warriors on board?”

Taavik nodded.

“Historical records say that the expedition was commanded by Prince Dariel K’Daar. They were one of the royal lines, and he was tipped to make emperor one day. But then he disappeared. History does not record what happened to him or the expedition he led.”

“Well, we know now.” Murphy turned back to the window as they circled around the part of the ship that jutted out from the ice. “Is that all of it?”

Taavik shook his head. “No, many levels are still buried. This is probably the first... twenty or so levels?”

Murphy eyed the distance between their chosen landing site and the mountain of the ancient ship, its layers of ice like a hat.

“Are you sure about the landing spot? There aren’t any external defenses we need to worry about?”

Taavik grinned.

“Don’t worry, Mr. President. We’ve done this before.” He indicated his team around them. “We’ll be fine, and it’s the best area for us to set up camp before we venture toward the ship.”

Murphy nodded, and within minutes the transports had circled the site and then touched down. As soon as they were on the ground, everyone scrambled into action.

The ramp started to descend, letting the biting cold into the warmer interior of the transport. Murphy cursed under his breath, pulling on his cold weather gear like the other humans aboard.

He hated the cold with a passion, and he knew only too well the devastating effect it could have on the human body. He and El had nearly frozen to death during the winter that first year they’d escaped the Anselm children’s home.

Taavik barked orders and a group of warriors jumped off the descending ramp to secure the area. They all waited until the all-clear came back, and then the rest of the group stepped out into the harsh arctic winds.

He slid a glance at Taavik and raised an eyebrow. None of the Latharian team had changed into heavier gear. They all wore the same leathers they'd worn every time he'd seen them, in all conditions. The only concession to the cold they seemed to have made was thin gloves and yellow tinted glasses to shield their eyes from the snow.

“How do you manage the cold?” he asked, trying not to shiver in his heavy gear, yet none of them seemed the slightest bit bothered by the cold.

Taavik smiled as he adjusted his gloves.

“My team and I are...” he paused for a second in the way the Lathar sometimes did when they were searching for a term that made sense in their translation matrices. “More like... archaeologists? Because of that, we're genetically modified for various weather conditions, including this.”

Murphy gave a low whistle, impressed. “You can do that?”

The Latharian raised a brow and nodded. “It's an easy genetic fix. You could always have it added when we get back to Devan Station.”

“I might just do that.” He nodded. Some might say it was a risk, the president undergoing treatment in the facility of another power, but he'd already done that. Without the scarred Izaean healer, Isan, he'd have died as a result of the injuries he'd received in that explosion.

“Okay... Let's see what we can see,” Taavik said, unpacking a sleek, sophisticated-looking device from a protective case. It had a tablet-like screen with multiple holographic display layers above it. The big Latharian tapped on the side of the gadget, which emitted a soft blue hum.

“This is an environmental penetration scanner,” he explained, slowly waving it in front of the snowy expanse. “It provides detailed imaging of structures hidden beneath layers of ice, rock or sediment before we send a team in. We can check that the structure of the ship is sound before we go in.”

Taavik moved the scanner in a sweeping motion, and the holographic display flickered before updating in real time to

show an enormous spacecraft extending down into the ice. Its sleek lines and impressive design gave the impression of a predator ready to strike even after being trapped for so long.

“I knew it was big... but that’s a lot bigger than I thought,” he commented, keeping an eye on his team as they set up base camp. The plan was to keep the majority of the team here and send in exploratory groups to survey the inside of the ship.

Dubois was in her element, glaring at their surroundings and then barking orders to get the shelters set up in the best configuration.

“Indeed,” Taavik murmured. “This has to be one of the biggest explorers I’ve ever seen. I don’t think we even have full schematics or manuals for these anymore. If we can get inside and their computer core is still intact...” He looked up, excitement shining in his eyes. “This could be the find of the century.”

Murphy noticed Savaar standing to the side with a huge box in his hands, his gaze fixed on Dubois. She noticed when she almost barreled into him and then stopped and looked up with a frown. He half expected her to send the big Latharian away with a flea in his ear, but instead she motioned for him to help her with a heavy equipment case she’d been carrying.

To his surprise, the major even managed a polite smile as the Latharian warrior wordlessly took the burden from her hands. As they walked side by side toward another tent being pitched by human and Latharian soldiers alike, there was an unexpected fluidity between them—a teamwork that transcended species.

“Well, holy shit,” he breathed.

Taavik looked up, a frown between his brows, and then turned to see what Murphy was looking at.

“Problem?”

Murphy blinked and then looked up to check the skies above. “I’m not sure. Dubois just smiled at Savaar, and I could have sworn that would herald the sky falling.”

Taavik chuckled and turned back to his scans. “Since the sky does appear to be where it’s supposed to, I suggest we carry on with our task and let nature take its course.”

“Indeed.” Murphy turned back to study the scans as well. “But if she knifes him, I’d like it on record that I told you so.”

VAARK’S SAKE, how much starch had Adia put in the collar of her dress uniform?

Leaning forward slightly, Lynara cast a quick look past the assembled admirals along the parade deck. The emperor’s shuttle had landed, but the airlock hadn’t cycled yet. Good. She risked a quick yank on her collar and sighed in relief as the hard fabric yielded. It was so stiff and upright that she was definitely going to end up with a welt where it had rubbed.

“Relax,” Dariel chuckled, watching her with amusement. He was enjoying her discomfiture. Asshole. “The emperor and I are good friends. It’ll all be fine. Trust me.”

His gaze dropped to the battered pin on her lapel, and his expression tightened. “You should wear the pin I sent you earlier. It will give a far better impression.”

She didn’t dignify that with a response, staring straight ahead. She’d received gifts from friends and family this morning for the official launch ceremony of the *Elysium*—flowers mostly and small trinkets to remember her first command. There had even been a bouquet from her father... huge and elaborate, with flowers from their family gardens.

Saar and the others had clubbed together to get her a necklace with a tiny model of the *Elysium* as the pendant, and there had been an “official” bouquet from the admiralty in the Navy’s colors to congratulate her. She suspected Illais’s involvement in that.

But the biggest and most elaborate bouquet had been in the K’Daar family colors, all expensive imported flowers from the hothouses on *Dranais Four* that would die within twelve hours without their specially adapted environment. It was an

expensive show off, and wasteful, all designed to show how much money Dariel and his family had.

A small box containing an officer's pin had been with them. Shiny and new, it had the wreath and motto of the K'Daar family around it—a match to the one Dariel himself wore.

A note had been tucked into the box:

My betrothed should have the best, not some old, battered pin.

She'd dropped the damn thing in the trash immediately and then taken great pleasure in pinning her mother's pin to her dress uniform. Not only had Dariel completely missed the reason she wore it, but the new pin was nothing more than a mark of ownership. His ownership over her, right in front of the emperor. He thought he was so clever, but anyone with half a brain could see right through him.

"*Quiet in the line,*" a commodore further down hissed, annoyance in her voice as the emperor and his group approached.

Lynara snapped her gaze forward, standing to attention as they waited for the emperor to reach them. Kayan Vorr, the first emperor of the Lathar, was a legend in his own lifetime.

She'd never met him, but he had forged a single empire from the princedoms and stood up to the Tanel when they'd tried to invade. He had created the Vorrstan to combat the brutal shapeshifting oppressors, and he had inspired naval officers—like her mother and Saar's father and grandfather—to take up arms and become heroes in a war that the Lathar shouldn't have won. But they had, and the Tanel had all but been wiped out. The few survivors had scattered, banished, and their leaders imprisoned.

She waited, looking straight ahead, as the emperor inspected the parade. Curiosity pulled at her, but she didn't peek, just in case he was looking. Even though she'd been named the *Elysium's* captain, if the emperor took against her, there was the chance she would be replaced.

She *really* wanted the emperor to like her.

Movement to her left caught her eye and she looked down to see Dariel holding out another copy of the damn pin.

“*Replace that battered thing,*” he hissed. “*It’s a vaarking disgrace!*”

“And this is Captain Varaant, who will be commanding the *Elysium* on her maiden voyage.”

She yanked her head up at the sound of Admiral Verran’s deep voice. The two admirals were right in front of her, flanking a tall, lean man who could only be...

Holy *vaark*, the emperor was hot! She blinked and managed a smile from somewhere without drooling. Kayan Vorr was not what she’d expected. Not at all. She’d seen official images of him, decked out in his emperor’s finery, but they did nothing to warn her about the aura of power and command that clung to him like a second skin.

“Well met, Captain,” he said, his deep voice sending tingles down her spine as he offered his hand. “I’ve read your service record. Very impressive.”

“You have?” she managed not to squeak, shaking his hand firmly.

He nodded, and his gaze dropped down for a second to the badges clipped to her uniform. She froze when his brow creased and he didn’t let go of her hand as she expected, but held it captive.

His dark gaze shot back to hers, pinning her with its intensity.

“Varaant? Any relation to Kalyna Varaant?” he asked, his focus intent on her. Everything else fell away, and she felt like they were the only two people in the room. But not in a romantic way. The emperor was hot as *vaark*, but he was old enough to be her grandfather, the slight silver at his temples evident of his years... and everyone knew he was devoted to his empress.

“My mother,” she replied, “although, I didn’t know her well.”

“I did.” He offered her a smile, his incisors a little too sharp for comfort. “Kal and I were at the academy together.”

She blinked. “I didn’t know that. But I didn’t know her very well. She died when I was small.”

To her surprise, the echoes of grief washed through the emperor’s dark eyes, and his hand tightened on hers. “You look like her. She would have been so proud of you, and you honor her memory by wearing her badge. It was... a surprise and a nice one, to see our class number again,” he said, nodding to the small inscription of five numbers under the emblem of the insignia, and released her hand. “You have our blessings and best wishes for your voyage, Captain. Go with the gods and our thoughts.”

“Thank you, Your Majesty,” she said with a bow as he moved on.

Dariel tried to talk to him, but the emperor moved past him without acknowledgment to talk to the next person in line. Lynara didn’t pay attention to what was said, her mind still going over her conversation with the emperor. She’d known he’d approved the battle-honors after her mother’s death and ratified her as a princess of the line, but she’d always thought that was an official thing. She’d never thought that the emperor himself... holy shit, her mom had gone to the academy with *Kayan Vorr*?

Before she realized it, the official part of the ceremony was over, the emperor smashing a bottle of *kravnia* against the *Elysium*’s hull. The parade broke up and she was standing by the side of her ship when her father approached.

“There she is!” he announced. “My daughter, the captain of the *Elysium*!”

She stiffened, but his expression was not set in the disapproving lines it usually was. Not even at the sight of her in her navy uniform instead of the gowns and bracelets of the court.

“Father,” she inclined her head and then leaned forward to air-kiss his cheeks. It wasn’t really appropriate given she was in uniform, but she’d always had a foot in two worlds. “Thank you for coming. I... didn’t expect you to.”

She’d sent him the invitation, of course. But he hadn’t replied, so she assumed he wasn’t coming, especially as it was an Imperial Navy affair, and he’d refused to have anything to do with the navy since her mother had died.

“Of course I came,” he said, taking both her hands in his and smiling at her. “It’s not every day my favorite daughter gets command of an explorer-class ship.”

Her lips quirked slightly. “I’m your only daughter,” she pointed out.”

“True,” he said, pulling her toward him and grazing a kiss against her temple. “I’m sorry,” he murmured. “I know how much this... your career means to you, and I’m proud of you. I just wanted you to know that, okay?”

Tears welled in the backs of her eyes as she looked up at him.

“Thank you,” she said, tightly. “That means a lot.”

He nodded and then cleared his throat and stepped back. He’d never been comfortable with any display of emotions. Looking around, he spotted Saar and her friends about to descend.

“Go,” he urged her toward them. “Celebrate. I’ll talk to you soon.”

*H*is Royal Highness, Prince Dariel K'Daar, was a right *draanthing* pain in the ass.

Lynara practically vibrated with rage as she stalked down the *Elysium's* corridors, heading for the bridge. It had been bad enough putting up with the *vaarking* idiot during the prep-phase before mission launch, where he'd stuck his nose into everything during all the briefings, but now he'd started altering her standing orders for the ship.

Which, considering he knew absolutely nothing about captaining a damn ship or the dangers they faced traversing the galaxy, meant him changing orders when he felt like it could put them all in danger. In fact, if she hadn't caught them in time, *would* have put them all in danger.

Even so, she still couldn't believe what he'd done. His royal assholeness had gone and changed course so he could look at some pretty nebula, but he hadn't bothered running any scans or consulting anyone who actually knew what they were doing to make sure it was *safe* to change course. He'd just swept in, bullied the officer on duty on the bridge, and threatened him with the brig for disrespecting a royal prince before issuing the change order.

It had only been because she wasn't sleeping right that she'd registered the change in course. Three weeks aboard the *Elysium* and she knew the ship inside out. Knew her quirks and foibles as well as she knew her own features in the mirror.

It wasn't just that. Three weeks in... Hell, three days in, and she'd been protective of the ship. *Her ship*. This was her baby and no one, certainly not some spoiled asshole prince, was making decisions that would put her and the nearly ten thousand passengers currently in stasis in danger.

She'd contacted the bridge. One of the watch officers had clued her in, and she'd hauled ass up here.

"Should have shoved him in stasis myself. Or maybe out the airlock," she grumbled under her breath as the elevator stopped at the command deck. "*Vaarking* asshole would deserve it."

So what if killing a prince of the blood was treason? She could always say it was an accident. His foolish scheme had put the ship in danger and resulted in a random airlock accident. Or something... She grumbled in the back of her throat and burst out the doors like a destroyer at full charge, almost flattening a couple of junior officers coming the other way.

"Where is he?" she demanded.

It was a testament to how much trouble the prince had already caused because neither of them needed her to clarify who she meant. Instead, they just pointed silently in the direction of the bridge.

She nodded her thanks curtly and headed that way, virtually vibrating with anger. There had been absolutely no exploration in this sector, so they were it, leading the charge and mapping as they went. Carving out new starmaps with their sensor scans.

Even so, everything was new to them and therefore suspect, so certain things... certain clues about the way space behaved meant they had rigorous procedures when they entered a new area of space to ensure the safety of ship and crew.

Did his assholeness care about that? Of course not. He just had to see some triple suns rise over a planet near a nebula without checking the rest of the system, as per procedure. And

because he hadn't, they were about to head into a system with a rogue world whose crazy orbit even their computers couldn't plot. Their royal idiot was about to steer them straight into a death trap.

The familiar hum of the ship's systems filled the air as she entered the bridge. She stopped abruptly, her nostrils flaring as she inhaled the heavy, cloying smell of the prince's cologne and bit back a snarl.

Dariel lounged in the captain's chair, one leg slung over the arm as if he owned the place. Nearby, crew members went about their duties, their faces carefully neutral as they tried to pretend the prince wasn't there.

"Your Highness," she greeted him through gritted teeth, "I see you've decided to grace us with your presence on the bridge. Perhaps you'd like to explain why you've taken it upon yourself to change the ship's course?"

Dariel raised an eyebrow. "As the future ruler of our new colony, it only makes sense for me to take command here as well, Lynara. I'm merely looking out for the best interests of my people."

"Expedition commander," she reminded him. "Not ruler. The colony is part of the empire and last I checked, Kayan Vorr is still on the throne."

"Commander, of course." Dariel smiled. "Just a slip of the tongue."

Yeah, right. Slip of the tongue, her ass.

She kept her cool, though.

"Are you a qualified astronavigator, Your Highness?" she asked. "Because as far as I am aware, your leadership remit is limited to the ground expedition only. So the *only* way you should be meddling in navigation is if you are a trained navigator."

Anger flashed in Dariel's eyes as he shoved up out of the captain's chair—*her* chair—and stalked across the bridge toward her. She stood her ground, refusing to back down or show any emotion as he crowded her, shoving his face into

hers. It was a bullying tactic, pure and simple, and her hand itched to go for the blaster at her side. Talking back to a prince of the empire was one thing. However, shooting one was another completely.

“How *dare* you speak to me like that!” he hissed, fury turning his face purple. “I am a prince of the blood, and you *will* remember your place.”

“Captain,” she reminded him, her eyes hard as she lifted her chin in challenge. “It’s ‘You will remember your place, *Captain.*’”

She met his eyes steadily, refusing to back down. The days when she was young and impressionable and could have been intimidated by his show of anger and threats were long gone.

“The admiralty placed *me* in command of this ship and crew, Your Highness,” she said in a hard voice. “They trusted *me* with the responsibility to keep us all safe and get us to our destination in one piece. You would do well to remember that and refrain from interfering. Especially when your orders put the entire ship at risk. Like putting us right into the path of a rogue planet with an oscillating orbit just so you can get pictures of a sunrise.”

He looked at her, but she saw the slight flicker of his eyelid—the quickly suppressed surprise. *Vaark’s* sake. Naval officer politics were nowhere near as cut-throat as those in the Imperial Court, but it was easy to see that Dariel was no player in either.

The tension on the bridge thickened enough to cut with a knife as the prince glared at her, trying to stare her down. She played this game with Saar, who had a stare that could give his own reflection a headache, so there was no way the arrogant prince was going to win.

The bridge fell silent save for the sound of their breathing. She felt the weight of the crew’s eyes on her, waiting to see how this little drama would play out. Like her, they would be returning with the ship, so none of them would have to deal with Dariel’s wrath on the return journey.

It seemed like an eternity, but finally, the prince snorted.

“Whatever! I don’t have time for this!” He snarled and turned to march off the bridge.

She let out a deep breath and walked across to settle into the captain’s chair. A soft air of relief washed through the bridge. Several of the crew looked back at her, but she ignored them, focusing on the viewscreen ahead.

“Bring us back to our original course,” she ordered, running a hand lightly over the cool metal armrests and feeling calmer now that she was in control of her ship once more. “Increase speed by three microns to make up the lost time and then return to original speed.”

“*Yes, captain!*”

The bridge crew sprang into action, following her orders with practiced precision. Within seconds, the ship was on a new vector and they’d resumed their journey toward their original destination.

She sat in the captain’s chair, staring out at the stars streaming past them. Dariel had been an asshole since he had come aboard. He was a royal prince and used to getting his own way. Even though he’d served on other ships before, somehow the concept that he was merely a passenger on her ship, and *she* was in command had completely eluded him. This had been the fourth—no, the fifth time he’d challenged her orders—but it was the first time he’d outright defied her and changed one of them. And to do it while she was off shift and presumably asleep was just downright *vaarking* sneaky.

She closed her eyes and took a moment to calm herself. It would be over soon, though. Only a few more days left. They were rapidly approaching the final and longest leg of their journey. Once they reached the point of no return, they would all go into stasis, trusting the ship’s computer and automated systems to carry them across the vast distance to their destination while they slept. Which would mean years and years of sleep without the constant complaints and interruptions from their royal passenger.

When they woke, they would be in orbit of a new planet. One she could offload Prince Pain-in-the-Ass and the other passengers onto. She only had to go down to the surface a few times. Once the expedition had established a base camp, she would turn the ship around and start the long voyage back home.

A smile quirked her lips. She would no longer have to put up with him. No more encounters with Dariel and his meddling. But most importantly, she could return home without the need to follow her father's command to marry the asshole prince she'd despised from the moment she'd met him.

She was free.

Finally *free*.

THE NEXT DAY Lynara left the bridge after a long, hard shift. She didn't mind. She'd worked her ass off for the right to sit in the captain's chair, so no way would she complain about what she had to do while sitting there.

Rubbing the back of her neck, she exited the lift near her quarters. The captain's suite on an explorer was bigger than most, containing her living areas as well as a separate office and briefing room, but it was by no means the most impressive.

That honor went to the VIP quarters aboard, which Dariel and his entourage had claimed. As a princess of the line, she could have claimed one herself and turned it into the captain's suite, but she hadn't bothered. For one thing, that would put her sharing a corridor with prince asshole himself, and for another, she really didn't need all that space.

But the one luxury the captain's quarters had that she really, *really* liked was the bath. Something about being able to lie full length in hot water just eased not only the body but the mind and soul as well. She needed that today.

Sensing her bio-signature, the doors slid open as she approached. She hadn't taken more than a few steps inside when she registered she wasn't alone.

Frowning, she paused in place. The main room, bathed in the gentle glow of the ship's ambient lighting, was empty. As was the office, separated from the room with a simple glass panel. She moved through the quarters toward her bedroom.

The door slid open and her expression tightened.

Dariel lounged on her bed as if it were his own. He was naked, if his clothes strewn across the floor were any indication, with nothing but a thin sheet to preserve his modesty.

“Lynara. My betrothed,” he said with a smile that she supposed was meant to be charming but left her feeling like she needed a month-long shower instead.

He sat up, the sheet sliding dangerously low to reveal the sculpted lines of his abs and the hard ridges of muscle that disappeared beneath the covers. “I thought you’d never get off duty. What kept you so long?”

“What the *vaark* are you doing in my quarters?” she demanded, glaring at him.

“Well, we *are* betrothed,” he said, watching her with unreadable eyes. “And you’re way too uptight. That little scene on the bridge earlier proved that.”

He patted the bed beside him. “Come on. Getting laid will relax you.”

She couldn’t help it. She barked out a laugh and looked at him like he’d grown another head.

“You can’t be *vaarking* serious,” she hissed, her hands clenched into tight balls at her side. It was that or rend him into tiny pieces here and now. “That ‘little scene on the bridge’ was me saving the ship from smashing headlong into a *vaarking* planet, not some kind of... hysterical outburst!”

Dariel shrugged, the muscles in his bare shoulders shifting beneath his bronzed skin. “It sure looked hysterical to me. Especially the way you spoke to me. No captain in her right mind would have offered a prince an insult that way.”

“Insult?” she spat, her cheeks red with rage. “I should have thrown you out of a damn airlock!”

He raised an eyebrow, an indulgent smile curving his lips. “I can see the pressures of captaincy are getting to you, my love, so I will forgive your outbursts. Now come, we are betrothed after all.”

“You are seriously out of your skull.” Her expression dropped and she glared at him. If he thought she was getting into bed with him...

“I didn’t think you’d be this old-fashioned, Lynara.” He looked at her and his smile faded into a frown. “I have been patient with you, even allowed your little... dalliances with the Cavaal boy. But that stops now. You are my betrothed. You *will* be my wife. And now, you will get into bed so I can claim what is rightfully mine.”

Old-fashioned? Like *vaark!*

“This has nothing to do with being old-fashioned,” she shot back, her words a cold whip in the air. “We might be technically betrothed, *Your Highness*, but we are not married yet. That requires my agreement. And I will *never* marry you.”

His laugh, deep and cruel, echoed off the walls.

“A mere formality,” he threw back, his eyes glinting coldly. “And your *agreement*, as you so quaintly put it, is not required. I can have us married by proxy with just a comms call.”

Fury blasted through her like a star going supernova.

“Get out,” she hissed, her hand dropping to the blaster holstered at her hip. Normally she wouldn’t have been armed on board, but there had been reports of pirates in this area so she’d authorized personal weaponry for the crew in case they had to fight off a boarding party. “Before I decide this room needs a little extra ventilation.”

His grin faltered at her words, his eyes widening in surprise. It obviously wasn’t the reaction he’d expected, but she didn’t give a *draanth* about that or about the fact he was a prince of the blood.

“I wouldn’t touch you with a ten-foot pole, even if you were the last man in the universe,” she snarled “Now. Get. The. *Vaark*. Out.”

His eyes flashed with something between anger and disbelief as he slid off the bed, bundling the sheet around his waist.

“You can’t be serious,” he sputtered, his jaw clenching tightly.

“Oh, I’m deadly serious.”

“I am a prince of the empire!” he roared in indignant fury. “You are my subject!”

Her laugh rang out harshly, a bitter sound devoid of any humor.

“Prince or not,” she clipped out, her voice steady with cold anger, “on this ship, I’m the captain.”

She closed the gap between them, spearing him with a hard gaze.

“On this ship, you’re neither my prince nor my betrothed,” she told him, each word perfectly enunciated. “You are my passenger. That is all. Now, I will only tell you once more before I start shooting. Get out of my room.”

Silence fell as he searched her face and then his expression twisted. Flouncing across the room like a child who had been denied a wanted toy, he turned back to spear her with a look so hateful it could have cracked the spaceship’s hull.

“You’ll be sorry for this,” he hissed, his voice venomous. His eyes glinted darkly. “I’ll make sure of it. One day, you’ll come crawling to me, begging for my forgiveness.”

She laughed, shaking her head.

“Oh, it’ll be a long, cold wait before I ever beg you for anything,” she threw back. “So you’d better wrap up warm.”

With that, she waved her hand and activated the door panel. It slid shut with a hiss, separating her from the prince and his bruised ego.

Alone again, Lynara inhaled deeply. Then, she allowed herself a small smirk. Hell, telling that asshole where to get off had felt *good*.

She turned, rubbing at her neck again. Her gaze fell on the bed and she groaned. Dariel had been naked in those sheets. Got his scent all over them. Probably rubbed his junk on them.

Her lip curled back. The very idea of being intimate with him made her insides coil, nausea bubbling up as if she'd just rode the worst hyperspace jump of her life. Nope, just nope. No way could she marry him, and he *did* need her consent, even if he had blathered on about marriages by proxy. They weren't binding until both parties agreed.

But still. Perhaps... Could there be an "accident"? A malfunctioning airlock, a rogue asteroid...

Then she shook her head at herself and discarded the thought. She was a captain, not a killer. But damn, did she want out of this situation. Getting to that planet couldn't come soon enough. But for now, those sheets had to come off...

Lynara sighed as the doors to the captain's office slid shut behind her, sealing her into blessed solitude. Striding across the room, she sank into the worn leather chair behind her desk with a groan. After a long day, her body ached for rest, but her mind buzzed with the day's events.

Rubbing the back of her neck, she eyed the stack of mission reports with dismay. The paperwork requiring the captain's signature seemed endless, and she was seriously wondering whether it was actually breeding somewhere like some new form of stationary-based rabbit lifeform.

She sighed as she pulled the stack before her. Even though she loathed it with a passion, she knew each form served a purpose and enabled someone somewhere aboard to do their duty. Even if that duty *was* creating more forms for her to sign.

As a small blessing, at least Dariel had made himself scarce today. She'd dreaded the thought of facing him today, especially after throwing him out of her quarters last night, so his absence was a small mercy that she was very grateful for.

Opening the first file, she skimmed through pages of dull facts and figures. The familiar routine eased her mind even as her eyes wanted to glaze over at the boring details about supply manifests and engine outputs. She made herself focus, and before long was lost in admin.

A sudden chime from the comm system startled her, and she glanced up.

"Yes, what is it?"

“Incoming long-range communication,” the computer announced in its soft, androgynous voice.

“Identify code, please,” she ordered, closing the file in front of her.

“Code is SS-Nine-Alpha-Four. Registered to Colonel Saar Cavaal, Captain. Would you like me to display it on screen?”

She was already smiling as she replied. “Yes, please do.”

She leaned back as Saar’s rugged features appeared. His blue eyes glinted with mischief, bringing back memories of stolen moments in shadowy corners of seedy bars and their last night together before they’d both left for deployment. “Saar,” she said. “To what do I owe the pleasure?”

He grinned, the expression highlighting a scar through one eyebrow, a souvenir from some covert operation she’d never dared to ask about. “Just calling to congratulate the captain. Heard you had a close call out there yesterday but pulled through without a scratch. You always did have nerves of steel.”

She shrugged, not bothering to ask how he’d found out about their near miss with the rouge planet. He was Sector Seven. They always found out about everything. Even, it seemed, events on a ship heading at speed into the unknown. “All in a day’s work. Someone has to save the universe from these idiot royals the admiralty saw fit to foist off on me.”

“Well, someone had to deal with him, I guess.” He chuckled. “So, how are you taking to command? And how’s the crew settling in?”

Lynara leaned back in her chair, tapping her pen against the desk while Saar made small talk. She raised an eyebrow at the casual questions but decided to play along.

“You know how it is. They grumble and complain, but they get the job done. They’re a good bunch. A little antsy because well...”

They were headed into the unknown. That would make any crew a little on edge.

She paused and looked at him. Saar was always direct and never one for idle chitchat. So what gave?

Saar nodded absently, his eyes tightening briefly, and an expression she'd never seen before washed through his eyes. Something was definitely off.

“What’s going on, Saar?” Lynara asked, her tone firm and probing. “You look as stiff as an ensign ordered to high tea at the courts.”

He sighed and looked down. When he looked back up, he wore a solemn expression that shook her to the core.

“Look, as soon as you left, I realized I should have said something.” He paused again. “I... well...”

She frowned. Saar was the ultimate charming bad boy. He was never at such a loss for words.

“Said something? Said what?”

He scowled, as if bothered by the weight of his own confession.

“I’m in love with you, Lynara,” he blurted out and then scowled at her again. It was such a Saar thing to do that she would have smiled if not for *what* he’d said. “There, I said it.”

She froze. What the hell did she say to that? She had never expected such a declaration, not from him, of all people. Not in a million years. Sure, she cared for him, but love? They were friends with benefits—just occasional bed partners who understood boundaries. She’d always assumed he felt the same way.

“You... you do?”

A furrow formed on his brow, and she could see the tenseness in his shoulders.

“Yes,” he said, desperation lacing his voice. “I should’ve asked you not to go.”

She let out an incredulous chuckle. “You know that was never an option. This is my mission, my calling... I couldn’t have turned it down.”

“Yeah, I know.” He sighed, leaning back in his chair and running big hands through his close-cropped hair. Then he looked back at her, determination in his steely gaze. “When you come back, Lynara... will you marry me?”

The words hit her like a blast from a force lance, sending her scrambling to wrap her head around the new reality unfolding in front of her.

She gave a small, strained laugh, her stomach twisting itself into knots.

“Yeah, right. I see what you’re doing,” she teased, her heart aching for him like a vise squeezing her chest and threatening to suffocate her. “You’ll be in your dotage by then, just looking to get yourself a young, hot wife.”

He didn’t laugh. His face remained serious as he said, “I’m not kidding, Linnie. I won’t be that old, and I’ll wait for you.”

Her pulse quickened, the fear of breaking his heart flooding her veins. She hadn’t wanted him to do that. In that instant, she saw past the mask to the truth buried beneath their flirtatious banter all these years: Saar loved her, and now she couldn’t ignore it anymore.

“Please,” she begged, her voice choked by the raw emotions threatening to break free. “Don’t wait. Live, find love. Have a family. For my sake.”

Have everything I couldn’t have.

He shook his head, resolve in the set line of his jaw.

“There’s no one else for me, Linnie. I thought you always knew that. I’ll wait,” he promised, all but shattering her soul with his determination. “Until my last breath.”

And then he cut the comm.

As the screen went dark, Lynara stared at the space where Saar’s fading image had been, her chest constricting with the weight of his words and the tangled emotions they conjured within her. She hated hurting him, but her duty was elsewhere, pulling her away from any possible chance to anchor her heart beside his. For the sake of both their futures, she had to remain

focused on her mission, even if it meant breaking her best friend's heart.

THE NEXT MORNING Lynara stood on the bridge of the ship, back straight and posture textbook perfect as she surveyed the array of star-speckled darkness that stretched out in the viewscreen before her.

They were the first Latharians to see this area of space, the first people to explore and map it. The idea both filled her with pride and terrified her at the same time.

Pride because she'd done it. She'd not only broken from the royal upbringing her father had tried to foist onto her, but she'd also brought honor to her mother's legacy rather than tarnishing it. Her mother had been the youngest ever officer to command a destroyer... and now Lynara herself was the youngest ever officer to command an explorer. The two sides of the empire in perfect harmony. And she'd brought honor to her mother's memory.

It was enough to wash the confrontation with Prince Dariel clear from her mind. For all of a second or two before his voice broke through the silent hum of the bridge.

"Your Highness? You can't go onto the bridge, Your Highness! Captain's orders!"

"Oh, I'm sure the captain will want to see her betrothed."

"What the vaark does he want now?" she muttered under her breath, exchanging a glance with Adia, sitting at the duty officer's station. She'd been looking through the rules and bylaws that governed both Imperial ships and colony expeditions. They needed something... anything... to curtail the prince's access to ship systems before he did some real damage.

She turned to look over her shoulder.

"Your Highness." She inclined her head to the required level of respect from a princess of the line to a prince of the blood. Technically she could have gotten away with less, given

she was the captain and the ranking officer of the ship, but the pissiness if she did just wasn't worth it. "What can we do for you this morning?"

"You can't bar me from the bridge like this," he said as he strode across the deck toward her. "I have a right to be here!"

She shrugged slightly, an elegant, one-shouldered movement as she imagined scraping him off the sole of her boot like so much *trall*.

"Actually, you don't. Not until we are in orbit of CV-Three," she said, naming their target planet, the place Dariel and his colony would call home. "Until then, I am the ranking officer and according to bylaw three-five-oh-nine of the Imperial ship governance code, I have the right to restrict access to operational areas of the ship to crew only. All colony expedition staff must remain within their designated areas for their own safety."

"What?" Dariel looked stunned for a moment and then shot a glance at his aide, an ever-present shadow at his side. She'd been surprised he wasn't in the bed as well last night. Or at least lurking nearby like the *liiraas* snake he was.

"Captain Varaant, surely you owe me the opportunity to prove the prowess of a K'Daar prince?" Dariel's arrogance bounced back as he changed tack, a smirk she instantly wanted to slap off his face spreading over his lips. "After all, there is no better pilot in the empire than a K'Daar warrior, now is there?"

Vaark. He had her there. The K'Daar had earned their place by supplying ace pilots and fighters during the war, so she couldn't argue with him there. And she couldn't even argue that her academy stats were higher than his since he'd pulled the family card and gotten out of flight training with the excuse he couldn't risk giving away K'Daar strategies and tactics.

"Prince or not, pilot or not. I am captain here, and I already have a pilot. Your services are not required here, Your Highness."

“Very well,” he answered with a haughty snort as he walked his fingers across the back of the pilot’s console.

The pilot looked up at her with wide eyes as the prince got closer, but she motioned the young man to remain in place. Let Dariel sit on his damned lap if need be; she wasn’t giving him permission to take helm control.

“I must say, I had hoped this would go a little easier, Lynara. But history will prove me right.”

“What have you done?” she demanded, dread sending ice down her spine as her gaze locked with his.

He didn’t answer her, simply smirked as he leaned over the console, batting the pilot’s hands out of the way. His fingers danced over the controls with the grace of a concert pianist, and alarms squawked out warnings.

“What the *vaark*?” She gasped, as both her and the pilot lunged forward to get his hands off the console.

The ship lurched at the sudden course change, one no sane pilot would ever make at this speed with a ship this big. The engines groaned in protest under the sudden strain, the ship’s subframe screaming as it was twisted and pulled in opposite directions.

“What the hell have you done?” she shouted, leaping toward the captain’s chair, desperate to seize the controls and right their course. But before she could do anything, startled gasps drew her attention forward.

She whirled around to face the viewscreen, and her eyes widened as what looked like a flower bloomed in space right in front of them. Its huge petals were the most beautiful cerulean, sparkling and shimmering in space as they reached toward the *Elysium*, the stars beyond just visible. What the *vaark* was that?

“Shit! Helm, reverse course, now!” she barked, her eyes darting between the instruments and the viewscreen.

The crew scrambled to obey, tension thick in the air as the ship hurtled toward the unknown. She turned, hard gaze

spearing the security team who were supposed to have been guarding the bridge.

“Arrest the prince and get him off my bridge!” she bellowed, her fingers hammering commands into the console as the anomaly loomed ever closer.

The officers hesitated, the confusion etched on their faces. “But, Captain,” one stammered, “He’s a... *prince*.”

“I don’t care if he’s the *vaarking* emperor himself!” she roared, her voice echoing through the bridge like a thunderclap. “Get him out of here, now!”

With barely a pause, the security officers sprang into action, grabbing the prince’s arms and yanking him away from the console. At any other time, seeing the prince’s smug face dissolve into confusion and resistance might have been a small source of satisfaction, but she had no time for that right now. She needed to get the ship away from whatever the *vaark* that was out there.

“Captain, the engines are at full reverse, but we’re not able to break free!” called the pilot, beads of cold sweat sliding down the side his face as he grappled with the controls.

It was too late.

The ship shuddered violently as it was sucked into the anomaly, the fabric of reality seeming to fold in on itself. It felt like she was being turned inside out—over and over, without end.

Colors swirled around her vision, an otherworldly kaleidoscope that seemed to defy the laws of physics. Up was down, down was up. Left and right no longer existed in any meaningful sense.

Her stomach churned in protest, and her nerve endings sizzled with a thousand conflicting sensations as her body was overwhelmed. The strangeness of it ripped at her, shredding her sense of reality like tissue paper.

Then just as abruptly as it had started, it stopped.

The pull of the anomaly slackened, releasing them like a predator spitting out prey it didn't like. Nausea rushed up her throat, bile burning as her senses tried to steady themselves.

But they weren't out of danger yet.

The screams of alarms on the bridge pierced the air like klaxon calls, the shrill vibrations reverberating through her being. Panicked shouts cut through the cacophony as the ship hurtled headlong into the atmosphere of the unknown planet that even now filled the viewscreen.

"*Trall!*" she hissed. They were hurtling toward a planet's surface quicker than the ship was designed for, with brakes that weren't rated for atmospheric descent. "Reverse thrust on all engines!"

Time slowed as they battled against the forces of the planet's atmosphere. Adrenaline coursed through her veins as her fingers danced across the console, desperately inputting commands to try and keep the ship under control.

"Helm's not responding, Captain!" the helmsman called out, his voice strained yet controlled under the pressure.

"Structural integrity failing. We can't pull away!" Engineers shouted over the comm.

"What about escape pods?"

"Too late. The pods will burn up in re-entry," her chief engineer replied, his grim tone underlining the severity of their predicament.

"Put all power on the forward shields and throw the engines into reverse!" she barked. With one final deep breath, she opened a ship-wide comm, her voice steady. "Attention, all hands. Brace for impact!"

The world exploded into chaos and fire, tumbling over and over. Lynara screamed as she was thrown around like the ragdoll she'd loved as a child, reaching out desperately to try and grab something to hold on to.

But the world was topsy-turvy, her command chair appearing and disappearing like she was looking at the world through a kaleidoscope of flames and darkness. Each time she tried, she missed and tumbled further into the maelstrom.

The flash of sparking wires and failing lights punctuated the darkness, giving her snapshots of confusion and horror: the lifeless gaze of one of the crew slumped against a ruptured bulkhead; the blood-spattered control console on front of her blinking and whirring its distress; a broken wall panel sparking as circuits shorted.

More screams.

They tore through her as she slammed into hard surfaces, each impact driving the breath from her lungs and stealing more of her strength. Agony lanced through her, a heavy drum in time with the ship's shuddering death throes, and then she slammed into something bigger and far more final than before.

It was like she'd hit a planet at light speed. One moment she was conscious, trying to orientate herself in the chaos, but the next she drifted in a foggy haze, somewhere between pain and the oblivion of unconsciousness.

The pain came back first. It always did.

Then came sound. Screams of pain and soft moaning. The squeal of tortured metal as it settled. Then the sound of alarm klaxons and the ship's computer warning of an imminent collision, like it was a second soundbite that someone had just turned up the volume on.

She gasped, trying to draw air into her lungs, but her ribs complained bitterly. Reality stitched itself back together in disjointed pieces, and she thought she would lose it again... Slide back down into blackness.

Somehow she didn't. Instead, she blinked and looked up at the ceiling above her. It looked wrong, the metal twisted and buckled above her, bulging like it held the weight of the thousand oceans. The ship moaned, a tortured sound like a wounded beast in its death throes. Her soft groan echoed it as she tried to turn on her side, coughing as she tried to clear the smoke from her lungs. Each movement sent shards of pain through her sharper than any shattered glass.

The metallic symphony of the dying ship faded into a grating backdrop as Dariel's voice cut through the chaos, his words as crisp and cold as the ice coating the hull. "Corbin, Takar, get the fires under control. Alun, secure the mainframe. We can't afford to lose any data."

She watched him, her body leaden and her thoughts thick. Dariel was a symphony of control in the midst of pandemonium, his commands painting a portrait of leadership. His lips quirked, a ghost of a smile pulling at the corners of his mouth as he met her gaze, his satisfaction barely masked.

He sank to his knees beside her, the side of his face bathed in the icy glow of malfunctioning lights. A facsimile of a concerned prince, a heroic figure etched in the eerie blue light. Lynara didn't need her fading strength to see through the illusion.

"You..." Her voice came as a whisper, bitter and biting. "You've murdered us all."

"No, my love," he replied with a small, indulgent smile as he reached out to tuck a lock of her hair behind her ear. She didn't even have the strength to try and bite him. "I've given

them a fresh start. A new beginning away from the stranglehold of the empire. A new world... where we make the rules not an emperor who lives in the past, and sees enemies in every shadow and around every corner.”

She shook her head. “You’re crazy. Truly crazy.”

He chuckled as he leaned in, acting the part of the concerned betrothed, looking after the woman he was to be married to. Her skin crawled and she tried to move away, but his hard hand clamped down on her shoulder to keep her in place.

“A virgin world where I am the sovereign,” he whispered. His mask of warmth slipped to reveal the icy ambition beneath. “And all I needed to do was get rid of *you*.”

She gasped as realization dawned, cold and brutal. This was no accident. He meant to rule... whatever the cost. A life serving the crown would never satisfy him. And as the throne was out of reach, he’d found another way to claim power for himself. She recoiled in disgust.

“You’re mad!”

His laugh rang through the chaos, a chilling sound rang off the ruined walls of the bridge.

“Poor Lynara,” he cooed, his voice dripping with mock concern as he turned to the shell-shocked crew. “She’s hit her head in the crash, I’m afraid. Can’t trust a word she says. We need to stabilize her.”

He motioned to a pair of crew members. “You two! Grab a stretcher. We need to get her out of here. *Now!*”

As if replying to his comment, the ship groaned again, and everyone in the room froze, looking up.

“We need to clear this deck,” Dariel barked the order. “That ceiling’s going to come down any minute and we need to be out of here before it does.”

His gaze locked with hers, and for a brief moment, she saw a flicker of satisfaction in those icy depths. The realization chilled her more than the pain coursing through her veins.

“You picked a hell of a time for a nap, my love. It’s a good job I’m here. I can take over for you now... You just rest.”

“No,” she argued, struggling to sit up. The pain made her lightheaded, but she almost managed it. “I’m good... Someone give me a sitrep, *now!*”

“She doesn’t know what she’s saying. She’s injured... Really badly,” Dariel cut her off, his loud voice drowning hers out as he put a hand out and shoved her back down none too gently, his movement concealed by his body.

“Stasis,” he announced, his gaze cold steel. “Put her in stasis until she recovers. It’s what’s best for her... for all of us.”

“No...no!” Lynara gasped, her protest weak and garbled, a desperate plea to the crew blinded by Dariel’s lies. But her strength ebbed, and her words morphed into incoherent mumbles as they lifted her on to a stretcher.

The concerned faces of her crew swam into view above her, their brows knitted in worry. She tried to tell them, tried to warn them of Dariel’s madness, but her words were a garbled mess of sound, just a babble as she tried to make herself understood.

“See what I mean...”

His voice faded off, and time became a meaningless concept as she drifted on a sea of pain and delirium. Shadows became specters of crew members, their faces morphing and warping into parodies of their true selves as she was carried through the ship. But not the ship as she knew it. The gleaming metal corridors were gone, replaced with shattered lines and buckled metal.

Several times she opened her eyes to find herself being carried upright as those around her were forced to climb between decks, access granted by whatever forces had torn through the ship, opening her from top to bottom.

She came to as they entered the stasis hall, gasping as biting cold air filled her lungs. Her struggles were weak and

fitful as she was eased into a pod, her body protesting every movement.

The last thing she heard was Dariel's soothing lies. "The pod will heal her injuries. We'll return when she's recovered."

She locked eyes with him as the glass closed, and then his face faded out, her world becoming silence as the drugs took hold. The world of the living faded, replaced by the numbing stillness of the stasis.

But as the cold took over, her last conscious thought was of defiance. Dariel may have won the battle, but she would not let him win the war.

She would wake. She would fight.

For herself, for her crew, for her ship.

She would never let him win.

THE SHIP in the ice was a lot bigger than he'd expected.

Murphy strode across the stark white expanse toward the looming hulk of the ancient ship, Taavik at his side as their teams trailed closely behind.

Ice crystals sparkled in the harsh arctic sunlight as the snow crunched underfoot, spreading in an endless carpet until it reached the ship. Recent activity had driven it up through the layers of snow and ice, revealing the side of the colossal leviathan that had lain undisturbed for countless eons.

His breathing echoed in his ears as he looked up. He'd known the ship would be big, but being this close to it brought that size into focus in a way that threatened to fritz his brain. He felt like an ant looking up at a skyscraper.

When he exhaled, his breath fogged up his helmet's visor and cut off his view.

"Are these really necessary?" He turned to Taavik, tapping the side of the helmet.

It hadn't escaped his notice that only the humans were wearing them, not the Latharian warriors on the team.

Taavik's expression was focused as he squinted up at the big ship in front of them, shielding his face from the sun with a hand. "We have no idea what the composition of the air inside is. I don't want to risk anyone."

By that, he meant he didn't want to risk any of the humans with them. Even though the big Latharian was far more diplomatic than Daaynal, the emperor, would have been, there was still the elephant in the room. Humans were smaller... weaker, and without the genetic adaptations the Lathar enjoyed.

"If you'd let us scout ahead, though," the big warrior said. "We could ascertain conditions and make sure they are safe—"

"No, it's fine," Murphy cut him off. "We'll cope. Besides, the helmet cams might pick up something we miss. Better to have a complete record."

And also a failsafe. Because as much as he appreciated Daaynal letting him lead this expedition, he was under no illusion the Latharian emperor would let them actually *keep* the ship.

No, there was a better than fair chance that the emperor would find some reason they had to haul the ancient ship into orbit, and then whatever knowledge and technology it contained would be gone and outside humanity's reach for good.

Murphy's lips compressed into a thin line. That meant they had to gather as much information as they could while it was here, on the ground... *in* the ground. Or ice.

"As you will." Taavik inclined his head.

They carried on, fanning out as they approached the side of the ship. Fortunately, the way it had crashed and then reemerged from the snow and ice had brought what looked like massive loading bays into view.

One of them was missing half of its door, the metal that had sealed in the atmosphere and kept the occupants of the ship safe torn clean through.

"They hit hard when they came down," Murphy murmured, turning to follow the scrapes and gouges in the side

of the ship with his gaze.

“Yeah, looks like it,” Taavik replied. “I’m surprised the ship didn’t break up. These things were all built in space. They weren’t designed to land.”

“Someone survived, though,” he said. “Or humanity basically wouldn’t be here.”

Or they would, but they definitely wouldn’t be what they were now.

“Hold back,” Taavik warned as they reached the opening.

Murphy looked up. The ripped part of the door was hundreds of feet above them. He felt ant-like again in comparison.

With a raised fist, he ordered the team behind him to stop and watch as Taavik took several paces forward, scanning with the machine on his wrist.

“I’m reading low-level energy signatures, so internal defenses could still be active,” he said. “Or possibly they could have been reactivated with the movement of the ship. A lot of early imperial defenses were designed to scan for non-Latharian bio-signs and eliminate them.”

A shudder rolled down Murphy’s spine and he nodded. The last thing he wanted was to be lasered down where he stood because some ancient computer still held a grudge.

“So the Latharian DNA in the human genome wouldn’t protect us?” he asked, holding position as Taavik crossed the threshold.

Taavik shook his head, tension in his broad shoulders as he stood just within the door, the wind kicking up snow around his boots. “Possibly not, no. So far, so good. There doesn’t seem to be any defenses active.”

“What about you?” Murphy asked curiously. “From what I understand, modern Latharian DNA is significantly altered. Surely that would mean the computer would have been unlikely to recognize you as well?”

Taavik shrugged as he turned to walk back. “I was taking a chance. The historical records list the captain of the *Elysium* as Lynara Varaant, whose brother was an ancestor of mine. That should be enough that the systems will recognize me.”

Murphy frowned. “Varaant? I thought your clan name was V’aant?”

Taavik’s lips quirked. “It was, but at some point in our history, the name was changed and shortened,” he explained. “Like most Latharian clans, we adjusted our naming convention to imitate that of the royal lines.”

Murphy raised an eyebrow. It was interesting how even in an alien society, such customs had evolved in order to align with those who held power. He made a mental note of the information for later.

“Fascinating,” he murmured and then looked up at the huge ship in front of them. “Well, I’m glad the ship didn’t decide to vaporize you. Shall we press on?”

They crossed the threshold and the icy air gave way to a heavy, stagnant atmosphere. Each footstep echoed through the vast expanse, filling it with a drum-like cadence that resonated through his chest.

“Keep it tight,” he commanded. They couldn’t afford for anyone to stray and accidentally trigger hidden defenses.

The beams of their flashlights sliced through the darkness, casting eerie shapes upon the immense walls and illuminating ancient control panels, long dead, along with cryptic glyphs. They seemed to be in some kind of hall. Whether it was for cargo or other purposes, Murphy couldn’t work out.

“Ever feel like you’re being watched?” Taavik moved closer to mutter in an undertone, keeping his head down as he consulted the scanner on his wrist mount.

“Yeah... thought it was just me with the heebie-jeebies.”

Taavik looked up, spearing him with dark eyes, and snorted. “Mr. President, you are the last being I would ever expect to be jumpy.”

“Not jumpy,” he countered, his hand resting on the pistol holstered at his side. “More... careful and aware of the possibilities. Better to be paranoid and alive than trusting and dead.”

“You sound like an individual with an interesting past.”

Murphy barked a short laugh, feeling the synth-skin pulling over the scars on the side of his face. “Yeah, you could say that.”

The cold seemed less biting and less invasive as they moved deeper into the ship. It was as if the metal walls around them absorbed the cold and dissipated it. As the team descended further into the bowels of the ship, a shiver ran down Murphy’s spine that had nothing to do with the cold.

The twisted metal and rubble that littered their path told a story of abandonment and tragedy. He tried to picture the corridors as they had been, with Latharian crew members heaving cargo or rushing between duty posts, but it was impossible.

The haunted atmosphere pressed closer, sending prickles up the back of his neck as they moved deeper into darkness. He cast the beam of his torch up. The high ceilings were a reminder that this ancient vessel had been built for beings much larger than humans, Lathar from the dim-distant past.

“Mr. President?” Dubois’s voice snapped him out of his thoughts, and he turned. She had her flashlight trained on a nearby wall. The beam of light reflected off a series of glyphs running in a line down the wall. They were alien yet so familiar it was like he could squint and look sideways at them to make them make sense.

“Taavik?” he called out, and the Latharian joined them to look at the glyphs.

“This is ancient Lathar... I’ve never seen this dialect.” Taavik pursed his lips, using the device on his wrist to scan the writing. Then he snorted in amusement.

“What does it say?” Murphy asked.

“Down to engines.” The big Latharian grinned. “Seemed they were economical with their signs, no?”

“Perhaps they paid by the letter.” Murphy shrugged. “Let’s move on, see if we can’t find an access panel for a computer or something. Then we can work out if the distress signal was set off by accident or if there really *is* someone here.”

They moved on, the two teams blending together as they made their way along what appeared to be a main central corridor.

“This ship seems... different from current Latharian vessels,” Murphy commented as Taavik fell into step with him. The ones he’d been aboard so far were huge, like this, but their interiors were more like cathedrals with huge open spaces. They weren’t closed in and dark like this.

“It is. This class of vessel was built mostly during the Tanel Wars,” Taavik replied, his eyes sharp as they walked, obviously taking in every detail of their surroundings.

Murphy noticed the disciplined ease in the Latharian team’s movements, evidence of their military background. They scanned the ship, eyes filled with reverence and curiosity.

“After it, a change in engine design necessitated a different space-frame and hull construction. So this... this is amazing.” He grinned again, his teeth a white slash in the semi-darkness. “Hopefully, we can find at least part of the engine core intact. The plans were lost eons ago, so we have no idea how they worked. There is even speculation that pre-Tanel War technology may have come from the Origin planet.”

“The Origin planet?” Murphy asked, a frown creasing his brow as he swept the beam of his light along the join between the ceiling and the corridor wall, looking for cameras or anything that looked like internal weaponry.

Taavik grunted an affirmative. “The planet our species originated on. I guess yours, too, in a way. Its location was lost before records began. But if this is pre-war, it’s possible we can get a clue to help us find it.”

Murphy stopped in the middle of the corridor, surprise rolling through him as he looked at the big alien.

“Wait... *what?* The Lathar don't come from Lathar Prime?” he asked, too surprised to cover his expression. “As in you didn't evolve there?”

Taavik half turned, shaking his head. “No. We don't know where we came from originally. The ancient stories talk of arck-ships that brought us to our home, huge vessels that belonged to the gods when they transported us from the Origin planet, but as most myths... they are a little sparse on the details.”

“Something's up ahead!”

The shout came from in front of them. Taavik and Murphy exchanged a glance and then headed that way, jogging lightly to cover the distance quicker.

“Keep your eyes and ears open,” Murphy ordered, stepping carefully as he looked around the blackness.

A sense of space warned him a moment before the beam of his torch slid off the corridor roof and then was lost in the darkness above as the corridor opened out into a huge hall.

He turned to cast the flashlight over the walls on either side of the corridor to see if he could get a sense of how big the room was, but they carried on virtually in a straight line as far as the light could reach.

He turned back around. So... big then.

“What is this place?” he murmured, half to himself, as they moved forward. Something loomed up out of the darkness in front of them. A lighter shadow in the blackness gave off a sense of solidity.

“Is that...”

He looked up and then up some more. He couldn't even see the top of the thing; it disappeared up into the darkness, at least ten stories high.

“The engine,” Taavik said, excitement in his deep voice. Their flashlights picked up a railing ahead, its metal lines

barring the drop beyond.

They reached it, and Murphy whistled as he looked down. The machine went down as far as they could see. “Bet that thing puts out a *lot* of power.”

“How fucking *big* is this thing?” Dubois asked, standing at Murphy’s side.

He shook his head. He was no engineer, so he couldn’t hazard a guess. Or really at what he was looking at.

The machine was a juxtaposition of sleek lines and unfathomable complexity, and as they watched, the metal seemed to come alive. Where a moment ago, it had been flat and inert, its surface began to pulse with a faint glow. It waxed and waned like a sleeping creature’s breath, painting an eerie light show on the faceplates of their helmets.

“Has it been like this all the time?” he asked. “It almost feels... alive.”

Taavik shook his head, his gaze trained on the screen on his wrist. “No, we’d have picked it up if it was. This is new.”

Murphy turned to look at him. “Could our arrival have activated it?”

“I don’t think so. We need to find the control room. This way...”

They followed the balcony around the engine until it opened out into a huge engineering bay filled with workspaces and consoles in rows. He blinked. How many engineers had they needed to run this thing?

“All right...” He broke the silence that had enveloped them. “We need to tread carefully. This isn’t just a museum; it’s a link to the past. Let’s respect that.”

The ship’s metallic smell filtered through his helmet scrubbers, and adrenaline pulsed within him. The voices of his team members filled his helmet, blending together as they explored and shared their discoveries over the main comms channel.

“Some of this tech... it’s over two hundred and fifty thousand years old, yet so advanced,” Savaar muttered nearby, almost to himself. “I don’t even recognize what some of this is.”

“Looks like some kind of propulsion system console, maybe?” Dubois remarked, moving to stand with the big Latharian warrior, her brow furrowed in concentration.

“We need to see if any of them are still linked to power, or if time has corrupted the wiring,” Taavik added as he moved to a nearby console, training his light on the input panel.

His fingers danced over the keys as the soft hum of the ancient engine filled the room. For a moment, nothing happened. Then a holo-screen blinked into existence in front of him.

“Bingo!” Murphy grinned. “Tell me that’s a good thing.”

“Oh, it’s definitely a good thing.”

The symbols scrolled rapidly under Taavik’s touch, a ghostly parade of alien text. After a tense moment, the alien let out a soft exclamation.

“The ship’s computer is in standby mode and a recent activation code was input,” Taavik announced in surprise.

Murphy blinked behind his visor. “Which means?”

Taavik looked up, a frown between his brows.

“With this activation code? It means the ship’s captain is still aboard.”

“*Y*ou’re sure?” he asked and Taavik nodded.

“This is the captain’s code. I... hadn’t expected to see it.”

Murphy cast a glance at the screen the Latharian was working on, but his grasp of modern Latharian was sketchy at best, which meant that ancient Lathar was completely beyond him.

“The captain was one of your ancestors. Wasn’t she?” he asked.

Taavik nodded and then stopped and shook his head. “Not directly. Our clan is descended from her brother. At least, I think we were, but the records from this era are a little spotty.”

Murphy nodded in understanding. “We are talking a hell of a long time here. So, if that’s Captain Varaant’s code, that means she’s on board? Can you track her location?”

Taavik looked down at the console again and tapped in another query.

“I’ve got something,” he murmured after a moment, his attention riveted on the display. “A power source independent of the engines.”

Murphy flicked him a glance. “The captain?”

Taavik’s expression was tight as he nodded. “Could be. Or at least her ident code is registering in part of the system. She appears to be in one of the stasis halls, which is odd.”

“How so?” he asked, but Taavik turned and headed across the engineering bay, all his attention on the datascreen in his hands. Murphy caught the attention of Dubois and Savaar, motioning for them to follow with the rest of the team.

Something shimmered on the wall as they approached. An outline, faint and hardly visible, betrayed the presence of a door.

“This way.” Taavik pressed his palm flat against the glowing symbol.

A low hum resonated through the corridor as the door shuddered and then slid open halfway, only to judder to a stop.

“The mechanism must be blocked,” the big Latharian said, stepping into the door frame and putting his shoulder to it. He pushed, and with a squeal of metal the door slid back all the way to let them through.

Old, musty air hit them as they stepped into the corridor. This place had been locked up tightly since the crash way back when, which meant they were breathing in air from wherever this ship came from, not Earth. Crazy to think how long ago that was.

As they walked down the hall, Murphy felt the whole history of it. No one had been in this part of the ship since it first landed in the ice. A shiver rolled down his spine as he realized they were the first souls to pass through in thousands of years.

It was a plain corridor, the wall panels only slightly buckled, and there were doors off it at intervals. They were all closed. Taavik ignored them and kept going.

Finally, a door at the end of the corridor hissed open, revealing a huge hall with row upon row of empty pods. Dust and ice lay thick on them. Most of them were empty with their front panels raised. On some, the glass was shattered, and toward the left of the room the roof had collapsed, burying the pods there under the twisted metal of the ruined decks above. His eyes widened as he looked across the hall. Thousands of pods must be in here.

“How many people could this ship carry?”

“An explorer of this size? About ten thousand,” Taavik replied, hurrying across the deck. They passed several rows, all standing empty and abandoned, but when they passed the last row to the right, Murphy sucked in a breath.

One of the pods had an occupant—a solitary figure lay sleeping, her delicate form highlighted by soft blue lights.

“Is that...” he asked, unable to tear his gaze from her as they approached.

The rest of the team clustered around them, their faces mirroring his surprise. Even though Taavik had said the captain’s code had been used, he hadn’t seriously thought they’d find anyone. He’d thought it would be a glitch in the system or something. A false reading.

But it wasn’t.

The ship’s captain was still aboard.

And she was beautiful. Utterly beautiful. Her face was a serene mask, her body encapsulated in a tranquil slumber that had spanned eons.

Taavik broke the silence, his voice barely a whisper, “President Murphy, meet Captain Lynara Varaant.”

Murphy’s eyes roved over the woman’s form. Despite her alien origin, her features bore an uncanny resemblance to a human.

“She could be from Earth,” he mused aloud. “She’s...”

His voice trailed off. Beautiful didn’t quite cut it. She was otherworldly.

He cleared his throat. “She’s a lot smaller than I’d have expected for a Lathar. Especially an ancient one.”

Taavik blinked. “You’re right. She should be a lot taller.”

He moved to the console panel on the side of the pod, quickly scrolling through the records. His movements became quicker, betraying his agitation.

“No, that’s not possible. *Draanth*,” he breathed and looked up.

“What’s wrong?”

Taavik shook his head, his expression tight as he looked at the woman in the pod. “Okay, so back then they’d only just started to work with genetic modification, and the process was a lot more complex than it is today. For a gen-mod, the DNA had to be prepped with a retro-code, and then the actual modification took place during stasis.”

Murphy nodded. “Makes sense so far. So she had modification to change her to look like a human?”

“Exactly.” Taavik nodded. His skin had gone pale. “But the problem is, this isn’t her assigned pod. The one listed in the system for her... well, it isn’t registering.”

Murphy shook his head. “I’m not following.”

“I think it’s in one of the sections of the ship that was destroyed. But that’s not the only problem.”

“What do you mean... problem?” Murphy asked, his voice wary.

Taavik put his hand on the front screen, looking at the woman within. “The pod’s error logs note that no prep-code was found in her genetic makeup. She went through gen-mod cold...”

A chill washed down Murphy’s spine. “I take it that’s a bad thing.”

“Really bad. It means she’s likely to be very ill when she wakes up... if she survives at all.” The Latharian nodded as he moved back to the console panel. “It’s near the end of its automatic wakeup cycle.”

A knot tightened in Murphy’s gut. They’d only just found her. They couldn’t lose her already. He couldn’t explain it, but looking through the glass at the face of a woman who was older than human history, he felt something... a connection.

The chamber hummed louder, an ethereal serenade that echoed through the room before gradually fading into silence.

Then, with a hiss that sliced through the expectant hush, the pod started to open.

THE FRONT of the stasis pod had barely lifted before Taavik was in there, scanning over the unconscious occupant with a handheld device he pulled from his pocket. The Latharian's brow furrowed as he checked her vitals and scooted to the side, his fingers dancing over the ancient console of the pod.

“Not good,” he muttered, glancing at Murphy. “We need to get her back to base camp. Kvatt will know what to do.”

Murphy nodded. He hadn't missed the presence of a scarred Latharian within Taavik's group. In the empire, scars meant a doctor. The more the merrier. And Kvatt looked like he'd lost an argument with a chainsaw, which meant he was *very* good at his job.

“About time we had a change of scenery anyway,” Murphy grumbled, eyeing the sleeping woman with her elfin features and delicate limbs. Something about her tugged at him, tugged at his soul, but he shook it off. They didn't have time for distractions right now.

“Help me with the anti-grav stretcher,” Taavik ordered, urgency in his voice as he dropped the pack off his shoulder and started to open it out.

“Right, careful now. Don't jostle her.”

Together, they managed to load the limp figure onto the hovering stretcher. It didn't take much since she was so light and delicate. *Too* light and delicate, like there was no substance to her. Nothing left after so long asleep.

Taavik tapped his radio. “Kvatt, we found the ship's captain. We're coming in hot. Suspect genetic damage.”

“Genetic damage?” Kvatt's voice crackled over the speaker. “What model of stasis pod?”

“Couldn't tell,” Taavik admitted, frustration evident as he looked at the machine in front of them. “It's way too old.”

“Figures.” Kvatt’s voice was clipped and no-nonsense. “Doesn’t matter then. Just get her here, fast.”

“Like we were gonna take a leisurely stroll,” Murphy muttered under his breath, helping to guide the stretcher through the wreckage-strewn corridors of the ancient ship. They clambered over mangled beams and downed cables, struggling to keep the stretcher level. Every bump and jostle earned a venomous glare from Murphy for the team around them.

“Would you lot move your asses?” he snapped at the crew members ahead, his patience wearing thin. He shot a look at the woman on the stretcher. She was too pale, and her lips were turning blue. “A woman’s life is on the line here!”

“Keep your panties on, Mr. President,” Dubois shot back, walking backward to help guide the stretcher over a mound of fallen beams. “We’re moving.”

He sighed and nodded. He shouldn’t be pushing them this hard. They were trying their best, and he *never* normally reacted like this. So emotionally.

“My apologies,” he said in a low voice, bracing the stretcher as they moved it through a door jammed half-closed.

“No worries,” Dubois grunted, taking the weight on her side as they made it to the final loading hall where they’d entered the ship.

Conversation ceased as they emerged from the ship and raced toward the healer’s tent, and Murphy couldn’t help but steal glances down at Lynara in the daylight. Her otherworldly features called to something deep within him—a sense of familiarity he couldn’t quite place. It was maddening.

“Almost there,” Taavik assured him, his own concern palpable as snow crunched underneath their boots as they ran.

They crossed the expanse between the ship and the camp in record time to reach the healer’s tent. The tent flap tore from Savaar’s hand as he held it open, edges flapping wildly in the harsh winds, but they managed to push the stretcher through. Murphy ducked inside, his eyes adjusting from the

bright sunlight to the artificial lights within. Lathar lighting was all the same, ambient and bright, with a slight blue cast.

“Get her on the bed,” Kvatt commanded.

The healer was an imposing figure—tall and broad-shouldered with a mane of white hair that fell past his shoulders. The entire right side was taken up with braids, each with a bead fastened to the end, and his face bore the marks of countless battles, his eyes holding a keen intelligence.

“Gently with her,” he muttered as they transferred Lynara over from the stretcher. He moved with practiced efficiency around the bed, bringing various monitoring devices online. “Move. Give me some room.”

Murphy stepped back, watching intently. The healer worked with a quiet intensity, his big hands moving deftly over her, checking her breathing, her pulse, and then searching for signs of injury quickly.

Then he stepped back, and the bed activated. Murphy had seen beds like it before on the station where he’d been healed after the explosion. They were both diagnostic and also could be used for surgery. Circles of blue whirled around and over each other, moving up and down the bed as they scanned her still form. The healer’s expression set as he watched the console readouts.

“Time is not on our side,” he said after a moment, his voice low and urgent. “Her genetic code has been scrambled. It’s like trying to decipher a language that’s been lost for centuries.”

“Can you fix it?” Taavik asked, worry seeping into his words.

“Maybe.” Kvatt’s fingers danced over the controls of the medical bed. “But it won’t be easy. The damage runs deep, and there’s no telling what complications could arise.”

“What are we waiting for?” Murphy demanded, unable to keep silent any longer. “Get started!”

“Her heart rate’s all over the place,” Kvatt muttered, his eyes narrowing as he studied the readings on the monitor.

“And her blood pressure...*draanth*.”

He shook his head, frustration etched into the lines on his scarred face.

“Can you stabilize her?” Murphy asked, his fists clenched at his sides.

“I’ll try, but no promises. I’ve never treated anyone who has been under stasis for so long.” Kvatt’s fingers flew over a touchscreen, adjusting settings. Then he stepped back, pulling on gauntlets that came up to his elbows.

“Stasis pod wasn’t hers,” he growled after a moment. “Some kind of genetic modifications were in progress when she got put in there, but her body wasn’t prepared for it.”

“Modifications?” Taavik questioned, his brow furrowing. “What do you mean?”

“See these markings?” A holographic display formed over Lynara’s body and Kvatt pointed to the swirling patterns that covered her skin, shimmering like liquid silver. “They’re not decorative. They’re part of the ancient coding for modification. The problem is, they were meant for someone else.”

“How dangerous is that? Murphy asked with a frown.

“Very. These mods are keyed to a specific individual’s genetic code. It’s like trying to force a square peg into a round hole... the end result isn’t pretty.” Kvatt sighed, his expression grim. “In Lynara’s case, it’s causing chaos at a cellular level. Her body’s fighting itself, trying to adapt to changes it was never meant to handle.”

“Is there anything you can do?” Murphy asked, his concern growing by the second.

“Maybe. I can try to reverse the damage, reprogram the mods to work with her DNA instead of against it.” Kvatt rolled his neck and stepped forward. He nodded to one of the medical techs nearby, who input something in his console, and the lights activated on Kvatt’s gauntlets. “There are no guarantees, though. Never done anything like this before.”

“Still better than doing nothing,” Taavik said, crossing massive arms over his chest.

“True enough.” Kvatt looked up from the scanner, meeting Murphy’s gaze with steely determination. “I’ll do my best, but I won’t lie. It’s gonna be touch and go for a while. All we can do is hope that Lynara’s as strong as she looks.”

“Then let’s get to it,” Murphy said, trying to ignore the sinking feeling in his gut. He couldn’t put his finger on why he felt so drawn to this strange, beautiful woman, but one thing was certain. He wasn’t about to let her die without a fight.

“Okay, let’s begin,” Kvatt ordered as the healer team swung into action.

“Neural interface ready,” the tech said. “Surgical unit online.”

Kvatt nodded. “Link me.”

And that was it. For all intents and purposes the rest of them stood around, watching Kvatt as he stood still in front the surgical bed. The only movements were the whirling rings over the still form of the beautiful ancient captain. If Murphy didn’t know better, he’d wonder what the hell was happening.

Thanks to his trip to Devan station, though, he knew that Kvatt was mentally linked to Lynara through the bed, using the power of his mind to operate at the genetic level to try and heal the damage. Latharian medical tech was... magic compared to what humanity had. And right now, he’d never been more grateful for it.

“Damn it,” Kvatt muttered under his breath, beads of sweat forming on his brow. “Her body’s rejecting the modifications again.”

“Is there anything we can do?” Murphy asked, unable to keep the worry from his voice.

“Only thing to do is keep trying,” Kvatt said, gritting his teeth. “I’ve adjusted the reprogramming sequence, but her system’s fighting me every step of the way. Like trying to wrestle a greased eel.”

“Sounds like one of us,” Taavik chimed in, attempting to lighten the mood. “V’aants have never been known to make things easy.”

Murphy’s lips quirked at Taavik’s words, even as his heart pounded in his chest. He didn’t understand why he felt such a strong connection to this alien woman, so small and fragile compared to the hulking Latharians.

But he knew with absolute certainty that he couldn’t let her die—not when she could hold the key to understanding the long-lost ties between humanity and their Latharian ancestors.

“Come on,” he whispered, willing her to fight. “You’ve survived this long. Don’t give up now.”

“Got it!” Kvatt exclaimed suddenly, triumph in his voice. “I think I found a workaround. It should stabilize her system, allow her to start healing.”

“Really?” Murphy asked, relief washing over him like a tidal wave.

“Seems so,” Kvatt confirmed, his expression still guarded, “but it’s not a guarantee. We’ll have to monitor her closely to make sure there aren’t any complications.”

“Anything’s better than nothing,” Taavik said, clapping Murphy on the shoulder with a massive hand, a broad smile on his face.

“We’ve done all we can for now,” Kvatt said, disengaging from the link and slipping the gauntlets off. “The rest is up to her.”

“Thank you, Kvatt,” he said quietly, offering a nod of respect to the healer. “For everything.”

“Hey,” Kvatt replied, wiping at his sweat-slicked brow with the back of his hand. “That’s what I’m here for. Right? Now let’s just hope our stubborn little captain here pulls through.”

He was sitting by her side an hour later, composing an update message for his vice president, Ortega, when Lynara began to stir.

“Over here,” he called out. “She’s waking up.”

The moment Lynara’s eyelids fluttered open, the collective tension in the healer’s tent seemed to evaporate. Her gaze was unfocused, and she blinked several times as if trying to clear her vision. He sucked in a breath, transfixed by the sheer intensity in those irises, a storm of emerald and sapphire.

He smiled, “Welcome to the future, Captain.”

Her gaze focused on him and then her expression twisted, hatred washing over her features.

“You!” She hissed, and she launched herself off the bed at him.

*T*he *vaarking* bastard!

Rage consumed her at the sight of Dariel standing nearby, and she launched herself off the bed at him. The only reason that *vaarker* would have fetched her from her pod was to taunt her some more... or try and force her into his bed, and she'd *die* before she let that happen.

But her body, weaker and smaller than it should be, betrayed her and she half leaped, half fell out of the bed, crashing against her nemesis.

He caught her, easily hauling her up against his hard, muscled body. She hissed, fighting back, but something was wrong. No... *everything* was wrong. She and Dariel were the same height, but for some reason she had to look up at him now, and her strike, intended to be fast and brutal... was delivered at half-speed, her arms feeling like wet noodles.

He dodged her pathetic strike with ease and wrapped her up in his arms. Her petite form fit against his perfectly. Even though she struggled, she couldn't break free.

"Hey, hey!" he murmured in her ear, his deep voice sending a shiver down her spine. "Whoever you think I am, I'm not him. I'm here to help you."

She stared at him, her chest heaving as she struggled for breath. Her eyes narrowed, and she studied him closely. The more she looked at him, *actually* looked at him, the more she realized something was wrong about him. No, not wrong. *Different*.

He looked down at her, and concern crinkled the corners of his eyes disconcertingly like Dariel's. But not quite. His nose was different, his gaze softer when he looked at her. Though he resembled Dariel, she didn't recoil from his touch. If anything, she found him attractive, uncomfortably so, especially when her body reacted to his without her say-so.

He moved to scoop her up, cradling her against his chest. She didn't argue. She doubted her legs would even support her at the moment. And besides, he was all she could see, fascination with this man who was not Dariel running through her.

"You're not Dariel. Who are you?" she demanded, her voice barely more than a whisper.

A small smile flirted with his lips, crinkling the corners of his eyes appealingly. Three vicious scars marred his cheek, further setting him apart from who she'd thought he was. Dariel would never display an imperfection like that so publicly.

"No, I'm not. My name is Cameron."

"Cam-er-on." She tested the strange name, watching him warily. "I'm Lynara."

He nodded. "Lynara Varaant, right?"

"Yes. What's your clan name?"

His devastating smile emerged fully. "Murphy. My surname is Murphy."

Lynara blinked. It was an odd-sounding name. Not the name of any clan she'd heard of.

His fingers flexed against her back as he settled her more comfortably in his arms. She shivered, sensations flooding her. His chest rose and fell quickly against her side, and she slid him a sideways glance under her lashes.

"What do you want with me?" she demanded. "Why are you helping me?"

Was he Dariel's son? How long had she been asleep?

“I’m...” He paused with a frown. “I guess you could say I’m part of your rescue team. We found you in that stasis pod and brought you here.”

“Rescue team?” Lynara echoed in disbelief. Dariel would never authorize a rescue team, not for her. She tried to sit up straighter against Murphy and winced in pain. “You expect me to believe that?”

“Believe it or not, it’s the truth,” Murphy told her, his voice firm but gentle as he helped her back onto the bed. “Whether you trust me or not is up to you. But I promise you, we’re here to help.”

Lynara’s gaze held his for a long moment, trying to work out whether he was lying. And if he was... why. Then, with a slow, deliberate exhale, she let the fight drain out of her. Exhaustion and pain had won this round.

“How long have I been asleep?” Her heart thudded. Had decades passed? Centuries? Oh gods, was everyone she knew dead?

He hesitated too long, an odd expression washing over his hard features. “We can talk about all that when you’ve rested and recovered your strength.”

She grabbed his collar, her pulse racing. “Tell me everything. *Now.*”

Her gaze sharpened as the adrenaline rolling through her body dissipated, and she looked around. A small group was clustered around them, some obviously Latharian but not like the ones she knew. The Vorrtnan had merged enemy features with that of her species, so she was used to seeing differences, even if the Vorrtnan had mostly retreated to their own planets in later years, but these new Lathar were different again.

Her gaze settled on a man standing nearby, watching her with unreadable eyes. He resembled her brother. Almost. But when he lifted his chin and the light washed over his face, she saw that his eyes and pupils were wrong for Riaan. They were set differently. But like Cameron, he was close enough that she had to be looking at either Riaan’s son or grandson.

“Who are you?” She tried sitting up in Cameron’s arms.

The Latharian caught her eye and offered a small smile. “I’m Taavik. Taavik V’aant.”

“You look like my brother, Riaan.” She must have been out for years if her brother’s son sought her. “Wait, V’aant? *Vaark*, don’t tell me my brother caved to court pressure and shortened our name?”

Taavik’s smile froze for a moment, and he exchanged a look with Cameron. “Errr... it’s not quite that simple.”

Suspicion rolled down her spine as she glanced between them. “What am I missing? What aren’t you telling me?”

“Don’t worry now,” Cameron said, soothingly. “You were in stasis for a long time.”

“You’re not Latharian.” Though he resembled Dariel, it was only on a superficial level, and now that she was more with it, she realized he wasn’t Latharian.

“*What* are you?” she demanded, looking around the tent. “*Where* are we?”

“Show her.” Murphy nodded and a woman near the tent entrance pulled the door back.

Lynara gasped, her hand shooting up to cover her mouth. An alien landscape stretched before her, white snow as far as the eye could see. But that wasn’t what drew her attention. It was the *Elysium*, half buried in ice, with half the port loading door ripped clean off.

“Did we do that when we landed?” she breathed, her eyes wide as she looked at the view in front of her. The skies roiled, dark and angry overhead, and the wind whipped like a force whip, the cold reaching in to chill her despite the blanket Cameron moved in to wrap around her.

She gripped it. Gods, did it *all* look like this?

“What planet is this?” she breathed, huddling further into the blanket against the biting cold. Odd—she’d never felt it before, an advantage for a deep space captain. “Is this an ice world?”

They'd had no time to scan the planet before they'd crashed. *Vaark*, had Dariel brought the survivors out here into this after he'd put her in stasis? What had happened to the colonists?

Cameron shook his head. "No, this is one polar region. Conditions vary from the arctic like this, right the way through to desert conditions."

She nodded, resisting the urge to nestle closer. Her body felt strange—smaller, aching. Puzzling. "What is this planet?"

Cameron glanced down at her, his pale eyes unreadable. "This is Earth. Your ship's distress beacon activated a few weeks ago, which is how we found you here. Otherwise, we wouldn't have."

She looked at him and then at Taavik behind him, a kinsman of some kind she was sure. Suspicion rolled through her. They were definitely keeping something from her. But what?

"I've been asleep for a long time. Haven't I?"

"Enough!" a tall, white-haired man interrupted, shooing people around her out of the way. She looked up at him, taking in his scarred appearance. Hells, what accident had he survived? "I'm Healer Kvatt J'Tarrin. How do you feel?"

A healer. Good.

"Confused," she admitted. "I ache, more than usual after stasis. And..."

A frown creased her brow as she looked at Cameron, still sitting next to her. "Something's wrong. I'm..."

She looked down at herself. Her uniform hung off her, like it was made for a much larger person, and she'd lost her boots somewhere. "My body's... different. I'm smaller. A lot smaller."

"Do you have any other symptoms?" Kvatt asked.

She started to shake her head but then paused. "I'm too sensitive to cold. I've spent years in deep space, so usually it doesn't bother me. Something's wrong."

Kvatt looked over his shoulder at Taavik. “I’m afraid I am not an expert on stasis...”

Lynara glared at the healer. “You’re not familiar with stasis injuries? Then why are you here?”

She clenched her fists, anger masking the fear twisting her gut. What kind of rescue mission was this? If they’d known the name of the ship, they knew it was a colony-explorer. Which meant the *vaarking* thing was filled with stasis pods. So why send a healer who didn’t know anything about stasis? How could they be so unprepared?

Taavik interrupted. “Captain... Lynara, please calm down. Your anger is misplaced.”

She turned to glare over her shoulder at him. “Misplaced? I wake to find my body’s changed, I’m on an alien world, and the healer hasn’t a clue how to treat me!”

“I apologize for the confusion.” Kvatt’s tone was gentle as he pulled a chair up to sit next to her. “What I had been going to say was that I’m not an expert in the type of stasis injuries you received. The changes you underwent were intentional, not an injury. You were genetically modified in stasis.”

Lynara stared for a moment. “What? No... I wasn’t... I shouldn’t have been undergoing any gen-mods. I was returning with the ship to Lathar Prime.”

He nodded... “Yes. I read that in what Taavik could recover of the mission logs. And *your* pod was programmed for stasis without genetic modification. But—”

She groaned and dropped her head back to the pillow. “I wasn’t in my pod. Was I?”

He shook his head. “No. Your pod was on one of the decks that was destroyed. You were placed in a crew pod, I believe to save your life. The pod’s logs list extensive injuries. No doubt as a result of the crash?” he asked.

She nodded. “Yes. Prince Dariel put me in a pod to shut me up mostly and to take command... but I was injured. I didn’t know how badly, though. *Vaark*,” she whispered,

feeling sick, like she'd only just gone through the gen-mod procedure. "What were the modifications?"

What had been done to her?

"I understand your distress. But we're here to help." Taavik's eyes were kind and his voice soothing as he moved forward, his hand on the healer's shoulder. If she closed her eyes, she could almost imagine it was Riaan right there with her. A pang of homesickness made hot tears prickle the backs of her eyeballs. "The modifications were made to suit the colony's new world. Smaller skeletal frame, shorter muscle heads to enable greater muscle mass in ratio, slightly denser bones in ratio to mass. Greater spatial awareness, better night vision. You will hear slightly better as well."

She nodded. "Sacrificing size for different advantages. I can understand that."

Unbidden, a thread of amusement washed up. Dariel would have *hated* such mods, but then he had been way too fond of posing in front of his mirror.

She looked up at Taavik. "Appearance?"

Taavik handed her a mirror. "See for yourself."

With shaking hands she took it, afraid of what she might find. But the face gazing back at her was still hers. Her eyes were the same blue-green, her hair still a riot of raven-black curls. But her features had subtly shifted to a more delicate cast. Her ears were smaller and rounded, and lips and cheekbones that were once merely full and striking were now a sculpted work of art.

She was no longer a tall, athletic creature who towered over most other races. This new form was petite and slender, tailored to a gentler world. Her mind reeled. How was this going to affect her balance and movement? How long would it take to get used to a body so radically different from the one she remembered?

"Did anything else change?" she demanded. "What am I now?"

The Latharian warrior offered a small smile she was sure he meant to be reassuring. “You’re still you, Lynara. The alterations were only physical, to suit the environment. Otherwise, you’re unchanged. I know it’s little comfort now, but you will adapt. And I’ll be here to help you through it. We all will. I promise.”

She searched his eyes, finding only sincerity. Even though he looked like her brother, this man was a stranger, and the world she found herself in was as alien as the landscape beyond these walls. But seeing the sincerity in his expression, she nodded.

“Rest now,” he suggested. “Then when you’re feeling a little better, we will talk more.”

LYNARA LAY ON THE COT, listening to the wind shriek and howl beyond the tent walls. Everything that had once defined her—her ship, her crew, her purpose—was gone, leaving her adrift in this strange time and place.

The tent itself was large, a temporary shelter built to withstand the elements. Pale yellow walls of heavy canvas rose high around her, rippling slightly in the wind. The roof sloped up to a central peak, metal ribs holding the structure secure against the weather.

Cots similar to the one she lay on were arranged throughout the space, obviously for those recovering from injuries, but were currently unoccupied. Crates of supplies and equipment lined the perimeter, along with folding tables and chairs.

The scent of antiseptic and medicines hung in the air, undercut by the smell of unwashed bodies and damp canvas. The light was dim, provided by lamps hooked at intervals along the ceiling. An electric generator thrummed somewhere beyond her sight, powering the equipment that kept this shelter warm and functioning.

It was all so strange, so alien. She felt out of place and time, everything familiar ripped away. So she lay on her side,

watching the people in the tent as she let her body adjust to its new form.

Voices drifted from the front of the tent, where a makeshift command center had been set up. People milled about, some humanoid but most Latharian. A few glanced her way with open curiosity, though most seemed focused on their tasks.

Lynara watched as Cameron strode over to a woman by one of the consoles. She was hunched in her chair, glaring at the screen like she held a personal grudge against it. For a moment she reminded Lynara of Elaira so much that it brought a pang of homesickness and tears to her eyes. Elaira would be long dead by now, perhaps even dead for centuries.

“Major Dubois,” Cameron said, dropping his hand onto the back of her chair. “What’s it looking like?”

The woman turned, brushing a stray hair from her eyes. “Not good, Mr. President. Wind speeds are increasing fast, and the temperature is dropping sharply. At this rate, visibility will be nearly zero within the hour.”

Cameron studied the screens, frowning. Lynara couldn’t see what was on the screens from here, but if his tight expression was any indication, it wasn’t good. “Any chance it might pass us by?”

Dubois gave him a look that said he should know better. “In this region? Highly unlikely. I’d estimate we’re looking at least three days of punishing conditions.”

He grunted, his gaze still fixed on those ominous monitors. “Recommendations?”

“Batten down the hatches, conserve power, and ride it out.” Dubois shrugged. “Not much else we can do. Anyone not essential should stay indoors. We’ll need patrols to monitor infrastructure, but make sure we restrict exposure.”

Cameron nodded and clapped Dubois on the shoulder. “Keep me posted if anything changes. We’ll weather this. We always do.”

She nodded. “Yes, sir. Monitoring the storm. I’ll update you hourly.”

“Good. Carry on, Major.” Cameron moved away to talk with someone at one of the other monitors, his expression still grim.

Lynara watched the exchange, anxious of what the next days might hold. The shelter seemed fragile against the rage she could hear outside. Cameron emanated a confidence that eased her fears, though. He and his team had brought her to safety, cared for her.

As if he sensed her watching, he looked up. Meeting her gaze, he smiled. She quirked her lips in reply. Not a smile, not exactly. She was too tired for that.

Her gaze flicked back to Dubois. Were she and Cameron lovers? Is that why she’d called him Mr. President? Was that a pet name in their species?

Jealousy flared, confusing her. She’d just met Cameron, and he looked so much like Dariel she shouldn’t feel this... pull toward him.

But she did, and she didn’t like the other woman flirting with him... if that conversation could have been called flirting. She wouldn’t have said so, but perhaps their procreation rituals were different to Latharian?

But then one of the Latharians approached Dubois and she smiled. Lynara couldn’t hear their exchange from here, and while she didn’t know whatever species Cameron and Dubois were, she *knew* Latharian men. The big, long-haired warrior was definitely flirting. And it seemed Dubois was flirting back, if the man’s deep, low laugh at something she’d said was any indication.

Lynara looked back at Cameron quickly, interested in his reaction. But instead of the jealousy she expected to see written on his face, he just smiled as he looked at the pair. Relief flooded her as he turned away to attend to someone who had just walked up to him, though she didn’t understand why.

Seeking distraction, Lynara caught Taavik’s eye.

“This world is so different,” she said. “And you didn’t answer me before. How long have I slept?”

Taavik hesitated before answering. “Hundreds of thousands of years,” he admitted.

She blinked and then attempted a small laugh. It felt false and tinny to her ears. “I’m sorry, I thought you said hundreds of thousands of years.”

She had to have misheard that.

“I did.” He watched her levelly.

“Don’t be ridiculous. Pods aren’t rated for that long. I’d be dead.”

He shook his head. “As far as I can tell, damage to the pod power couplings kept the link alive and the pod functioning. The cell would have been on its last legs by now, but because it was only sustaining one pod all this time, it managed.”

“*Vaark*,” she breathed. “So you’re not Riaan’s son?”

“Riaan was your brother. Right?”

She inclined her head, not wanting to think about her family, now long dead, too much.

“No,” Taavik replied gently, regret in his eyes. “But I am one of his descendants.”

“So you are family.” That made sense, especially with the way he was hovering. She would have done the same if they’d discovered the arck-ship from the origin planet and she found she had a direct ancestor on board. “What has changed? Who is the emperor now?”

He smiled, settling into the seat next to her. It wasn’t a Latharian design, so it looked a little like his knees were up around his ears. She tried not to smile at that.

“The empire has changed a lot since your time. The emperor now is Daaynal K’Saan.”

She blinked at that. “That clan name is not familiar to me. So the Vorr no longer rule?”

“As I said, much has changed.” Taavik smiled. “No, the Vorr have not ruled for many generations. Not after their

involvement in the creation of the Vorrta, something they have paid for many times over the years.”

Surprise jolted her, and she tilted her head in confusion. “Why would they have to pay for creating our greatest weapon? Do you not have Vorrta in case the Tanel return?”

Taavik chuckled. “The Tanel have not been a reality for many, many years, Lynara. They are a bogeyman from our distant past. But, yes, it has recently been discovered that there are still Vorrta.”

She shook her head. “It seems I have a lot of history to catch up on then. Then she frowned, looking around. “I see Latharian men, and whatever species Cameron and the others are, but no Latharian women? Why?”

Taavik leaned back in his chair, his expression grave.

“That would be because there are no Latharian women now. Not since the plague.”

“What?” She caught his eye, seeking answers to anchor her in the chaos of this new reality. “A plague? What plague? What happened to our people?”

He sighed. “We advanced genetic science over the centuries, modifying our code to adapt to new environments as we explored. Somewhere along the line a sequence was lost that left us vulnerable. A plague spread, attacking Latharian women. They all perished over the span of half a decade.”

She stared in horror. An entire gender, gone?

“How did the Lathar survive?”

“We found a couple of species we could procreate with, with varying levels of success,” Taavik replied. “But those solutions were never guaranteed and resulted in no female births. Only males.”

“So you had warriors, but no way to rebuild?”

“Exactly.” He nodded. “And then we made contact with humanity. Close enough genetically to produce offspring, and their females carried the missing code. A mate matching program has been established and, so far, at least one viable

female has been born healthy.” He shook his head. “A costly lesson. Our science outstripped our wisdom, and it nearly wiped us out.”

Lynara shuddered. Her people had gambled with their own existence, tampering with the building blocks of life, and paid a grim price for their arrogance. “There are no pure-blooded Latharian women left?”

“None but you. The princess is half-human and half-Latharian, which we hope will protect her from the effects of the plague, but you... you have the original coding sequence in your DNA so I’m sure the lord healer will want to speak to you. Take samples.”

“Of course,” she said quickly. “Anything for the empire.”

For a moment, silence hung between them, heavy with the weight of time and history.

Taavik touched her shoulder gently. “I regret being the bearer of such news. But you deserved the truth, to understand the world as it is.”

Someone called his name from the other side of the tent and Taavik stood. “Rest now. There will be time to talk more later.”

Cameron watched Lynara from across the bustling command tent, transfixed by her. Though she was Latharian, she was petite, barely reaching his chest, with silky-looking skin and midnight hair that rippled down her back. His body thrummed at the sight of her, heat pooling in his core as unfamiliar emotions rose within him.

He dragged his gaze away, forcing himself to focus on the storm readings flickering across the tent's holo-screens. But his thoughts kept drifting to her smile, her laugh, the way she brushed a stray lock of hair from her face.

Savaar sidled up beside him, following his line of sight. "I see why you find her so fascinating, my friend."

Cameron scrubbed a hand over the stubble lining his jaw. "She's strong, to have survived all she has." And beautiful. And everything he couldn't have.

Savaar clapped him on the back. "Any man would be drawn to such a woman."

"I'm not meant for relationships."

The admission was unexpected, one he wouldn't normally have voiced, not to anyone, and the words tasted bitter on his tongue. He knew the darkness that lurked within, the rage and violence that simmered beneath the surface. He would never subject Lynara to that.

"Humans are so strange," Savaar said. "That's not what I meant, but okay."

Murphy gave a small chuckle. “How are we strange?”

Savaar looked over at Dubois, a frown on his face. “You talk in riddles and never say what you mean. The Lathar way is much simpler.”

There was so much to unpack there that Murphy didn’t know where to start. “I’m assuming from that you are having some... issues with the good major?”

“Yes.” Savaar growled in frustration, shoving a big hand into his long hair as he glared across the tent at Dubois. “I try and court her, or tell her that I want to court her, but all she does is play word games with me.”

Murphy pressed his lips together in an effort to conceal his amusement. “We call that flirting,” he explained. “It’s like a... battle of words to work out how the other person feels.”

Savaar looked at him like he’d grown another head. “Why do you not just tell the object of your interest that you want to mate them?”

He glared across the tent again, and Murphy couldn’t help the small chuckle. “Well, glaring at her like that isn’t going to help.” He leaned in and said in a low voice, “And, honestly, she likes you. Trust me.”

Savaar looked at him in surprise. “How do you know that? Has she... said anything? About me, I mean.”

Amusement rolled through Murphy. For all their differences, sometimes humans and the Lathar were so alike. “She’s not tried to shoot you yet,” he pointed out. “And she even smiled at you earlier. I’ve known her for years, and I can count the number of times I’ve seen her smile on the fingers of one hand, if I chopped a few fingers off.”

Savaar’s eyes narrowed as he worked out what Murphy had said. Then a slow smile spread across his face. “So she would be open to my claim?”

The corner of Murphy’s lips quirked up. He wasn’t sure who would be putting a claim on whom, but Savaar could work that one out for himself.

“She’s divorcing her husband, so you might want to tread carefully, but yeah... I would think so.” And Dubois deserved a little happiness... Or hot sex with a guy who worshipped the ground she walked on. Whatever she wanted out of the situation.

Savaar blinked and looked at Dubois again. “She was mated?”

Murphy nodded. “She’s divorcing him because he cheated with another woman.”

There was a lot more to it than that, he was sure, but that was Dubois’s story to tell.

“Then that draanthic does not deserve her,” Savaar growled, taking a step forward.

Murphy stopped the big Latharian with a hand on his arm. “What did you mean before? When you said that wasn’t what you meant? About me... And Captain Varaant?”

Savaar’s expression was unreadable as he looked down at him. “You don’t know? Of course, you don’t know. It’s in the historical record. Captain Varaant was betrothed to the expedition ground commander, Prince Dariel.”

Murphy froze. “She was engaged?”

Shit. Not only was she displaced from her own time, but she could be heartbroken to boot. His heart, an organ he’d long thought dead, ached for her even as the green-eyed monster of jealousy raged through his system. The idea that her heart belonged to another was one he couldn’t comprehend.

Savaar inclined his head. “It was a dynastic alliance between the two families, which was common at the time.”

Relief rolled through Murphy.

“So it wasn’t a personal thing? They hadn’t met and...” He forced the words out. “Fallen in love themselves?”

Savaar shook his head. “I do not believe so. The records on Captain Varaant show that she followed her mother into what was then the Imperial Navy.”

Murphy frowned. “I did wonder why her rank wasn’t the same as the ones you lot have... Lathar from this time, I mean,” he added for clarification. Then he frowned. “Her mother was in the navy as well?”

Savaar rocked back on his heels, obviously regretting starting this little history lesson. Murphy wasn’t going to let him off that easily. He needed to know everything about Lynara.

“Indeed,” Savaar said, “she was a veteran and a hero of the Tanel Wars. It’s why the captain is a princess.”

Shock rolled through Murphy. “She’s a princess?”

“Yes. It was an honor bestowed on her line by the first emperor. Her children will be royal in perpetuity.”

Murphy’s gaze slid between Savaar and Taavik. Sometimes the ranking and clan statuses among the Lathar gave him a damn headache. “But you’re her descendants. Right? So that would make you two royal as well?”

Savaar shook his head. “Our line rose from Lynara’s younger brother, Lord Riaan. He was born of the previous lord’s second mate. Same father,” he explained. “Different mother. The royal status did not pass down Riaan’s line. But...” He drawled with a smile. “That’s not what’s important here.”

Murphy froze and pinned him with a direct look. “Then what is important?”

Savaar’s grin broadened to show straight white teeth that were far too sharp to be human.

“That betrothal contract was never fulfilled,” he revealed. “Because there was no Varaant, and later V’aant female who was also a princess. Of course.” He shrugged. “There was also no K’Daar prince either. Dariel was the last of his line and the K’Daar ceased to exist as a clan with his disappearance.”

“Okay... if there is a point here,” Murphy said, “I’m afraid I’m missing it.”

Savaar clapped him on the shoulder. “You are the only male with verified K’Daar blood. Which means you not only take Dariel’s title as prince, but also the right to his betrothed mate.”

LYNARA’S EYES FLUTTERED OPEN, her senses assaulted by the sterile scent of antiseptic mingled with the smell of too many bodies in the same space. She blinked at the dim light above and turned her head, her gaze wandering as she took in the tent around her.

Memory flooded back.

The crash. The pod.

Waking... here.

She hadn’t been able to get much of a look at her surroundings yesterday. Even though she’d been in stasis for eons, that wasn’t real sleep, and the genetic modifications had done a number on her. She’d needed to sleep, and sleep properly, for her body to heal.

But now she felt, if not better, at least functional, and she looked around with interest. The tent was bigger than she’d initially thought with side panels pulled away to reveal a command area nestled beside the medical bay.

“Ah, Sleeping Beauty awakes,” a deep voice said from across the room, and she half turned to see Dariel’s clone, Cameron Murphy, walking toward her, a steaming mug in hand. “Thought you could use this. We call it coffee.”

She struggled to sit up, and he moved quickly to bunch pillows behind her for support.

“Better?” he asked and she nodded, murmuring her thanks as he handed her the mug.

“This is coffee?”

“It is. Careful, it’s hot.”

She breathed in the steam from the top of the mug, and the bitter aroma assaulted her nostrils, making her wrinkle her

nose in distaste. She took a sip. The liquid burned all the way down her throat, but the warmth spread through her body, sending prickles of alertness up her spine.

“Thanks,” she muttered gruffly. Her eyes fell on a familiar sight, and she couldn’t help but smile at the plate he held. “Field cake? A taste from home.”

“Figured you might appreciate it,” Murphy replied with a small smile.

“More like choke it down out of necessity,” Lynara shot back but smiled to show she was joking. “But it’ll do.”

She took a hesitant bite of the cake, expecting it to be dry and flavorless as she remembered them. Instead, the rich taste exploded on her tongue and she moaned in appreciation. Chewing slowly, she savored the rich sweetness that lingered on her tongue and closed her eyes in pleasure.

“Wow,” she murmured. “That’s... amazing.”

Murphy chuckled. “Taavik certainly has a knack for field cake. It must have changed a lot since your day.”

She nodded, taking another bite and humming in satisfaction. She finished the small cake quickly, feeling as though she hadn’t eaten in days—which was true, she realized with a start. Yet somehow Taavik had managed to make it more delicious than anything she remembered from home.

She looked up at Murphy with appreciation in her eyes. “Thank you,” she said softly.

“You’re welcome.” He smiled back at her.

“There seems to be a gap in the weather, so we’re going to take a team over and do a survey of the Elysium, see what condition she’s in. Would be good to have the captain along, but only if you feel up to it,” he added quickly, concern showing in his eyes.

“I’m good, honestly,” she reassured him quickly. “I’ve been asleep for far too long. Some exercise will do me good.”

He searched her eyes for a few moments longer, but whatever he saw there must have satisfied him because he

nodded.

“Okay. Dubois has left some clothes for you,” he said, nodding toward the chair next to her bed. “You’re about the same size. I’ll leave you to... get dressed and all that. Facilities are just through that section there,” he added, indicating a tent flap all but hidden in the corner that she hadn’t noticed before.

She nodded as he left, pulling a screen across her bed area to give her some privacy. Gathering her strength, she swung her legs over the edge of the cot and stood, using the makeshift table for support. Her limbs protested, still weak from her ordeal, and she was glad that Murphy had left her alone to change. She didn’t want anyone to see her like this.

Changing out of her now-too-large uniform made her bite her lip. It was a symbol of everything she’d left behind and everything she’d lost. She put it to one side, marveling that it and she herself were hundreds of thousands of years older than everyone and everything here. The very thought was too much to process and made her head hurt, so she focused on pulling on the clothes Dubois had left for her instead.

They fit nearly perfectly. Murphy had been right. They were of a similar size. She pulled on the boots, taking a moment to figure out the unfamiliar fastenings—they were laced, how... old fashioned—and then stood. Instead of the jacket Dubois had left for her, she pulled on her old uniform jacket instead, not willing to give up everything from her old life just yet.

She stood back to survey herself in the reflection from the back of one of Kvatt’s medical machines. Her new form was petite and slender, much smaller than she’d ever been before. She’d always been tall, almost on a height with Taavik and Savaar, so being this small would take some getting used to.

With one last steadying breath, she squared her shoulders and stepped through the tent flap Murphy had pulled across to give her privacy.

Taavik, Savaar, the human woman Dubois, and Murphy were waiting for her near the front entrance to the tent. The

two humans were clad in thick coats and insulated boots, whereas the Latharians had their leather uniforms zipped up to the neck and wore gloves. The leather must be nano-infused with thermo-regulation, like her jacket.

“Ready to face the Elysium again?” Murphy asked, his pale gaze assessing as he looked over at her. The wind howled outside, a chilling reminder of the frozen hellscape that awaited them.

“Yes.” She nodded. “I need to see what happened to my ship... with my own eyes.”

“Alright, folks,” Murphy said, clapping his hands together. “We’ve got a ship to survey. Let’s get this done.”

He threw the flap of the tent open, and a gust of biting cold air rushed inside. Lynara shivered and wrapped her jacket tighter around herself, accepting the gloves and hat Dubois handed to her with a smile of thanks. Being sensitive to the cold was obviously something else she was going to have to get used to.

They filed out into the icy landscape, their breaths visible in the frigid air as they began the trek across the snow. She paused for a moment to look around. She hated the cold, and snow in particular, but she couldn’t deny the wild beauty of the landscape.

“Such an odd environment for a planet,” she said, catching up with Murphy. “You could be forgiven for thinking you were the only creature on the surface.”

He snorted in amusement. “Oh, don’t be fooled. One of the planet’s worse predators lives out here.”

She blinked and looked up at him, making sure to step in the path Taavik and Savaar ahead of them had trampled down in the snow. “You have icewryms?” she asked. “I thought they were limited to the *Daais-Five* sector.”

He shook his head, squinting against the bright sunlight even behind his sunglasses. “No... worse. Polar bears.”

She arched an eyebrow at him. She’d seen the survey reports. The destruction icewryms were capable of was

horrifying. If these polar bears were worse, she really didn't want to know anything about them.

But then she turned and caught her first glimpse of the Elysium. Her breath hitched in her throat, and she blinked back tears that threatened to freeze on her cheeks.

The ship was buried beneath layers of ice and snow, only the top section visible, a testament to the hundreds of thousands of years it had spent entombed in this frozen wasteland.

Murphy paused with her, his gaze understanding as she looked her fill.

"She was glorious when I first saw her," she murmured. "She was just out of her construction cradle, the prize of the fleet. Now... she's nothing more than a tombstone."

"No." Murphy shook his head. "A monument to history and resilience. And she cared for you," he added, his deep voice cutting through the wind. "Kept you alive all these years, and when the time was right, rose out of the ice to bring you to us."

"That's... a very poetic way to put it," she said, locking down her feelings. She couldn't afford to let her emotions cloud her judgment now. "Come on, we're falling behind."

They moved forward, catching up with the others as they picked their way carefully across the treacherous terrain toward the huge ship. Her heart pounded in her chest as the ruins of the once-majestic vessel loomed over them. The cold bit at her exposed skin, but she barely felt it—her focus on the task ahead.

“Alright,” Taavik said as they reached the ship, standing just within the ruined door of the loading hall. “We need to find a way into the computer mainframe. That’s our best shot at getting any information. I’ve managed to map about half the ship, and I’ve isolated three areas that I think we could find an access point.”

His face was illuminated by the display from his wrist comp as he showed them a map of the Elysium. It was scattered and incomplete. Lynara’s lips pursed as she looked it over.

“Okay, this one and this one, yes,” she pointed out two intersections. “But this one isn’t to the mainframe. It’s to the ship’s environmental and waste management areas.”

“Definitely not what we’re after.” Taavik shot her a smile. “I know most archaeologists are fairly obsessed with trall, but it’s not going to help us much here.”

“No.” She inclined her head. “You’re missing a large part of the map. The best way to access the mainframe is the central ventral corridor here...” she traced in the air in the

middle of his map. “If we can reach that, and it’s clear, it’s a straight route to the mainframe chamber.”

Both Latharians nodded blankly, and she huffed. “Come on. Ship design can’t have changed that much in all these years?”

Lynara pushed away the despair that threatened to overwhelm her as they made their way through the wreckage of the ship. The cold was a constant reminder of death and destruction, but the absence of bodies was eerie in its own right. It was as if everyone had been snatched away in a single moment, leaving behind only memories... and a silent, empty husk.

“We’re almost there,” Taavik murmured as they reached a large door at the end of a long corridor.

“This should be it,” Lynara said with a nod as Taavik pulled the access panel off the wall to get to the door controls. Without ship-wide power, biomech registration was nonoperational. It was weird when she was used to them opening for her. More proof that she’d left her old life behind.

He got in with ease, the door cracking open with a groan and a release of stale air, and then stood back so Lynara could enter first.

She did, her heart in her throat at what she would find within. The room inside was small but relatively undamaged from the crash, though she saw signs of wear from years of exposure to the elements.

It contained only two pieces of equipment—a large computer console and an equally large server tower. Lynara moved closer, inspecting them with an experienced eye.

“If we’re lucky, this room was shielded enough that the data can still be accessed,” she observed, her voice low but carrying enough to reach the team behind her. What worried her, though, wasn’t any physical damage she could see but damage wrought by the sheer passage of time. The data might still be there, but if all the components to access it had aged and turned to dust over the intervening years, they were sunk.

Taavik nodded, but she knew he was only half paying attention to her. Instead, his and Savaar's eyes wandered around the room in wonderment, roaming over every part of it with awe and respect. She bit back her irritation, realizing that, for them, this was a piece of their history.

Lynara wiped the frost from the console's surface. The last time she'd seen this room, mere days ago for her, everything had been bright, shiny and new. Now... it was dull and aged. Ancient.

"Here goes nothing," she muttered, her breath condensing on the cold metal as she input a series of commands.

The screen flickered to life, bathing her face in an eerie blue glow. Hope filled her as the system came online, booting up into safety mode.

"Okay, a lot of systems are dead." She kept up a running commentary for the others as she scrolled through screens. "Engines completely inert. Engine four appears to be missing, probably torn off in the crash. Its reports end much earlier than the others. Central core is operating at less than one percent... fuel cores are almost completely depleted now," she noted.

"It's amazing that it's even running at that after all these years," Taavik murmured at her side.

She nodded. "I'm rather glad it is, or I wouldn't be here talking to you."

Her response was absent as she searched through more screens, accessing the stasis records. Searching... hoping...

"Vaark," she hissed, slamming her hands against the console's edge.

"Lynara?" Murphy asked, concern in his voice.

"They're offline," she said, her voice hollow. "The pods... they're all offline. They've been dead for centuries."

She closed her eyes, tipping her head back. She'd been hoping, beyond hope, that maybe one pod was still active. But no... nothing. Then a thought struck her.

“She might not have been in her own pod,” Lynara whispered, her fingers flying over the keys again. Then she spotted a piece of data that made her breath catch in her throat. “Adia... Adia never went into a pod.”

“Who’s Adia?” Taavik asked.

“An old friend,” she replied, her voice thick with emotion. She closed her eyes, relief washing over her like a warm embrace. “My oldest friend in fact. We were children together. When I went into the navy, she joined up as my yeoman. But here... look, there’s a sensor record for her biosignature.” She pointed out an entry on the screen. “She survived the crash!”

“But she didn’t go into a pod?” Murphy joined her at the console.

“No. There are no entries for her entering a pod...” She pursed her lips as she scrolled back through pages and pages of records. “All I can find are activations and—”

She cut herself off but Murphy looked at her. “And?”

She swallowed. “Termination notifications.”

“Ahh.” He put an arm around her shoulders and pulled her close. She stiffened, fighting his embrace for a moment, but then rested her head against his shoulder.

“There are so many of them,” she whispered as she watched the screen scrolling. They all had the same time and date stamp. “The crash must have damaged some of the stasis halls. The rest are... no,” she murmured, straightening up and pulling away from the reassuring strength of Murphy’s solid body to run another query on the database. “There’s other dates here as well...”

A frown creased her brow as she worked through them. “They were a couple of hundred years after.” Realization hit. “This is when the main generator failed. They died in their pods without waking up.”

Murphy covered her hand with his, squeezing lightly.

“He left them to die. *Vaark*,” she hissed, tipping her head back to blink away the tears.

“Who left them to die?” Murphy asked in a low voice.

“Dariel,” she said, turning to face the others as they huddled around the flickering display. “Okay, I don’t know what history says about that *vaarker*, but if it’s anything other than he was a snake in the *vaarking* grass, then it’s all lies. This... destruction, all this death... was down to Dariel’s grand plan to become emperor.”

“Prince Dariel?” Savaar asked, rubbing his hands together for warmth, his breath forming frosty clouds in the frigid air. “Dariel K’Daar?”

“One and the same.” Lynara sighed, pressing her lips together before continuing. “Dariel was the colony commander for the *Elysium*. My mission was to drop him and the colonists off at EC-14-alpha, for them to establish a level one colony.”

“Level one colony?” Murphy asked.

“One capable of operating as a central hub for smaller colonies,” Taavik explained. “The empire used to send out a large expedition to establish an L-1 colony and then subsequently send supply ships with colonists to establish lower-level colonies.”

She nodded. “It’s a hell of an assignment, even for a prince. And especially for a prince who didn’t have any experience leading a colony. But that was Dariel K’Daar all over. Why bother with the effort when you can buy whatever you want,” she snorted bitterly.

“Anyway, he was supposed to run the L-1, for the glory of the empire. Turns out he had other plans.”

“Like what?” Taavik questioned, curiosity etched onto his features.

“Betrayal,” she hissed, her anger rising like bile in her throat. “He sabotaged helm control, which took us off course. We hit a spatial anomaly, which caused us to crash here.”

“Wait, he did it on purpose?” Murphy butted in, disbelief evident in his voice.

“Unfortunately, yes,” Lynara admitted, shaking her head. “You see, he believed he would make a better emperor than Kayan and—”

“Wait? Kayan *Vorr*?” Savaar asked, his eyes shining with excitement. “The first emperor?”

She arched her eyebrow. “The emperor, yes. Who did you think I was talking about?”

“I think what Savaar is trying to say,” Murphy interjected. “Is that for modern Lathar, Kayan Vorr has achieved legendary status.”

Both Lathar nodded, still watching her with rapt attention.

“Did you ever meet Kayan?” Savaar demanded.

“The emperor?” She nodded. “Yes. He officiated the *Elysium*’s launch.”

Both warriors looked at her with awe.

“What was he like?” Taavik wanted to know.

She didn’t have to think about that. “Scary, ruthless... amazing. You have to remember, that for us, Kayan Vorr was the reason the Lathar survived the Tanel Wars. He created and controlled the Vorrтан. Most of us worshipped the ground he walked on. Dariel... thought he could do better.”

“Sounds like someone needed a hug,” Savaar deadpanned, earning him a sharp look from Lynara. Then he grinned. “Or a swift smack upside the head with a hull plate.”

She snorted. “Might have knocked some sense into him, but I doubt it. Regardless of his reasons, the end result was this.” She gestured at the frozen wreckage around them.

“We crashed, and a lot of the crew died instantly.” She indicated the screen in front of her. “From the looks of it, the rest went into stasis pods, hoping to be found someday.”

“They couldn’t have.” Murphy frowned. “At least some of them had to have left, otherwise we wouldn’t be here,” he said, motioning to himself and Dubois.

“That would explain why I can’t find Adia in the system,” she mused, frowning as she entered more queries. At first the system, unused for so many centuries, fought her, but then new results appeared on the screen. “Okay, I’ve had to go through biometrics to track their movement through the ship, and they didn’t leave through the damaged cargo hall, but from one of the upper deck gantry exits. But yes, a small cohort left the ship a few weeks after the crash. Adia among them.”

Relief washed through her. Her friend *had* survived.

“They obviously traveled from the pole and then found a viable place to settle, eventually becoming humanity.”

“Right.” Lynara drew in a deep breath and wrapped her too-big jacket more tightly around her slender frame, her fingers fumbling with the zipper.

“*Vaark* it,” she muttered, the cold biting at her exposed skin as she gave up and resorted to clutching the collar closed.

“Here, let me,” Murphy said, reaching over to help her with the stubborn zipper. He pulled the scarf from around his own neck to tuck into the too-big gap of her collar.

“Thanks,” she murmured, her cheeks flushing with color beneath the frosty air.

“Anytime.” He smiled warmly, and then his expression grew serious again. “So, what now? Can you download all the records from the mainframe?”

“Already on it,” Taavik replied, tapping on his wrist computer. “For saying this thing ran something as big as the *Elysium*, it’s surprisingly small. We have bigger mainframes running scout ships these days. There’s a lot of corrupted data here as well, but I think I should be able to clean it up back at base camp.”

She smiled up at Murphy as he finished tucking in the scarf to make sure she was warm. Why she was letting him fuss over her like this she didn’t know, but it felt... nice. Even if he did look too much like Dariel for comfort.

She brushed her fingers over her rank insignia, a movement borne of habit, and then froze. Her fingertips flew over the unadorned fabric next to her rank.

Her mother's badge was gone.

"*Nononono*," she moaned and then turned on her heel and sprinted from the mainframe chamber and down the darkened corridor, her breath coming in ragged gasps. The cold air burned her lungs as she ran, her legs pumping furiously beneath her.

"Come on. Come on," she muttered under her breath, her fingers itching with the need to find her mother's badge. The hallway seemed to stretch on forever, the flickering shadows cast by her flashlight only adding to her sense of disorientation.

Finally, the door to the pod hall loomed before her, and Lynara skidded to a halt. She took a deep breath to steady herself and then pushed the door open and stepped inside.

"*Vaark...* which one..." she whispered, her eyes scanning the rows of pods in search of the one she'd spent all these years in. She only had scattered memories of being brought down here, and no idea which pod Dariel had chosen for her tomb. The room was silent and eerie, the stillness broken only by the hum of the life support systems. "Which one are you?"

"Looking for something?" a voice asked from behind her, making her jump.

"Murphy!" she gasped as she whirled around, her heart pounding in her chest. "You scared the living daylights out of me!"

"Sorry," he replied with an apologetic smile, "but I couldn't let you wander off by yourself."

"Fine," she said through gritted teeth, turning back to the pods. "Which one did you pull me from?"

"That one, on the end there." He pointed out.

She was gone before he'd finished talking, sprinting down the line to the pod at the end. The lid was raised but she had to

jump and half scramble to get a look inside, searching the bed within.

“It’s not here. No,” she murmured, panic filling her. “It has to be here.”

She’d been wearing it on the bridge that day, which meant it had to have been put in the pod with her. A soft moan escaped her. But what if it had fallen off during the crash? But then she spotted something at the bottom of the pod, a small glint of silver half-hidden between the padding and the side of the pod.

“Yes!” she hissed, relief flooding through her as she plucked the badge from its hiding place. She clutched it to her chest, letting out a shaky breath. “Thank the stars...”

“What is that?” Murphy asked, his hip leaning against the side of the pod next to her. “Must be something important?”

“It is,” she replied, studying the familiar insignia etched into the metal. “It was my mother’s, her service badge.”

“Must mean a lot to you,” he observed, his eyes softening.

Lynara nodded, her throat tight with emotion. “It’s more than just a symbol of service. It represents everything she worked for, everything she sacrificed. And it’s a reminder that I have to keep going, even when things seem impossible.”

“Sounds like she was an incredible woman,” Murphy said, offering a small smile.

“Sometimes I wonder if I’ll ever be able to live up to her legacy,” she confessed, her grip on the badge tightening.

“Hey,” Murphy said, placing a hand on her shoulder. “I think you already did that. The *Elysium*, you, made history. Your mother would be proud.”

“Thanks,” she murmured, touched by his words.

“Let’s get back to the others,” Murphy suggested. “Before this damn storm closes in on us and we get stuck over here.”

She nodded, tucking the badge securely into a pocket.

“You’re right,” she agreed. “We’ve got work to do. If we can figure out those logs, maybe we can figure out where Dariel took the group that left.”

MURPHY MADE sure to keep Lynara close to him as they made their way back to base camp. Given what she’d been through, she’d been a rock, helping them with the Elysium, but the moment she thought she’d lost her mother’s badge, the mask had cracked and he’d seen the pain and grief she was hiding.

It wasn’t a surprise. In the space of what seemed like hours for her, she’d lost everything. Her family, her world, her life... and now everything was different. New. Everyone she knew was dead. It would rock anyone.

“We need to clear up the medical area, so, sorry, we have to move you. You’re in here now,” he told her as he led her through the main command tent through to one of the dorm tents. The tents were all interconnected, their construction adding extra protection against the elements. Which, if the sound of the storm back up outside was any indication, they needed.

“Oh?” She shrugged as she followed him, her gaze flitting over the beds laid out. “Looks like pretty much every barracks I’ve bunked in.”

He raised an eyebrow at that. “I thought you were a captain? Didn’t you get your own quarters?”

Being honest, he’d never thought much about accommodations on Latharian vessels, old or new. He’d just assumed they were the same as on human ships and facilities. Lower ranks got shoved in together, but higher ranks got some privacy.

She chuckled, the sound lower than he expected and melodic. “I wasn’t always a captain. I had to work my way up through the ranks, as I’m sure you did.”

His lips quirked. “Yeah, I totally walked into that.”

“You really did.” She grinned, and their gazes caught and held for a second. A shared moment of humor but just for a second. There was something, a spark of connectivity, and her eyes darkened slightly.

He cleared his throat and turned.

“Okay... I’ve put you through here, so you have a little privacy from the rest of us,” he said, leading her to a bed that was tucked away to the side of the tent behind a support pillar. He put the sleeping bag and pile of blankets down on the simple cot.

It was in the middle of the group of tents, and the “wall” she was next to was an interior one with a research lab on the other side. It was one of the warmest spots in the room, which since he’d spotted her shivering earlier, he figured she needed. Especially when sleeping.

“Thank you. This is a... nice spot?” she offered, looking around.

He shook his head, rubbing at the back of his neck as he looked at it. She was a visitor to Earth and possibly the most important person he’d ever meet in his life, and all he could offer her was a camp bed and a sleeping bag. It was pathetic.

“I swear, most of the planet is far better than this.” He grinned. “When this storm dies down and we can get out, I—”

She moved quicker than he anticipated, stepping closer and reaching up to put her fingers over his lips. He started in surprise, looking down at her. He’d held her in his arms before, and each time was imprinted on his memory forever, but this was the first time *she’d* initiated contact.

The touch of her fingertips against his lips was soft, but the spark it created arced through him like an electrical storm.

“Seriously,” she murmured, her voice far lower and more sultry than he’d heard it before. “It’s fine. I’ve seen more than one base camp in my career.”

He nodded, his arms sliding around her slender form to pull her up against him, slowly giving her a chance to pull away if she wanted to. A small voice at the back of his head

screamed this was a bad idea, that he wasn't relationship material, that no one could ever love him, not with the things he'd done... and this could jeopardize the link humanity had to their own past. Could fuck it up beyond all repair—

She reached on her tiptoes and kissed him.

His thought processes halted. Just stopped.

With a groan, he tightened his arms until she was higher on her tiptoes and slanted his head, kissing her back—softly, gently, as he kept rigid control on himself.

Her lips were soft and sweet, responsive as they clung to his. It was exploratory, each of them learning the shape of the other's lips. They shared a breath. His hand spread out over her lower back, holding her in place as he pushed further and teased the seam of her lips with his tongue.

She parted for him with a soft sound of pleasure that wasn't a moan but not a catch of breath. Whatever it was, he wanted to hear it again. He groaned again as he slid his tongue into her mouth. Soft, gentle, teasing her to come and play with him with soft strokes.

Her hands tightened on his shoulders, clinging as she became the aggressor. Where he'd been letting things go at her pace so as not to scare her, she upped the ante on him, pushing him backward so he sat down on the bed behind him with a thump. Their lips parted with the sudden movement, but a second later she was there, stepping between his parted thighs as she claimed his lips again.

He growled, his arms banding around her waist and hips. She was so tiny that he only had to tilt his head up a little for their lips to meet again.

His heart pounded as the kiss became hotter, wetter, more torrid. Heat blasted through him like a supernova, his cock hard and heavy in a heartbeat, but he held himself still. He kissed her like his life depended on it as she shoved her hand into his hair, gripping the short strands to keep him still.

When she broke away to look down at him, her breathing was ragged, and a stunned look shone in her eyes. "That... my

gods...”

“Yeah,” he offered raggedly, watching her.

He’d never reacted to someone so strongly. Not ever. It was like, for a few seconds, the rest of the world hadn’t even existed and, with a start, he realized he’d actually lost operational awareness of his surroundings. Which for him... was unheard of. He’d been in the middle of an orgy before, while undercover, and never once lost track of what was going on around him. But she only had to kiss him, and that was it, all he could think about was her.

“I’m... guessing from that,” she said, easing from his arms to sit next to him on the cot. “That you don’t have someone special somewhere.”

He was still stunned enough to answer honestly, shaking his head. “No. I’m not really the relationship type.”

Shit. Why had he told her that? Now she’d think he was a commitment-phobe. But shit, wasn’t he? Hadn’t he spent most of his life avoiding letting anyone get close apart from his sister? But that was because El *knew* him, knew the darkness inside him and the things he’d had to do to keep them safe, and she loved him anyway.

Lynara tilted her head, watching him, and for a moment he felt like a sample under the microscope. “Why is that? Duty?”

He gave a small shrug. It was that and it wasn’t. Many presidents had been married, had a family, just... not him.

“I guess, in a way. Until recently I’ve not really been in the same place for long.” Or even used the same name for long. “My career... not many of us can maintain long-term relationships.”

Not even with each other although some had tried. Mostly it was a string of one-night stands, the need to seek some kind of physical connection driving them together rather than emotional feelings for each other. Physical release, that was all.

“Ah.” She nodded, and he got the feeling she’d seen far more than he’d intended her to. He shouldn’t ask, but he

couldn't help himself.

“Ah?”

She smiled, but the expression was softer somehow. “You remind me of a friend. He's...” She paused and swallowed. “I guess *was* special forces. Sector Seven.”

“What's that?” he asked, aching to pull her into his arms again, especially with the weight of loss in her eyes like that. But something about the set of her shoulders warned him off. They may have shared one of the hottest kisses known to man—or Latharian—kind, but that didn't give him any kind of rights.

“Sector Seven?” She focused on him again, and he saw her pull herself together. “It's not around anymore then I guess?”

He shook his head. “I mean, I'm no expert on the Latharian empire, but no, it's not a term I've heard. Apart from the fact all the clans seem to be military-based, the only thing I've ever heard them reference that sound like special forces are the Izaean.”

She shook her head, a blank look in her eyes. “That must be after my time then. I've never heard of that group. But yes, Sector Seven was the Imperial Navy's special forces wing. My... friend Saar was S7, so I recognize the look.”

Something about the way she paused and the soft curve of her lips when she said the guy's name clued him in. This Saar must have been a lover, or someone close. Jealousy hit him hard and fast, roaring through his veins like wildfire. So she had a lover she thought fondly of, and meanwhile he reminded her of the guy she hated most in the world.

Sucked to be him.

Lynara lay on her back, listening to the storm rage outside and the chatter of other people on the other side of the tent with half an ear. Warm and comfortable, she wasn't ready to get up yet. She'd slept better than she ever had before, perhaps catching up on the hundreds of lifetimes since the last time she'd slept in her bed aboard the *Elysium*.

But that wasn't what filled her thoughts right now. That honor went to the kiss with Cameron last night. She'd had lovers before, who *really* knew what they were doing in bed, but no one had ever kissed her like Cameron. It had been the hottest kiss she'd ever experienced, but that wasn't it.

It had been the feeling of *rightness* in the center of her chest. Like something within her recognized and welcomed Cameron. The reason she'd had to say no to Saar's proposal...

Guilt slammed into her, hard and fast, stealing her breath. Since meeting Murphy, she hadn't spared a thought for Saar. He'd be long gone now, dead for thousands of years, but she couldn't help wondering what had happened to him. In his last call he'd promised to wait as long as it took.

But she'd never returned home. Had he found another and built a life, found a family to replace the one he'd wanted with her?

She lifted her hands to scrub at her face. While she slept in the ice, frozen in time, Saar's world had carried on without her. And now all she'd known was dust, her friends and family

remnants of a forgotten age. Mere footnotes in history. She was adrift, belonging neither to past nor present.

Alarms blared suddenly in the tent, making her jump. She sat up, pushing her hair from her face, and looked across the tent. The main command area was visible through the doorway, and it was a hotbed of activity, both human and Latharians running back and forth, their faces tight with worry.

Cameron emerged from another area of the command tent and her gaze latched on to him as the human woman, Dubois, called out to him, her voice filled with urgency. “Mr. President, we have multiple systems failures from the storm. I recommend we evacuate. *Immediately!*”

His eyes cut across the tent to look at her, their gazes colliding. A warm feeling spread out from the center of her chest that his first thought was to look for her.

“Okay, we need to evacuate. How long will it take us to load the transports?” he asked, already striding to Dubois’s side. Taavik reached her at the same time.

“That’s not going to be an option.” She spun the screen toward them. Lynara couldn’t see it clearly, but it seemed to show the storm outside, centering right above them. “It’s a class five, came out of nowhere. If we try and go up in this... it’ll tear us to pieces. But we can’t stay here, so we’re fucked.”

Okay... that didn’t sound so good. Lynara slid from her sleeping bag and started to dress as quickly as possible. If they were evacuating, she would get no more sleep tonight.

“No, no, we’re not fucked,” Cameron said reassuringly and then raised his voice so it would carry through the tents. “Everyone, get ready to move. We’re going to take refuge in the ship.”

She looked up as she pulled her boots on to find Cameron headed her way. He already had a heavy jacket on and held one out to her.

“You’re going to need this,” he said, his expression grim as he looked her over. All around them, people were packing up what they could carry into backpacks, and Cameron did the

same, shoving her sleeping bag and his into a pack as she fastened the jacket. “The storm is vicious so I need you to stick close to me. Okay?”

She nodded and offered him a reassuring smile. “Don’t worry. I might be old, but I did hostile environment training when I was at the academy. This...” She shrugged. “It’ll be a walk in the park.”

He looked down at her, his pale eyes unreadable for a moment, and then nodded. She got the feeling that he wasn’t comfortable showing his concern—not for her or anyone.

“Okay, people,” he called out, shrugging the pack on and grabbing her hand. “Let’s move.”

For all her reassurances about her training, the cold and the sheer ferocity of the storm that greeted them outside the tent stole Lynara’s breath away. It was like nature itself had risen up around them in righteous wrath to try and wipe them from the face of the planet.

They raced for the shelter of the *Elysium*, the tattered remains of base camp disappearing into the whiteness behind them. Lynara stumbled, holding tightly to Cameron’s hand, through blinding snow while fighting against the wind tearing at her with icy claws.

A thousand meters. They only needed to make it a thousand meters to reach the ship. But in this weather, it may as well have been a thousand lightyears.

Her legs burned as she waded through thigh-deep snow, struggling for every step. Exhaustion dragged at her, seeping into her bones until she could barely lift one foot after the other.

Her boot caught on an unseen obstacle, sending her tumbling into a snowbank, and panic clawed at her throat. This new body was pathetic and weak, nothing like her original form. If she fell, she would never get up, and in seconds the snow from the storm would cover her. No one would see where she was and help her.

Strong hands gripped her arms, hauling her back to her feet. She half turned, looking up at her rescuer. Cameron. Relief crashed over her in waves. Just a few more steps and he'd never have been able to find her, all because her new body wouldn't keep up.

He wrapped an arm around her waist, taking most of her weight and shielding her from the ferocity of the storm with his bigger frame as they fought their way through the storm toward the ship.

She almost cried when the hulking form of the *Elysium* emerged from the churn of white. Within seconds they could see the dark slash of the ruined cargo hall door.

They staggered through it and into the warm halo of light set up by those who had already made it, leaving the storm behind.

Cameron turned to her, beads of melted snow clinging to the dark strands of his hair. His gaze swept over her as though reassuring himself she was okay, a crease forming between his brows.

Her chest tightened at his concern, and she reached out, brushing the droplets from his forehead. His eyes hooded at her touch, his gaze darkening, and for a moment, she let her fingers linger against his skin, reluctant to break contact.

Clearing her throat, she turned to look at the ragtag group that had fled base camp with only what they could carry. The storm still raged outside, buffeting the ship with howling winds and forcing them to huddle on the far side of the loading hall, well away from the ruined loading door.

“Stay here,” Cameron ordered and then moved through the group, taking a head count of the human personnel even as Taavik was doing the same with the Latharians.

His brow creased when he finished, his gaze darting over the faces around them. “Where’s Dr. Lei?”

Silence met his question, and dread pooled in Lynara’s stomach. They were missing someone.

“Errr... she was right behind me,” one of the other scientists said, looking toward the ruined door. “I thought she’d made it in.”

Cameron cursed under his breath and turned on his heel, striding toward the door. Before he’d even made it halfway across the hall, the winds buffeted him and almost took him off his feet. She gasped, starting forward, but Taavik beat her to it, grabbing Cameron’s arm and stopping him.

“You can’t go back out there,” he growled. “That storm will kill you before you make it twenty meters.”

Cameron shrugged off the restraining hand, determination etched into the hard lines of his face. “I can’t leave her behind.”

Taavik blocked him, refusing to budge. “Your death won’t help Dr. Lei. The storm is too strong. No one could survive out there for long. I’m sorry, but she’s lost.”

Cameron glared at the other man, hands balling into fists at his sides. But after a long moment, his shoulders slumped in defeat. He knew as well as any that Taavik was right. Venturing out now would be utter suicide.

She reached his side and put a hand on his arm, squeezing slightly. His frustration was palpable, the desire of a leader to help a member of his team at odds with the bitter knowledge that his hands were tied. Her chest ached in empathy. She knew that feeling of helplessness all too well. It had been etched into her soul when Dariel had taken control of the ship and doomed them all.

He covered her hand with his own, and she wished she had the words to ease his suffering. After a long moment, he drew in a breath and straightened, though his hand remained over hers.

“Okay, we move on then.”

She suppressed a shiver. With the storm outside, the loading hall’s temperature was beginning to plummet. They might be on a planet she knew nothing about, but after so many years of service in deep space, she knew all about the

effects of temperature on the Latharian body. If they remained here much longer, hypothermia would soon become a real threat.

“We need to find shelter away from the cold,” she told Cameron and Taavik in a low voice. “If we move deeper into the ship, away from the exterior doors, we might find one of the crew lounges still be intact. If not, the corridors of the inner ring will hopefully give us enough protection from the worst of the cold.”

“Sounds like a plan. Lead on, Captain.” Cameron nodded, gesturing for the others to follow them.

They made their way through dim corridors, debris crunching under their boots. The detritus of a bygone era littered their path—scrap metal, wiring, the remnants of storage crates. Lynara’s chest tightened at the sight of the damage, a harsh reminder of what had happened to cut the *Elysium’s* voyage short.

They moved further into the ship, into the inner ring. This was one of the more secure areas of the ship, and more sheltered, so the damage was more sporadic, which was not surprising. The ship’s subframe would have to be nearly totaled for this area to be heavily damaged.

So she wasn’t expecting it when they turned into a new corridor and the beam of her flashlight washed over a huddled figure. Her breath caught in her throat, and she froze. They hadn’t seen any bodies so far, and all the pods in the stasis hall she’d been found in had been empty, so she’d begun to think they wouldn’t find any. But that was impossible. That hall was one of ten, so there had been deaths. No crew came through a crash like that without some casualties.

“Lynara?” Cameron put his hand on her shoulder. “Are you okay?”

She nodded, swallowed hard, and stepped forward. As they drew closer, the figure’s clothing came into view, a uniform she recognized all too well.

“An engineer,” she said, pointing out the stripe of color on the uniform’s cuff. She squatted down next to the body. It was frozen, had been frozen for more years than she wanted to think about, but if not for the ice covering his skin, he might as well have just sat down for a rest and gone to sleep.

Her gaze flitted downward, and she winced at the dark stain over the side of his uniform.

“Some of the crew must have disagreed with Dariel,” she murmured, pointing out the burn marks on the walls around them. “There was a fire here, and they just... left him where he fell.”

“We can recover him later,” Cameron said in a low voice. “Give him a proper burial... or whatever ceremony you prefer to honor the fallen.”

She nodded, standing and wiping her hands on her thighs. She didn’t need to. She hadn’t touched the body, and besides, he’d been frozen for so long that all she would have gotten on her hands was ice, ice, and more ice. But still, the very act of brushing something off—like she was brushing death off itself—was instinctive.

“Let’s move on.” She nodded firmly. “Mark the location and come back for him later.”

“Of course,” Cameron murmured, and they carried on down the corridor, the team behind them averting their eyes as they passed the long-fallen engineer.

But Lynara couldn’t look away. This man had once walked the halls of her ship, dutifully carrying out his tasks alongside his fellow crewmembers. He had hopes and dreams, loved ones who would grieve his loss... *had* grieved his loss, thousands and thousands of years ago and halfway across the galaxy.

Her eyes burned with tears she refused to shed. So much death... because of one man. Dariel. She straightened up to catch up with the group. What had happened to the rest of her crew? She knew their descendants had spread out and become

humanity, but what had happened to the people *she* had known...

Cameron claimed her hand, enveloping it in the warmth of his as he gave it a comforting squeeze. Without a word, she curled her fingers around his, accepting the quiet comfort as they moved on, following the rest.

“A lounge should be just up ahead,” she said in a low voice as they walked along the curve of the central ring corridor.

“Yeah, there’s a door here.”

Taavik was a little ahead of them and used the beam of his torch to pick out the outline of the door. It was barely visible, wedged almost completely shut with detritus from the corridors and showing its age. Chunks of rusted and pitted metal, wiring with insulation that had long decayed to dust, and other less identifiable things were shoved up against it, all covered in a layer of ice.

“Come on,” Taavik motioned to the Latharians on the team to move the debris from in front of it. “Let’s get this lot shifted.”

The Latharians began moving the debris, revealing the door beneath.

“There should be a panel here,” she murmured, sliding her hand down the panel at the side of the door. Feeling for the slight indentations that marked the edge of the plates, she stopped and pressed. The panel didn’t move for a moment, but then she noticed a slight grating sound, one she felt more than heard, and it slid away under her hand to reveal a circle-lever.

“Get the manual release on the other side,” she ordered Cameron, waving at the other side of the door. He opened the panel in the same way she had, proof he’d been watching her keenly.

Reaching in, she grabbed the handle. “To the left, on my mark. Three... two... *mark.*”

They twisted at the same time and heard a squeal as metal ground on metal somewhere within the wall in front of them.

The door inched open, juddering and protesting the movement after so long in place.

“Someone get in there!” she ordered. “Looks like the mechanism is seized. We’ll need to force it open.”

Taavik and Savaar leaped into the gap, taking a side each and setting themselves against the doors to push. They slowly forced the doors apart until the gap was wide enough for the members of the team to slip through.

“Whoa... this is *plush*,” one of the scientists breathed behind them as they crowded in and washed their flashlights over the darkened room.

“You should see the VIP lounges,” she said, seeing the lounge not as it was now, darkened and with ice on every surface sparkling in the torchlight, but brightly lit and full of people. “This was the main lounge for the upper decks. It was designed to be a place to relax for crews on long voyages. The VIP ones were another level again.”

“This will do,” Cameron said, his breath pluming in front of his face. “We just need to warm the place up, and then it’ll be like home sweet home.”

Dubois slid him a look. “Sometimes, Mr. President, I really worry about your home life.”

Lynara was only half listening to them as she walked forward. The lounge remained pristine, filled with plush seating surrounding an open bar and intact, if currently dead, holo-screens.

It was like stepping back in time. Unlike the corridors, this room seemed untouched by the damage in the rest of the ship. The plush fabrics of the seating were faded but intact, and the metallic surfaces of the bar gleamed dully as they swept their flashlights around the room.

The others spread out through the lounge, settling onto couches. For a moment, as the chatter of voices filled the lounge, she could almost imagine herself back in her own time. The fantasy faded as quickly as it had formed. Her people and world were lost to her, no matter how familiar her

surroundings. She was alone here, adrift, with only echoes of the people she had known in the faces of her new companions.

She shivered and wrapped the jacket Cameron had given her tighter around herself. She couldn't wallow. The past was the past, and now all she could do was move forward. Her gaze caught on Cameron's tall form, and for the first time she saw him, not Dariel.

Perhaps moving forward in this time had some advantages after all...

This place was colder than hell freezing over. Murphy sighed and ran a hand through his close-cropped hair as the air plumed in the thin light of his torch every time he breathed out. It was a good job they were all wearing extreme weather gear, or the humans in the group would already be in trouble.

Inside the dimly lit lounge, the two teams clustered together, working out what they'd managed to recover from base camp as they'd fled. His gaze picked out Lynara as she stood by Taavik, the pair of them trying to get the computer access terminal in here working. Otherwise it was a long, cold trek back to the mainframe core, and after trekking through the storm from basecamp, he knew none of them had the energy for that.

But he wasn't thinking about that, not really. Instead, he was full-on staring at the delicate little Latharian woman as she frowned at the screen. He swallowed as heat flooded his veins. What the hell was wrong with him? He never normally reacted to a woman, any woman, this way. He was strictly a one-night sort of guy, and she most definitely was not *that* sort of woman. She was the sort of woman a man took home to meet his parents and started making plans that involved weddings, picket fences, and two point four children.

But he had no parents. Or rather he had, but neither of them had wanted him. As for kids, why would he want to inflict his fucked-up life and emotions on children?

Taavik cursed suddenly, leaning back to shove his hand through his hair.

“Everything okay over there?” Murphy called out.

The Latharian rubbed the back of his neck. “Just trying to work out the routing for the power cells to get heat and lighting in here. Think I’ve got it, though.”

Lynara smiled as she looked over. “If we can get this power spur active, we’ll be able to access crew quarters on this level. Which means proper beds and maybe even shower facilities. Warm water...”

There was a collective groan and he chuckled. “Okay, I think you have everyone’s vote for that.”

She grinned back and memories of their kiss last night ran through his mind again. He wanted to pull her up against him again and drive his hand into her long, dark hair to hold her still as he plundered her lips. The taste he’d had of her last night had been nowhere *near* enough.

Murphy dragged a hand over his face, scrubbing at tired eyes as Dubois walked over. Savaar trailed after her, his arms folded over his broad chest. Their grim expressions set off warning bells in his head.

“We have a problem,” Dubois announced without preamble.

Murphy bit back his sigh. Of course they did. “Okay, what have you got?”

Dubois’s jaw tightened. “This storm isn’t natural. I managed to hook the data cores from our equipment up to Savaar’s computer. The readings are all wrong. Look...”

She flipped the handheld screen around to show him. He didn’t know much about weather mapping, but as usual Dubois was way ahead of him.

“Normal weather on the left of the screen,” she said. “And our storm on the right.”

Murphy’s gut clenched as his gaze flicked over the data. It was easy to see that something was very wrong with the storm

outside. “You’re sure about this?”

She nodded. “Absolutely. Something triggered this storm, and it wasn’t an accident.”

Murphy swore under his breath, his gaze drifting to the teams still preparing the makeshift beds, laughter and chatter filling the air. A knot formed in his chest as his attention snagged once more on Lynara. He dragged in a deep breath and focused on the issue at hand. “Can we get a distress call out?”

Savaar shook his head. “All long-range comms are being blocked. We’re on our own.”

“Well, isn’t that just dandy,” Murphy drawled, scrubbing a hand over the bristles on his jaw.

“You three look way too serious over here,” Lynara said as she and Taavik joined them.

His gaze locked with hers for a second, but he forced himself to concentrate.

“Savaar and Major Dubois have found something concerning,” he said, making sure to keep his voice low. “The storm that forced us to take shelter might not have been natural. Seems someone out there has deployed a planet-killer orbital weapon.”

“And it’s using the... storm to kill us?” She looked around the group. “Is that even possible?”

Taavik nodded. “More than possible. We’ve had orbital platforms for centuries. They’re mostly deployed on worlds suspected of harboring Vorrtnan, as a last line of defense to stop them escaping. This one isn’t set to full strength. If it was, it would rip the planet apart.”

“I will never get over you seeing the Vorrtnan as a problem.” She sighed. “To us, they were the savior of the empire. But... back to the problem. Someone is trying to kill us?”

Murphy sighed and scrubbed a hand over his bristly jaw. “That’s about the size of it.”

“That’s if the cold doesn’t finish the job first,” Dubois grumbled, shivering even in her thick jacket.

“We need to get the power cells online,” Savaar cut in, looking down at the major in concern. “Not just for heat but to try and get a message out. Whoever set off that storm is still out there, and chances are, they’re not done with us yet.”

“Agreed.” Murphy nodded. “What do you need?”

Taavik’s expression filled with irritation. “That’s the problem. The computer core isn’t fully active. I can’t access the schematics to locate the damn power cells. Like I said before, we don’t have full schematics of the *Elysium* class in the historical records. They’ve not been used for hundreds of generations.”

She smiled. “Then it’s a good job you have something better than schematics.”

He tilted his head, and just for a moment, he saw the resemblance between the two. It was hidden mostly, but that head tilt was just the same. “We do?”

“Yes.” She nodded. “You have the ship’s captain. Me.”

Taavik’s expression blanked for a moment. “Of course! You’d know where the backup systems are located.”

The smile she gave him was so wide and bright that he had to shove down the blaze of jealousy. They were related, albeit distantly. Even with that kiss, he had no claim on her and, therefore, no reason to be jealous. But he was.

“Okay, looking at this, the lower cargo halls are too unstable to access, but the upper maintenance shafts should still be intact,” Lynara said, pointing out a route on Taavik’s screen. “Auxiliary power cells along here should have emergency power reserves.”

Taavik traced the route, nodding. “That could work. If we can tap into those, we might be able to get basic systems back online.”

“Okay, let’s do it,” Murphy said. “The sooner we have power, the sooner we can work on getting a distress call out.”

Dubois nodded. "I'll grab us some kit."

Murphy caught Lynara's gaze as the others moved off to grab what they needed for an excursion through the ship. "That was good thinking. We'd have been wandering around for hours without your knowledge of the ship's layout."

Lynara flashed him a quick smile but then her expression dropped serious. "Let's just hope the auxiliary power cells are still viable. Otherwise, we're going to freeze to death long before our unknown enemy gets to us."

COLD AIR BIT at Murphy's skin as he trudged through the ancient, twisted corridors of the ship with Lynara, Savaar, and Dubois in tow. Ice crunched underfoot, the sound echoing through the dimly lit passage. He could feel fresh sweat cooling beneath the layers of his heavy gear, but he knew better than to strip off. The cold down here would kill him in minutes.

"This thing sure took a beating," Dubois muttered, her gaze sweeping over the devastation that stretched out before them.

The further they moved into the ship, the worse it got. Several doorways they passed were either filled with debris and ice or were buckled so badly there was no way they could be opened. Some corridors were blocked, the decks above collapsed into them, forcing them to scramble over mangled metal and under shattered beams.

"An understatement," Savaar agreed, holding out a hand to help her over a fallen beam.

They ventured further from the main area, and he cast a glance back at Lynara. Like the other modern Lathar, Savaar looked like he was on a pleasant afternoon jaunt, but Lynara wasn't a modern Latharian. And she'd said she felt the cold more now since her genetic modifications hadn't included cold resistance. One look at her pale skin and the slight blue of her lips, and he knew for sure.

“Hey,” he murmured, helping her over a pile of debris that blocked their path. “How you doing?”

“Alive.” She gave him a small smile, murmuring her thanks as she scrambled over a fallen beam. “Which is more than I should have expected after so long. I was lucky that pod didn’t give out.”

He nodded, not even wanting to think about that. He could have lost her before he’d even known she was here.

“I meant with the cold?” he asked, falling into step next to her. He had to shorten his stride to match rather than make her hurry to keep up.

His gaze flicked over her. She wore Dubois’s spare cold weather gear and a heavy jacket. Even so, she still looked frozen to the bone.

“You don’t have the cold weather adaption that Savaar and Taavik have. Do you?”

She shook her head. “No, if I was modified for EC-fourteen-alpha, the Elysium mission’s target planet, then it wouldn’t have been needed.”

They turned a corner, their torches washing over a small huddle of bodies. Three of them were packed in closely, like they were trying to keep warm.

Lynara’s expression tightened as Savaar knelt down, studying the remains. They were little more than bones draped in tatters of what once had been uniforms. They weren’t as well preserved as the first body they’d found, but this area was more damaged.

“Looks like they were shot and left here,” he murmured, reaching out to spread out a section of fabric. It clearly showed burn marks, like the owner had been hit by some kind of energy weapon. The same marks as before.

“These were bridge crew,” Lynara said, her voice tightly controlled. “They must have fought back when Dariel took over the ship and forced me into stasis. I doubt he ever intended to come back for me, and they would have known it. He killed them because of me.”

Cam's jaw tightened. "Dariel was a complete asshole."

Lynara snorted. "That's an understatement." She met his gaze, her eyes shadowed. "I apologize for my reaction when we first met. You reminded me so much of him, I just saw red."

"Can't say I blame you." He scrubbed a hand over his jaw. "If our roles were reversed, I'd probably have done the same."

Her lips quirked. "Somehow I doubt that. You seem more level-headed than I am."

"You'd be surprised." He chuckled.

Level-headed was not how most folks described him—the ones who really knew him, not the ones who just knew the Murphy persona he'd cultivated. Reckless, hot-tempered, a loose cannon—those were the more familiar descriptions. But one look from those violet eyes, and his brain turned to mush.

"We should get moving. These power cells aren't going to restart themselves," she said and started forward again, picking her way over twisted beams and chunks of debris.

He fell into step beside her, his pulse quickening when her arm brushed his. He couldn't seem to keep from touching her, as if drawn by some invisible force. And that scared the hell out of him.

"How did Dariel end up in control of the ship?" he asked, focusing on practical matters. "Wouldn't there have been protocols to prevent that?"

Lynara sighed. "There were. But Dariel was charming when he wished to be. He'd cultivated allies among the crew and used them to help override security measures put in place to protect the bridge."

Her eyes darkened. "By the time we realized what was happening, it was too late. Dariel had locked down the bridge and seized control of navigation."

Rage kindled in Murphy's chest at the thought of someone double-crossing her like that. Of the anguish she must've felt,

watching her ship plunge into disaster. His hand found hers, his pulse skipping when her fingers curled into his.

“I’m sorry, Lynara.” His voice rasped in his ears. “If I could go back in time, I’d make that bastard pay for what he did.”

A smile flitted across her lips. “Yeah, there’s a little problem with that. If you went back and killed him, you wouldn’t be here now. Would you?”

His jaw set, a tiny muscle pulsing in the corner. “Yeah, well... no. But I don’t like the idea I’m descended from such an asshole.”

And he didn’t like the thought that when she looked him, she saw that asshole from the past.

“Hey! Through here!”

The moment shattered as Savaar knocked debris loose ahead, the clatter echoing off metal walls.

They turned and hurried toward Savaar’s shout, his pulse kicking up. Had the Latharian found a way through this mess? He scrambled over the debris behind Lynara, boots sliding on warped metal plates. The passage ahead was almost completely blocked, but Savaar had managed to pry open a small gap near the ceiling.

“It’s tight, but we should be able to get through. The power chamber is just beyond.” Savaar grinned. “Ready to get your hands dirty, Mr. President?”

He snorted. “Wouldn’t be the first time.”

Murphy studied the twisted opening, his muscles burning from hours of exertion. But they were so damn close. “Let’s do this.”

Savaar shoved more wreckage aside, opening the gap wider. Murphy clambered up, reaching down to help Lynara. His breath caught when her hand grasped his, warmth shooting up his arm. *Focus, damn it.*

“Mr. President?” she asked as he hauled her up, bright eyes curious and focused on his. “Major Dubois called you that as

well. What does it mean?"

Savaar snickered from somewhere ahead of them. "It means he's the human emperor."

She blinked at him as he pulled her up against him, taking the opportunity to hold her slender form against his larger, harder body. "Is that true? Humans have an emperor?"

His smile was wry. "No, it's not quite the same. The Latharian throne is passed down through a bloodline, but the presidency is voted on."

"Voted on?" she asked as they squeezed through the opening, emerging in a cavernous chamber.

"The people decide who they want to rule them," he supplied, helping her from the other side of the rubble. He turned and his torch flickered over massive cylinders in front of them. They must be the auxiliary power cells. He smiled... if they could get these babies energized, they'd have heat, light, the whole shebang.

"There, that coupling's still intact." Lynara squinted as she looked up and then pointed to a junction box. "If we can rig a bypass to the main grid, we may be able to access emergency reserves."

Murphy nodded, cupping his hands and blowing into them to warm them up. He could barely feel them right now, and if he was going to be rewiring shit, he was going to need them.

Savaar pried open the junction box, rooting around in its depths. "Wiring's still live. This could work."

They set to work, stripping and splicing power lines, rerouting circuits. Even though this was alien technology, wiring was wiring... and power was power.

"I didn't know you could do that, sir," Dubois said, her arms wrapped around herself as the two women watched.

Murphy shrugged, his attention on what he was doing. "Spent some time undercover as a station electrician. Had to learn to sell the cover, or me and my partner would have ended up with some extra ventilation in our skulls."

Dubois grinned, “Would never have pegged you for a sparky.”

He chuckled. “Funnily enough, my partner for that op was called Sparky.”

“Less talk, more work,” Savaar grunted, holding his hand out for the knife Murphy was using to strip wires. Then conversation fell silent as they applied themselves to the task at hand. Within an hour, they had a twisted-together monster of a setup that just might do the trick.

Murphy’s hand shook as he connected one last power coupling. His joints were frozen stiff, and his right hand burned from an errant spark. But they were ready. “Okay, hit it!”

Savaar slammed a massive fist onto the activation panel. The power cells sputtered, groaned, and then roared to life.

Lights flickered on across the chamber. A fan whirred into life somewhere, and with a groan of protest, warm air started to flood the chamber.

“Taav...” Savaar spoke into his wrist comm. “Power cells online, you should be getting something on your end right about now.”

“Got it, power spur active! Lights and power coming online in the lounge now,” Taavik’s voice issued from Savaar’s wrist unit. *“How’s it looking out there in the corridor?”* His voice was muffled as he called to someone in the lounge. *“Yeah, we’ve got power in this whole section. Get yourselves back here before all the best rooms are gone.”*

Murphy leaned against a generator, adrenaline and exhaustion warring within him. His gaze found Lynara, her smile luminous in the glow of emergency lighting. For a moment, the rest of the universe faded away.

Her smile fell as she noticed his burned hand. In two strides she was before him, grasping his hand gently in both of hers.

“You’re injured.” Her brows pinched in concern.

Murphy shrugged. “Just a little singed. I’ll live.”

But the warmth of her hands on his seemed to chase the pain away, leaving behind a very different ache.

“This could get infected.” Lynara examined the angry red welts across his knuckles and palm. “We need to get this treated. Come on.”

“**S**eriously,” Cameron complained when they were back at the lounge, and she made him sit down so she could treat his hand. “It’s not that bad.”

“Yeah, well... this is still my ship and I’m still the captain,” she told him firmly, opening up the medical kit Dubois had handed her. “And I say that needs treating.”

Her lips pursed as she looked at the contents of the kit in front of her. She couldn’t read the writing on the items inside because it was human, but she recognized most of the items inside. The tiny diagrams on the side helped as well, and she grabbed a burn salve.

“Here we go,” she murmured as she knelt before Murphy, sitting on one of the makeshift beds, and reached for his hand.

She pursed her lips as she saw the damage. His knuckles were raw and blistered where the sparks had kissed his skin. She uncapped the tube, the sharp antiseptic scent hitting her nose.

“This is a little more than ‘not that bad,’” she chided.

“I’ve had much worse before,” he insisted in a deep voice, watching as she spread the salve over his knuckles with gentle fingers.

“Yeah, you’d probably say that if your leg was hanging off as well.” Her eyes flicked up to his and she ordered, “Shut up and let me fuss over you.”

“Yes, ma’am.” He chuckled.

His hand was rough and callused against hers, a warrior's hand, yet he wielded it with surprising tenderness. She finished applying the salve and wrapped his hand in gauze, securing it in place. Her gaze lingered on his hand, unwilling to relinquish her hold just yet. Something was comforting about the solidity of him, the heat and strength that seemed to radiate from his body.

When she met his eyes again, she found them dark with heat. Her breath caught as he reached out with his good hand, his fingertips skimming her jaw.

“Thank you,” he murmured, his voice a low rumble that reverberated through her, and he leaned forward to brush his lips over hers. Just once, but it was enough to leave her breathless and wanting.

She moved forward and kissed him back. He lifted a hand, strong fingers sliding into the nape of her neck. He held her in place as he took over the kiss, exploring her lips with the same devastating finesse as yesterday.

Heat and need bloomed through her in a lazy wave, and she couldn't help crowding closer. He parted his knees to allow her to settle between them, her face turned up for more.

A soft moan sounded in the back of her throat as she gripped his strong thighs, her nails digging in slightly as she fought the need to crowd closer.

He broke the kiss and looked down at her, his breathing as ragged as hers. Then he smiled, his pale eyes warm, and kissed her on the forehead.

“Not here,” he said in a raspy voice, and abruptly she remembered they weren't alone.

Vaark. She busied herself with repacking the medkit to avoid his searching gaze. Their connection both thrilled and unnerved her, eliciting sensations she thought long lost. But so many barriers stood between them. She was a woman out of time and between species, neither human or Lathar, not really. She didn't know where she fit anymore.

“Err... sorry to break this up,” Taavik’s deep voice had them both turning around. He stood where the lounge made an L-shape, sectioning the little area they’d claimed off as an impromptu medical bay, his display pad in his hand. “We have a slight problem. Lynara, would you mind looking at the schematics for me?”

“Of course. What’s the problem?” She nodded and moved to his side, Murphy a half step behind her.

Taavik didn’t need to answer. She realized the problem as soon as she looked at the readout on his screen. The more advanced technology had easily interfaced with the *Elysium’s* systems, which were, to them, ancient but were still state of the art for her. Even so, the main computer wasn’t online, probably dead for many years, so all Taavik could access were local area nodes.

She sighed as she flicked through the systems.

“Yeah, the emergency beacons are utterly shot, they must have gotten fried during the crash. Looks like a lot of other systems too,” she said absently as she tried a workaround in the system, but it was no good. Nothing worked.

“Our beacons just aren’t strong enough to cut through this storm,” Dubois said. “Without those beacons active, any rescue ship scanning for our signal is just gonna pass right on by.”

“Reckon we’re stuck here a while longer,” Murphy drawled, scrubbing a hand over his jaw.

Lynara’s fingers curled into fists. “The beacons need to be manually reactivated. From outside.”

Murphy’s eyebrows shot up. “Outside? As in, spacewalking outside?”

“If we were in space, yes,” she replied. “We’re not, so that’s in our favor and that area is... well, should be shielded from the worst of the weather. The beacons are tucked in between the command modules and the dorsal cannon banks. The problem is...”

She tapped out a few more commands on the screen, only to get an error message. “*Vaark* it, the external access hatch is jammed, so we’ll have to exit through this cargo bay here...”

She pulled up the ship’s schematics again and tapped an area of the screen. “Then traverse what’s left of the hull to reach the beacon controls here.”

She looked up at the ceiling as if she could actually see the treacherous path that awaited them through the multitude of decks.

“It won’t be easy, but it’s our only option if we want to alert your people that we have a problem and need help.”

One thing was for sure. *Her* people weren’t coming to help. Although... in a way, Cameron’s people *were* her people. Weren’t they? They were descendants of the colony. But Taavik and Savaar were descended from her brother. She shoved those thoughts away. It was enough to drive anyone crazy, and she didn’t have time for a breakdown right now.

Savaar grunted. “Just when we were getting cozy as well.”

Dubois looked at Murphy. “What’s the call, boss man? Are we suiting up for a stroll?”

Murphy shook his head, his jaw tightening. “A stroll in these conditions could get us all killed, especially with the temperature dropping now. We’ll hunker down here for the night, wait for morning and a gap in the weather, and then head out and reactivate the beacons.”



SHE’D FORGOTTEN how nice a hot shower could be, even if it had been the shortest shower in the history of showers. She was just glad the pipework and heater tanks still worked after all this time.

Sighing, Lynara sat on the edge of her bed wrapped in a towel and rubbed her hair dry with a smaller one. By the time the four of them had gotten back, most of the rooms near the lounge had been claimed. She’d snagged one near the elevator

banks, a corner room with a large bed tucked away into an alcove, giving her a little more room than in any of the others.

At least it was warm in here now. She paused and looked around, wondering who this room had belonged to. Whoever it was, they must have survived. Few personal effects were left in here anymore, just a small amount of clothing in a drawer and toiletries that had long since dried out.

Other than that, everything else was in surprisingly good shape, even if the bedding had ripped as soon as she'd tried to straighten it. She'd dumped it in the corner and spread her sleeping bag out over the bed, which seemed huge now that she was smaller. Her lips curved up in a smile. She'd have to see if the way up to the deck her quarters had been on was clear, and if it was, see what remained of her belongings. Maybe they hadn't been raided by Dariel's group before they left the ship.

A knock at the door brought her head around, and she padded barefoot across the only slightly cold floor. She held the towel in place as the door slid open to reveal Cam on the other side.

He was leaning on his forearm against the doorframe, looking down. As soon as the door opened, he looked up, and she was caught by his gaze, held in place by the darkness in those pale eyes. Ice and heat, all wound around each other until she couldn't work out where one ended and the other began.

A thrill shot through her veins. He really was the most handsome man she'd ever seen, and even though he had hints of Dariel in his features, she no longer saw her hated betrothed. She just saw Cam.

"Hey," he murmured, his gaze flicking over her quickly. "You okay?"

"Uh-hmmm." She nodded.

He'd taken the room right next to hers, and she could tell by the dampness of his hair that he'd recently come out of the shower as well. His T-shirt clung to his skin, highlighting his

solid frame and heavily muscled chest, and he wore pants tucked into unlaced boots.

Silence stretched out between them, but it wasn't awkward. It was charged, their eyes saying everything they needed to say.

Without a word, she stepped back, arching her eyebrow in question.

A small, predatory grin that was purely Latharian crossed his face and he stepped inside, crowding her as soon as the door closed behind him.

“Are you sure about this?” he asked as her back hit the wall, caging her in with his brawny arms and placing his hands on either side of her head.

She bit her lip and, unhooking her towel, let it drop to the floor. His nostrils flared as he drew his head back, looking down at her.

“I guess that answers that,” he breathed, and a second later his lips crashed down over hers.

She moaned, the sound lost under his lips as he hauled her into his arms. Kissing him back, she pressed herself against him, trying to mold herself against his bigger, harder body.

His tongue filled her mouth, sliding along hers as he teased her. She wrapped her arms around his neck, her toes almost leaving the floor. She hadn't been sure about how damn small this body was when she'd woken, but right now, she liked the size difference between them. *Really* liked it.

He growled, cupping her ass as he turned them around and walked her backward toward the bed. She shivered, lifting her legs to wrap them around his waist as he walked. His clothes were rough against her skin, which sent the heat in her blood to inferno levels.

He groaned in the back of his throat, the sound rumbling through his wide chest as he spread a big hand out over the back of her hips, pressing her against him.

She gasped, tearing her lips from his as she registered the thick bar of his cock trapped between them. “*Vaarking* hell, you... that’s...”

He. Was. Huge.

Seriously huge.

“Okay, that’s something that’s still normal sized, then.” She smiled and rocked herself against him.

“Yeah?” He grinned, the expression feral as he dropped them to the bed, careful to brace himself on his arms so he didn’t crush her as her back hit the bed. “Good. Because I’m going to make you feel every fucking inch of it, beautiful.”

The alien curses and the heat in his eyes at the darkly erotic promise made her bite her lip. “Promises, promises... next you’ll be telling me that you’re going to make sure everyone aboard will know your name by the morning.”

He claimed her lips again, parting her thighs with a hard knee so he could settle between them. “Sorry, beautiful, but I’m afraid they already do. I’m going for you screaming enough that we won’t need those emergency beacons for them to find us.”

“Humble much?” she demanded between kisses, pulling at his shirt to get it off him.

He broke from the kiss and lifted his arm, grabbing the shirt between his shoulders and hauling it off in one movement. She murmured in appreciation, feeling the hard muscles across his ribcage flare and move under her hands. He was ripped, mouthwateringly so.

“Realistic.” He grinned, and then his breath caught as she spread her hands over him. Exploring. Teasing as her fingertips brushed against his nipples. They tightened immediately, responsive to her touch.

Bolder now, she slid her hand down the front of his body, cupping him through his pants. His jaw tightened, eyes narrowed as he looked down at her. “Playing with fire, beautiful? You sure you’re ready for this?”

She chuckled, popping the buttons on his pants to free his cock. It sprang free, slapping against her belly, hard and heavy. She shivered, wrapping her hand around his thick length. He was... impressive was the only word. She hadn't been kidding when she'd said he was Lathar-sized.

"Fuck me," he breathed.

"I kind of thought that was the point." She chuckled, kissing along the side of his neck as she stroked him.

"Yeah," he slid his arm under the back of her neck, pillowing her head and bracing himself at the same time as he slid his hand down her curves. "But I'm the one who's supposed to be seducing you."

Her breathing caught in the back of her throat as his hand slid between her thighs. Strong fingers stroked against her, and she moaned as he found her slick and wet, using the wetness there to find and stroke over her clit.

Vaark, he didn't just know how to kiss.

"Yeah?" She managed to be smart-mouthed from somewhere. "Don't tell me that things have gone so backward a woman can't seduce a man now?"

"Oh, they can—" His words were cut off with a groan as she swept her finger over the broad head of his cock. "They definitely can. *You* can—"

"Good to hear it." She grinned, nipping at his earlobe lightly and tightening her grip, just to make him moan. He reacted to her teasing by sliding a strong finger into her pussy and then another.

She moaned, her head dropping back as he pumped his hand, finger fucking her until she almost saw stars. She did see them when he pressed a thumb against her clit.

"Vaark... holy... gods," she whimpered. Her body tightened as he took her up to the edge faster than anyone ever had before.

"Cameron," he breathed. "My name is Cameron."

"Yeah... that... *Vaark*, I'm gonna—"

“That’s it,” he breathed by her ear as he stroked her over and over. She still had her hand around his cock, but she was just holding on now. Mostly. Her only movements were tiny little strokes as he drove her out of her mind.

“Scream for me, Princess.” He pressed hard on her clit. “I want to hear you scream my name.”

“Oh gods... *Cam!*” she screamed as she came apart, her pussy clenching hard around his fingers.

He kissed her, murmuring soft words she wasn’t really listening to. Not with the pleasure that cascaded through her in wave after unstoppable wave, heating her blood and making her toes curl.

“Oh *vaark...*” she moaned softly, watching him as he lifted off her and stripped off with an economy of movement that was beautiful to watch. He was all hard muscles that rippled under scarred skin. He was a little shorter than Dariel, but his frame was harder and more compact. He was a more lethal and dangerous version of the haughty prince she’d been unwillingly tied to.

“Yeah, we’re getting to that.” He smiled ferally as he joined her on the bed again, the mattress dipping under his weight as he moved over her.

She welcomed him with open arms, wrapping them around his shoulders as he settled between her thighs again. A small groan caught in the back of his throat as he rocked himself against her, making himself all slick and wet between her pussy lips.

Their gazes caught and held as he changed position, and a second later the broad head of his cock pressed against her, right where she needed him the most. She nodded at the question in his eyes and then gasped as he pressed forward.

For all his gentleness before, there was little of it now. He surged forward, a relentless advance as he pushed deeper inside her. She bit her lip as he stretched her around him. Not rocking, just filling her. Inch after thick inch. He slid into her

in one, slow ride of pure sensation until he was seated in her to the hilt, his balls pressed up against her ass.

He filled her totally, more than she'd ever been filled before.

“*Ohhh...*” she moaned, lifting her legs to wrap them around his lean hips. “Gods that feels good.”

“Yeah?” He looked down at her, searching her eyes. He must have seen something because then he nodded. “Good, because it’s about to get a whole lot better.”

He wasn’t lying.

Pulling his hips back, he slid into her again, nearly as slowly as before. It was pure and utter sensation. Decadent sensation. Then he did it again, and again, each time faster than before. He braced himself above her, every inch of his big, powerful body dedicated to bringing her... *them* pleasure.

She moaned and clung to him as he dropped down and wrapped himself around her. An arm under her neck and one holding her hip, he powered into her, making her feel every inch of his thick, hard cock.

She’d never been taken this way before. It was raw and brutal but open and honest. He took and gave pleasure in equal turns, rocking his hips against hers every second or third thrust to grind against her needy clit.

“*Oh my gods,*” she managed, burying her face against the side of his strong neck as her body tightened again. Her pussy clenched around him as her climax crashed over her out of the blue.

He groaned, his rhythm broken for a moment as her hips juddered against his, so tight that he struggled to slide into her even though she was wetter than she’d ever been before.

Pleasure swamped her, her body wrapping around his. He held her close, his hand wrapping around the back of her neck to hold her in place as he sped up.

She watched him through hooded eyes, seeing the pleasure burn in his eyes and tighten his jaw, making the cords stand

out in his neck as he powered into her.

He managed four... maybe five thrusts before he threw his head back and roared, burying himself into her one last time. So deeply she wasn't sure where he ended and she began. But she felt him come, the heat as he bathed the gate of her womb with his white-hot seed.

She wrapped her arms around his shoulders, feeling the tension there as he held himself braced so he didn't crush her and stroked her fingers through the hair at the back of his head.

"Fucking *hell*," he managed with a shuddery laugh, holding her as he turned them, lying on his back so she could sprawl across his broad chest.

With him still inside her, she murmured in pleasure at the movement and nestled against him.

"Yeah... that," she murmured and nestled against him as he pulled the blanket over them both. "It was..."

"Yeah."

They lay there for a moment, wrapped in each other's arms as they came down from their high. Eventually, he slid from her and tucked her in against his side.

"We should settle in," he murmured, and she could hear the exhaustion in his voice. "We have a long day tomorrow."

She nodded, too tired to even think of moving, especially tucked against him. He was so warm it was like sleeping with a huge hot water bottle.

In the shadows, her world shrank to the steady, reassuring sound of his breathing. Her eyes drifted shut, as weariness claimed its due.

The morning sun had finally peeked through the clouds, allowing Lynara and the team to climb up the battered hull of the ancient ship. Had this been a spacewalk, as was originally intended, it would have been a walk in the park. Handholds every ten feet or so would have allowed them to pull themselves along in the weightlessness of space.

With gravity and the wind biting every exposed inch of skin, though, it was much harder. The ascent up to the beacon modules was treacherous. The climb was a tricky one, even with the handholds, and the hull plates offered limited other handholds, so it was slow going as they made their way up.

She paused for a moment, resting against the metal of the hull as she squinted out across the landscape. It looked serene, white as far as the eye could see, with blue skies directly above them. But it was impossible to ignore the ring of dark clouds, proof that the storm or weapon or whatever it was wasn't done with them yet.

She looked back and smiled. She hadn't missed the chemistry between Savaar and Dubois. The big Latharian warrior hovered protectively by the human woman, helping her past some of the more challenging areas of the climb, even though, from her movements, it was obvious that Dubois was an experienced climber.

Lynara couldn't help the smile that curved her lips. She would never have imagined a Lathar warrior fussing over a human female. Savaar's protective instincts had been almost

comical, especially as he had struggled to maintain his balance on the slippery hull plates.

Despite the sun blazing down, the wind was icy, and she shivered.

“You alright there?” Cam asked as he climbed up to join her, resting on one of the fins that housed the aft cannon array. He’d been watching her all morning, the dark look in his eyes warming her through.

“Yeah.” She kept her voice low, sharing this moment just between two of them as they waited for the others to catch up.

“Just taking a moment to catch my breath. Been asleep for way too long.” She grinned. “Need to build my stamina up again.”

“Oh, I don’t know,” he said in a low voice with a husky note in it. “Your stamina seemed just fine last night.”

Her breath caught at the heat in his eyes, and memories of last night filled her mind. The memory of skin on skin, the feel of his powerful body against hers and the blistering heat of his kisses.

“Yeah... I might need a rerun to test it again later.”

“Oh, we can do that—”

He cut himself off as Savaar and Dubois joined them.

“Good view from up here. Isn’t it?” Savaar commented, turning to look out, not at the landscape, but over the ship. From this angle, they could see more of the ship than from the side, revealing just how large it was.

“It is, but it’ll be much better from up by the beacon modules,” she said, turning to continue the climb.

It was hard going, and she grunted as she gripped the jagged edge of a broken hull plate, feeling the sharp edge catch on the heavy protective glove she wore. Sweat poured down her face from the relentless sun as she hauled herself up and over onto the next level.

If she'd known conditions on this climb were going to be so treacherous, she'd have looked for a different route. Perhaps tried to come at the beacons from higher up, dropping out one of the anterior access hatches.

But it was too late for that now. All she could do was make sure they made it to the beacon housings and back in one piece.

“*Fuck,*” Murphy hissed just behind her as he grabbed for the edge of a buckled hull plate and slipped. The sun was melting the ice, making their journey all the more difficult. Fortunately, his harness caught him before he could slip more than a few inches.

“You good?” she asked over her shoulder, and he nodded, his jawline clenched as he kept climbing.

She glanced over at Savaar, who was doing his best to traverse the difficult terrain while keeping an eye on the human female beside him. “You seem to know a lot about it... Who do you think was responsible for the storm weapon, Savaar?”

The big warrior's brow furrowed as he considered the question. He'd been the one to work out that it was a weapon, so he was obviously familiar with them. “I'm not sure. Whoever it was, though, they're playing a dangerous game.”

Murphy climbed past her and offered a hand down to help her over the precarious overhand for the next ledge. “They have to be non-Terran. We have weather controllers, but nothing on this level.”

“Agreed,” Dubois said as she and Murphy held the rope anchors to allow the others to ascend.

“My guess is the purists,” Savaar, bringing up the rear, said. He looked up at the sky with suspicious eyes as if he expected the storm to close in on them again without warning.

Lynara frowned. “Purists?”

Savaar nodded and sighed as he leaned against the cold metal of the hull.

“Some elements of our society believe we should not...” he paused to consider his words. “*Sully* our genetic code with that of other species. ‘Inferior’ species,” he added.

She blinked. “So... let me get this right. We have no women anymore, and these geniuses don’t want us to procreate with genetically compatible species?”

Savaar snorted. “Geniuses is about the size of it. But, no, they don’t. They think we should remain genetically pure.”

Her eyebrows shot up toward her hair, and then she burst out laughing as the complete irony of what they were saying hit her.

“Yeah... right. You lot do know we’ve not been genetically pure since like... forever? There are historical records... *were* historical records,” she added quickly. “Way back in my time that said we were genetically adapted for travel on the arck-ships from the origin planet.”

Three pairs of eyes turned to look at her. The two humans looked amused while Savaar just looked stunned. “We weren’t as the gods intended us to be when they brought us to Lathar Prime?”

She looked at him like he’d grown another head. “You believe the *gods* brought us to the Lathar system?”

Savaar’s brow furrowed. “The ancient teachings say the gods seeded Lathar Prime for us.”

“And both science and history, the history from *my* time, says that we were adapted for deep space travel, and that happened before we left another world.”

She kept her tone gentle, not wanting to offend his faith. He was as far removed from her as she was from the settlers that had come from the origin planet, perhaps even more.

He sighed, a deep rumble of defeat as he shoved his hair from his face. The long hair most of the Lathar had was taking some getting used to. And the braids... what was that all about?

“There was a...dark age after the Vorrta were imprisoned,” he admitted. “It was a time where much knowledge was lost. Perhaps you are right, and the truth was lost then.”

She nodded. “Those with an agenda often use times of upheaval to rewrite history.”

He nodded, conceding with a grudging shrug.

Murphy looked around, checking on the dark clouds that circled them miles away, a never-ending reminder that they weren't out of the woods yet.

“Let's go,” he said. “We can't afford to get caught out in the open.”

They climbed in silence, each of them lost in their own thoughts as they pitted their strength and stamina against the slippery hull.

Lynara's heart raced as they reached the top of the massive ship's hull and into the dip between the beacon module housings that extended out into a vee.

“The access panels are between these two housings,” she said, already heading that way. She picked her way carefully, avoiding the broken hull plates and a thick layer of ice on the left.

“We just need to get these off,” she said, reaching into her back pocket for the panel keys. Slotting two of them into place, she twisted, and... nothing.

“*Vaark.*” She grunted and pulled harder. What the hell was wrong with them? Had they frozen in place... perhaps something had broken the mechanism off inside?

She put her hand on the panel. No... It was warm, which meant they couldn't be frozen in place.

“Something must be wrong with the mechanism,” she muttered, already tracing along the panels. If she could get to the mechanism, she could—

“Here, let me try,” Murphy murmured, reaching for the panel keys. His jaw tightened a little, strain showing on his

face, but then something metallic clunked, and the panel released with a hiss.

“There we go.” He grinned as he lifted it clear, setting it to the side. “Just needed a bit of elbow grease.”

“Yeah.” It was a reminder of how much she’d changed. She was smaller. *Weaker*.

She looked past him to the beacon mechanism within.

“Can you activate them?” Savaar asked, his gaze shining as he looked over the tech within, ancient to him but still cutting edge to her.

“I can try,” Lynara said, stepping toward the modules. Thankfully she didn’t need her former physical size for this. Prying open a smaller access panel, she revealed a maze of crystalline circuits.

Murphy gave a low whistle. “This tech is lightyears beyond anything we have now.”

Lynara smiled up at him. “To be fair, you were starting from scratch. Even though my crew and passengers from this ship were your ancestors, they couldn’t have taken much when they fled.”

Her fingers skimmed the circuits, and she narrowed her eyes, dragging up memories of her basic training. Space was a very big place, so getting a dead beacon back online was a core part of any starship crew’s training. Without it, a ship could float aimlessly forever and never be found.

After a few adjustments, a low thrum reverberated through the modules as they hummed with energy for the first time in many thousands of years.

“We have life!” Lynara grinned and closed the panel back up. She motioned for Murphy to replace the panel to protect the newly active beacon.

Dubois cleared her throat behind them. “Hate to rain on your parade, Captain... but that storm’s closing in again.”

Lynara whipped her head around, and sure enough, the human woman was right. The storm clouds that had been

holding off were rolling back in again.

“Shit,” Murphy spat. “It must be reacting to the beacons.”

He strode to the edge where they’d climbed up and then looked up at the storm again.

“We’re not going to make it down in time,” he said, turning to look at her. “Is there a quicker way back inside?”

CAMERON TRUDGED behind the others through the narrow tunnel, his muscles burning. His breath misted in the chilled air as the small group headed back down to the comfort of the central ring corridor and the lounge.

Lynara had found them an alternative route, which meant they weren’t outside on the hull while the storm raged outside. They’d barely gotten inside the ancient airlock near the ruined bridge before it had hit.

But that didn’t matter. The beacons were live, and that meant rescue was on its way. It couldn’t be anything but. Not blowing his own trumpet, but you did not lose contact with the president of Earth and her colonies and *not* do something about it.

He scrubbed a hand over his jaw, stubble rasping his palm. And it wouldn’t be a moment too soon. After the last few days, all he wanted was his own bed and not to have to wear foul weather gear all the time. His gaze lingered on Lynara, walking in front of him. Okay, so maybe not *all* he craved. Last night had been the best night of his life, and he wanted to repeat the experience. Preferably in the luxury of the presidential suite with room service on hand. For at least five days.

Savaar glanced over his shoulder, a wide grin on the Latharian’s lips. “That was fun, eh Murphy?”

Cameron snorted. The Lathar had a very different idea of fun. “If that’s what you want to call it.”

His hands were raw and stiff from the climb to the beacon modules. But they’d done the job, and that was all that

mattered. His gaze drifted to Lynara, picking her way carefully over the uneven decking ahead. Exhaustion etched fine lines around her eyes, yet she was a vision to his eyes.

“How are you holding up?”

He slid an arm around her waist just as she stumbled, which gave him the chance to catch her and hold her securely against his side. Her body was warm and delicate, chasing away the chill that had seeped into his bones.

Lynara tilted her head to meet his eyes, weariness etched on her face. “I’ll live.”

A smile tugged at her lips as she leaned into him as if drawing strength from his nearness. His heart thrilled at the little movement. He hadn’t known her long, but she was strong. Proud. She wasn’t the type to *need* to lean on anyone. But wanting to... that was an entirely different matter. And he wanted to be the person she leaned on.

“Thanks to you. I didn’t realize that plate was loose. If you hadn’t caught me...” She shivered, her eyes dark at the memory. None of them had seen the loose hull plate as they’d scrambled to escape the storm. It had slipped just as she’d stepped onto it, nearly taking her over the side and into a lethal fall to the ice below. He’d only just caught her in time.

He rubbed a hand down her arm reassuringly. “All in a day’s work, ma’am. Gotta look after the captain of the ship, or she might throw me out of an airlock.”

She smiled. “Yeah, right onto the snow out the—”

The wall next to Lynara exploded in a shower of sparks, and she jumped. He shoved her behind a support strut, covering her with his own body.

“*Take cover!*” he bellowed as weapons fire tore through the corridor, energy bolts filling the air and creating a lethal net.

His pistol was in his hand in a heartbeat and he turned, keeping Lynara safely against the wall as he fired back.

“Oi!” she hissed, glaring at him as she slid free and moved into cover to allow him to fire back. “I’m not some *vaarking* damsel in distress. I can handle myself!”

He nodded, fighting the need to pull her closer and protect her again. But she was right. She was the captain of this ship, a naval officer—even if that navy was from eons past—so she had to have been trained for combat.

He turned his attention back to the battle at hand. Their opponents were shadowy figures at the end of the corridor, the tall, broad-shouldered figures telling him that their enemy were Lathar.

“What the *draanth*?” Savaar snarled as he hit the wall opposite, tucking himself in the recess of a closed door to fire back.

“Who the fuck are these guys?” Cam demanded, ducking out of cover to fire twice. They heard a grunt and then the thud of something large hitting the floor a few seconds later.

“No idea!” Savaar shouted back, trying to shove Dubois into cover behind him. She gave him a glare that could cut steel and darted past him to take a forward position. “*Draanthing* females! Get back here!”

Cam’s lips quirked. “Good luck with that one. You don’t recognize them? Shit, we need to get out of here! I’ll cover; you two fall back.”

“What?” Savaar shot him a look as he moved out of cover and back along the corridor. “Do you think because we’re Lathar, we all know each other or something? That’s like me saying all humans look the same.”

“You’d better bloody not,” Dubois shot back as she passed.

The two of them took position and started firing back, covering them as Cam turned, herding Lynara ahead of him. They carried on down the corridor, darting behind struts and support beams, weapons fire singing at their heels.

His mind raced. They’d been caught in the worst possible place on the route back to the lounge. They needed a way out

of this damn killzone, even if they had to strike out off the route they knew and into the unknown of the ruined ship.

They turned a corner, and a sigh of relief punched from his lungs. There, up ahead, an access hatch hung open... an escape.

“There! Make for the hatch!”

He pushed Lynara toward it, boots pounding the decking as he turned and fired back at their pursuers. The others followed, charging the hatchway under heavy fire. They hurtled through the hatch into a narrow corridor, Savaar slamming it shut behind them, turning the locking ring hand over hand. They’d bought a reprieve, but he didn’t expect it to last long. Those assholes had known *just* where to hit them.

“Everyone in one piece?” He scanned the group quickly for injury, lingering on Lynara, but they all looked fine.

“Yeah,” Savaar grunted. “No thanks to our friends. There was definitely some imperial-grade hardware back there, which cuts out mercenaries.”

Cameron’s jaw tightened. “Okay, we have to keep moving. Can you reach the lounge?”

Savaar shook his head, holding up his wrist. His bracer-mounted comp unit was dead, the screen blackened and cracked. “Took a hit... it’s totally dead.”

Shit. They were on their own.

“Okay, we need to find a way back, trying to avoid that main route. How much ammo do you two have?” he asked Savaar and Dubois.

“Half a charge,” Savaar replied.

Dubois nodded. “Same here. Going to have to be a little more economical with the shots.”

Lynara looked around, moving across to rub dirt and ice off the wall nearby, revealing what he assumed was a location marker. “There should be an arms locker two decks down. If it’s undamaged, we can rearm there.”

He nodded, not thinking about how old the weapons would be, if they were even still there. It was a plan, and they needed a plan. They could make it two decks. They didn't have a choice.

“Lead the way, Captain.”

They stayed in the shadows as they moved down the corridor, alert for any sign that their enemy might be near. Lynara led them to a stairwell, and they picked their way down, mindful of steps that were damaged, to emerge onto a deck that seemed even worse off than the others. Most of the walls and ceilings were caved in, and burn marks singed along what remained of the bulkheads.

“The locker is just up ahead,” Lynara murmured, her features shadowed in the darkness.

They reached it, and his heart fell. The hatch hung off its hinges, so he didn't hold out hope of finding anything useful in there. He followed Lyn through the door and blinked in surprise. It looked to be nearly fully stocked. He ran his gaze over racks of weapons, searching for anything still functional.

A muffled shout from the corridor outside warned him they were about to have company.

“Grab what you can and cover the door!” he ordered. “We can't afford to get pinned in here.”

He snatched what looked like a pistol from its mount. After a moment's cognitive dissonance, he reacted automatically, regardless of the fact that the weapon he held was an ancient one.

Pressing a button, lights lit up halfway along the bar on the side. Half-full or half-empty—it amounted to the same thing. Hopefully, it would fire properly after all these years rather than just take his hand off.

“Murphy! Spare energy cores,” Lynara called out, tossing him something. He caught it automatically, watching her as she loaded a big rifle with easy movements that spoke of long practice.

Savaar slung his depleted rifle across his back and grabbed a new one from the racks in front of them. He looked down at it in amusement. “This thing belongs in a museum.”

Cameron motioned for him to take the other side of the door, the two women taking positions behind them.

“Alright, on three. One. Two... *Three.*”

On three, they emerged from the locker, weapons ready. Savaar and Dubois took cover and unleashed a barrage of cover fire down the corridor.

The group attacking them cursed and scattered. Cameron narrowed his eyes. Those were definitely Latharian combat leathers, but he didn't recognize the style.

“What clan are these *draanthic* with?” Savaar growled.

“Fall back!” he shouted, shoving Lynara behind him, firing off cover shots as they retreated from the enemy's advance. There were far too many for the four of them to take on.

“Keep moving!”

But at the next turn, they ran into another group of leather-clad Lathar. Laser fire erupted around them and the corridor filled with smoke and flame as grenades exploded.

“Run!” Cam bellowed, and they took off down the nearest corridor. They plunged down corridor after corridor in darkness until silence enveloped them. Then they kept running.

Finally they stopped. He braced himself against a wall, his chest heaving as he looked at Dubois opposite. They seemed to have lost their attackers for now. But then he looked around, his stomach dropping. The corridor behind him and Dubois was empty. “Where are Savaar and Lynara?”

Her eyes went wide, her face pale. “*Fuck*, I thought they were right behind me.”

“*Shit*,” he breathed. His gaze remained fixed on the hatch they'd just come through, praying for any sign of the duo.

“*Come on. Come on,*” he murmured. They had to be just behind them. But the silence stretched out into minutes, settling into the ship until all that remained were the eerie whispers of its ancient beams settling in the ice.

“*Fuck...*”

This wasn't happening.

“Okay, they're probably making their way back to the lounge. Let's head that way.”

Lynara dove behind the doorway, her pulse pounding as energy bolts exploded around her. She popped up out of cover to fire off a few quick shots. Grim satisfaction filled her as she dropped three. But more kept coming in what seemed like an endless wave. She kept firing, trying to pin down their numbers. There were at least twenty of them, all armed and clearly willing to kill.

A bolt slammed into the wall beside her head, and she ducked back with a curse. They were outgunned and staying here would get them killed.

“Fall back! We can’t hold them off!”

She vaulted over a fallen beam, firing to give cover for Murphy and Dubois to retreat. Through the smoke and debris, she spotted Savaar across the corridor doing the same.

“Go, I’ll cover you!” he shouted.

Murphy motioned to her and Dubois to move ahead of him, but at that moment another flurry of bolts hit the wall above her head.

“Go!” she bellowed. “I’ll be right behind you!”

Cameron gave her a hard look, clearly wanting to argue, but she was already firing back at the enemy who were trying to kill them. The next moment, the space he had been in was empty as he and the human major fled down the corridor.

Firing off another volley to keep their enemy’s heads down, she and Savaar broke from cover to follow. They

sprinted down the corridor, boots pounding against the ancient, frozen deck plating, but another enemy team emerged ahead of them, blocking their path. She spun to find a third team behind them, cutting off their escape.

“*Vaark*, we’re surrounded!”

Her heart pounded as she and Savaar took up positions back to back, determining to go down fighting. They exchanged fire with their attackers, dropping several and sustaining minor burns and grazes in return. But for every one that fell, two more took their place.

A bolt caught Lynara in the chest, and she crashed to the floor, darkness flooding her vision. The sounds of weapons fire grew muffled and distant until, finally, silence engulfed her.

LYNARA WOKE WITH A GROAN, her head pounding. Blinking up at the harsh lighting above, she blinked and tried to get her bearings. She moved to roll over, but her body felt leaden, and her hands were tied behind her back.

More memories flooded back—the attack as they returned from activating the beacons, being caught in the darkness of the ship’s corridors, and then being overrun despite their efforts. How long had she been out?

“Easy now... take it easy,” a deep voice said as she struggled to sit up, using the wall behind her for leverage.

She turned her head to find Savaar beside her, his hands also bound behind his back. His eyes met hers, his expression tight as he leaned back against the wall. He sported new bruising on his face and a nasty gash to his lower lip—evidence that he’d gone down fighting when they’d been captured.

“You alright?” His eyes searched hers, tight with concern.

She gave a curt nod. No point voicing her fears, not when he likely shared them and when they didn’t know who was listening.

A quick glance around informed her that they were in a large cell, three walls bare metal while the fourth was made up of bars. A similar-sized room lay beyond the bars, the way the light fell telling her this was not the only cell here.

Footsteps sounded beyond the bars, and a tall, slender Latharian appeared. She narrowed her eyes. Like the ones who had attacked them on the ship, this one wore no clan markers that she could see.

“*Purist*,” Savaar snarled, confirming her suspicions.

The purist’s dark gaze flicked between the two of them. “You’re awake. Wonderful. You will provide us the access codes to unleash glory upon the human vermin.”

Her blood ran cold, and she exchanged a confused glance with Savaar.

“What codes?”

Anger washed over their captor’s face, and he took a step forward, his fists clenching at his sides. “Don’t play dumb with me. You will give us the codes, female, or we will make you suffer.”

She gave him a blank face to look at. “I have no idea what codes you mean.”

This was not her time, so unless they thought she was someone she definitely wasn’t, she had no access to anything. Definitely not after being asleep in the ice for over two hundred and fifty thousand years.

“You have the wrong female,” Savaar snarled. “She knows nothing that can help you. I’m the one you want.”

Their captor laughed harshly.

“We shall see.” His gaze raked over Lynara in a predatory way. “You’re a pretty one. It’s a shame you’re an abomination otherwise, I might have had plans for you.”

She blinked and then smiled. “A great pity, handsome, because I’d have had plans for you as well. They’re just not ones you’d enjoy.”

She might have been a long way from home and a woman out of time, but she was an Imperial Navy Captain, and she had more than a few tricks up her sleeve.

Savaar surged to his knees, his snarl protective and vicious. “Touch her, and you’ll regret it!”

The purist’s eyes narrowed. “Silence, dog!”

He turned, motioning to someone they couldn’t see. “Get the prisoners out of there. Bring them along!”

“Yes, General Opaas.”

Two brutish-looking Lathar unlocked the cell. Savaar glanced at Lynara as the cell door opened. She steeled herself as they were grabbed by their upper arms, hauled out of the cell, and then marched down dimly lit corridor after dimly lit corridor.

It took four guards to drag Savaar along, but she had only one, perhaps due to her more petite size now, or the fact she was a woman. She didn’t know. Whichever, she missed her previous size and strength. Had she been as she was, these *vaarkers* wouldn’t have stood a chance against her.

Their journey ended in a dimly lit cargo bay. Her eyes widened at the sight of an enormous, oblong machine at its center, the K’Daar family crest emblazoned on its side.

Her blood froze in her veins as she recognized the huge, brutish shape.

“*Vaark’s sake*,” she breathed. “He couldn’t have been so *stupid*...”

Opaas followed her gaze, his lips twisting in a sinister smile.

“At last, the key to glory is within our grasp. It took our leader a while to sort through the historical records and realize that such a prize was within our grasp, but we have worked out its secrets.”

“What the *draanth* are you blathering on about?” Savaar demanded.

Opaas reached out to stroke the weapon's casing reverently, a disturbing look on his face as he did. "With this, we will purge the human plague from our galaxy and restore the purity of our race."

His gaze swung back to her, a fanatical gleam shining in their depths. She'd seen insanity before, mirrored in Dariel's gaze, and now she was seeing it all over again. "And you will give us the codes to unleash its power."

She shook her head, her eyes wide and as innocent as she could make them as she looked at the weapon. "I don't have any codes. I have no idea what that thing even is!"

A lie. She knew exactly what it was.

It was a high-yield thermo-neutron bomb. Designed not just to kill a planet but wipe an entire system out of existence. The problem was that neutron bombs were notoriously unstable, apt to detonate at the slightest jostle, or even if someone looked at them sideways. The Imperial Navy had lost a multitude of ships before their use had been banned.

How the *vaark* Dariel had managed to get hold of one, she had no idea. The fact she was on a ship with one sent shivers down her spine, never mind the fact that this particular weapon had been in a ship crash, been buried in ice, and had now been hauled halfway across the galaxy... that was nightmare-inducing.

Opaas's expression darkened.

"Lies!" he snarled, striding across the space between them to backhand her viciously across the face. She gasped, pain lancing through her cheek as she crashed to the floor. "You will give us the codes or suffer for your insolence!"

Savaar snarled and jerked against the guards that held him, struggling to get free.

"Stop! Don't hurt her! She can't give you the codes! That weapon is hundreds of thousands of years old. It's useless. I doubt it will even work!"

Opaas ignored his protests, dragging Lynara upright to face the ancient weapon she'd transported without knowing. The

only saving grace was that it was here, not still buried in the ice on Earth, ready to destroy it at any moment.

Hard fingers dug into her arms like vises as he sneered into her ear. “You will give us the codes or your companion dies. Make your choice!”

“I told you,” she hissed, trying to throw him off. “I don’t have the codes. I’ve never seen this weapon before!”

His hands tightened cruelly and he shook her. “It was on your ship. You really expect me to believe the ship’s captain didn’t know of its existence?”

“Believe it or not,” she said, locking eyes with him. “It’s the truth.”

He sneered. “Then his suffering will be on your hands.”

He jerked his head abruptly in a signal to his men. She gritted her teeth as the purist thugs descended on Savaar, fists pounding into his flesh with solid thwacks. Grunts of pain escaped him as bones cracked under the onslaught.

She flinched at the violence, her heart clenching. How much could his body take? Modern Latharians seemed hardier than those of her time, but still...

She fought against Opaas’s grip.

“Stop! Please! I have nothing to give you! I don’t know the codes. I never did. That mark on the front... that’s the sigil for the house of K’Daar. I’m a Varaant! Not a K’Daar. *That’s* why I didn’t know it was on board. It belonged to the prince... I was just the ship’s captain!”

“Lies!” he hissed and shook her roughly. “We know you were betrothed to the prince. Look at him!” He turned her so she could see Savaar on his knees, covered in blood. “Would you see him die rather than relinquish the codes? Do you care nothing for his pain?”

She glared at him, rage burning through her veins.

“What is *wrong* with you people? You’re the one causing his pain. I’ve told you the truth.”

She looked past him at Savaar, taking in his battered form. How much longer could he hold out?

Opaas followed her gaze. “So be it. His death will serve as a lesson to any who dare defy us.”

He raised his hand, and two guards readied their daggers, poised to plunge them into Savaar’s heart.

“No!” She rammed her elbow back into the general’s gut. He grunted, and she twisted free to launch herself at the nearest guard, grabbing his wrist to halt the killing blow.

“I’ll give you the codes! Just stop this!”

Opaas’s eyes gleamed in triumph as he straightened up.

“At last, you see reason. Now, give us the codes to unleash its power, or your companion dies.”

She walked toward the bomb, her mind racing every step of the way. Her fingers brushed the casing, as she searched her mind for everything she remembered about triton bombs. There had to be something that would help her. But this tech had been banned for a reason. She’d only ever seen one before.

It had a small access panel on the side. She pressed the cover down, hoping beyond hope that the mechanism had seized and she wouldn’t even be able to access the thing. But the panel dropped and slid smoothly away to reveal a small keypad and display. Her breath caught. Not only was this a triton bomb, but it was also an experimental model, DNA-locked by design.

She couldn’t tell them that. Once they realized she couldn’t access it, they would have no reason to keep her or Savaar alive. Biting her lip, she typed out a command query, inputting not her own access code—Dariel would undoubtedly have blacklisted that in the weapon’s system—but an access code Saar had made her memorize years ago. She’d never asked where he’d gotten it or what it was, and she’d never been desperate enough to use it before. But now she was...

She held her breath as she waited for one of three things. The code would do one of three things: give her access to the

weapon's operating system, lock her out of the operating system, or the whole thing would blow up.

...code accepted. Root access enabled... scrolled in green letters across the screen. She held in the sigh of relief that wanted to punch out of her lungs, typing quickly as she accessed the coding sequences and initiated an emergency lockout, scrambling the authorization protocols.

She turned with a smile of triumph, locking eyes with Opaas.

“There, it's locked out of all systems. I'll give you the master codes once Savaar and I are on a ship far from here,” she announced. Hopefully her bluff would work and the *vaarker* wouldn't kill the pair of them on the spot.

Opaas snarled as he grabbed her shoulder, his fingers digging in painfully as he searched her face. “You *bitch!* Unlock it now!”

“Sorry, handsome. No can do. It's on a time-lock as well.”

He released her abruptly, shoving her out of the way to look at the weapon, his fingers stabbing at the keypad as he entered commands to try and override the lockout. The display flashed red in refusal each time. He let out an enraged snarl and slammed a fist against the casing, shaking with anger as he turned back to her.

“Deceitful witch!” He snarled and grabbed a fistful of her hair to yank her toward him. “You will pay for this!”

She bit back a gasp at the pain and glared at him defiantly. “You want access, then let us go.”

He shoved her away.

“Take them back to the cell,” he ordered his men. “They will answer to the lord when he arrives.”

MURPHY'S EXPRESSION was grim as they made their way back to the lounge in a reverse of their previous course. Frustration rolled through him, making him clench his teeth. He couldn't believe he'd let them get separated like that.

Even though he knew Lynara was an experienced starship captain who had commanded ships long before he was even born—hell, she'd been commanding ships before the human race even existed—that wasn't the point. She'd been under *his* command. Under *his* protection. And he'd let her get taken.

He tightened his grip on the ancient weapon in his hand, his gaze sharp as they moved through the corridors. Even though all his attention was on their surroundings and any clues to the assholes who had attacked them, he couldn't help a small part of his mind wandering back to seeing Lynara in action.

The way she'd handled that energy rifle with deadly precision and a fierceness that sent shivers down his spine was the sexiest thing he'd ever seen. He shouldn't, but he couldn't help but feel protective over her, even though she clearly didn't need it.

His lips pressed into a thin line, and his hands tightened on the rifle as they reached a corner. He nodded to Dubois to take the other side of the corridor, and they moved around it quickly and quietly. As they did, a part of his mind was back in the lounge last night. The memory of Lynara's lips under his, the way she'd softly surrendered to him when he'd challenged her for dominance in the kiss, had been enough to keep him awake and hard as a rock half the night.

The two of them set a bruising pace to get back to the areas of the ship they recognized, stumbling to a halt in a dimly lit corridor not far from the lounge.

Chests heaving, they tried to catch their breath, the cold air stinging their lungs. Sweat dripped from Murphy's brow as he glanced at Dubois, seeing concern etched on her face.

Her voice was tight with anger and frustration, "Who the fuck *were* those guys? We have to go back. We can't leave Savaar and Lynara to face them alone."

Cam, leaning against the wall, grunted and shook his head with a confidence he didn't feel. "Don't worry. Savaar's a seasoned warrior. He'll make sure they get back to us."

Dubois swallowed hard, her eyes shadowed with worry. “I just don’t like the idea of leaving them alone, especially with those assholes out there.”

“Remember, Lynara knows this ship better than any of us. She’s probably found a quicker way back, and they’re already in the lounge wondering where we are,” he said, reassuringly. “Come on. Let’s get moving.”

She nodded, and they set off again, moving into sections of the corridors that were now lit. It made their journey both quicker because they could see where they were going and potentially more dangerous because there were less shadows to hide in should their unknown enemy resurface to attack them.

What the hell was going on? He ground his teeth as they walked. It didn’t take a genius to work out that the storm and the attack were linked. Their enemies had obviously used the break in the weather to mount an assault on the interior of the ship. But to what end?

The area they’d been attacked in was treacherous and more dangerous than the main interior of the ship, which had been shielded from a large part of the damage caused by the crash simply because of its distance from the hull. It wasn’t the sort of area a team making their first exploration into such a situation would head for.

No, instead, in the time they’d had since the weather broke, he’d have expected them to survey the main interior of the ship. For a team to have found the small group heading back from the beacons, they had to *know* where they were. Which caused a problem. Because no one apart from them knew where they actually were.

He pushed that thought to the back of his mind to think over and quickened his pace. The lounge was just up ahead, and with it, he hoped, both Savaar and Lynara. Then they could start working on some answers as to what the hell was going on. And maybe, just maybe, when all was said and done, he’d have a chance to explore whatever had ignited between him and Lynara.

They finally stumbled into the lounge, exhausted but on high alert, and pulled up short.

A tall, familiar figure awaited them. Daaynal, the Latharian emperor, sat casually on a chair, leather-clad arms spread wide over the back.

“Your Majesty.” Cameron nodded. “This is a surprise. I would have thought it would have taken longer for a rescue party to reach us. We’ve only just managed to get the ship’s beacons online.”

Daaynal raised an eyebrow. “We’ve been monitoring the situation since the storm hit. We were simply waiting for a break in the weather to come to your aid.”

He turned to Taavik, an expectant air about him. “What have you discovered?”

Murphy interrupted, his voice tight. “I’m afraid we have bigger problems, Your Majesty. We were attacked by a group of Latharian soldiers. We’ve lost Lynara and Savaar.”

Daaynal speared him with a look. “Lynara... as in Lynara Varaant? The captain of the ship? She’s still alive?”

He nodded. “We found her in one of the crew stasis pods. Alive but weak and disorientated when we woke her. We only managed to get power online and activate the beacons with her help. Otherwise conditions...” He shrugged. “Most of us would have frozen to death last night. But I’m more worried about this attack team. They knew exactly where we were.”

Daaynal nodded. “Have you any idea who these attackers might be or what their motives are?”

Cameron shook his head. “No, nothing other than that they had both Latharian warriors and human soldiers. They were well-armed and organized. I’ve never seen a force like that before.”

He clenched his fists, frustration boiling inside of him as he looked around at the warriors Daaynal had brought with him. More than enough to take on the assault team that had attacked them. Far more than was actually needed for a rescue...

“We need to find our people and get to the bottom of this.”

Daaynal glanced at Taavik, his voice tense.

“Is it still here? Check. *Now.*”

Taavik nodded, striding across the lounge to where his equipment was hooked up to the *Elysium*'s systems.

Murphy's brow furrowed in confusion. “Check what?”

Neither of them answered. Daaynal watched Taavik as he tapped at the screen in front of him with a worried frown.

“*Draanth* it.” Taavik's face paled. “It's gone.”

“*What's* gone?” Cameron stepped forward, glaring in demand at Daaynal. “What the fuck is going on here?”

Daaynal sighed and rubbed the back of his neck. The grim look in his eyes froze Cam's blood in his veins.

“Historical records hint that there might have been something on this ship... But since it was myth and rumor we didn't want to worry you about it until we had confirmation it was here and wasn't destroyed in the crash.”

“*What* wasn't destroyed in the crash?” he demanded. The Lathar accused humanity of talking in riddles, but here they were, doing the same.

“A weapon,” Daaynal said bluntly, his voice dropping in the sudden silence of the room. “One capable of destroying the entire planet.”

“*A* weapon?”

Murphy couldn't help the laugh. It slipped out before he could stop it, the sound harsh. “So *that's* why you were all so keen on running this mission. It was nothing to do with a rescue at all.”

He stared at Daaynal, fury burning through his veins like wildfire. Then his eyes narrowed as he looked at Taavik. He hadn't missed the fact that the big warrior had known *exactly* what Daaynal was asking.

“You *knew* that weapon was here, and you didn't tell us?”

After everything they'd been through since they'd arrived, and Taavik had known all along why they were really here? Not to rescue Lynara or for an archaeological survey... but to search for some kind of ancient superweapon.

Cameron stepped forward, his lip curled back in a snarl as he faced off with the emperor. It was a stupid move. Humanity was dependent on Daaynal's goodwill and the treaties that stopped the Lathar from invading and just taking what they wanted, but he wasn't thinking about that right now.

They'd lied, and now Lynara was gone.

Daaynal held up his hands. “We couldn't risk word getting out before we knew if it was still intact.”

“And if it had gone off while we were traipsing around this rust bucket?” he snarled as his heart thudded against his ribs.

If he'd known, he wouldn't have brought Lynara and the others back in here. They'd have taken their chances in the transports to get them out of the storm.

Daaynal's eyes flashed with anger. "You *agreed* that this was a reconnaissance mission. We didn't have enough intel to —"

A deafening boom shook the floor beneath their feet. The lights flickered and then died, plunging the room into darkness. Cameron stumbled, reaching out to grab the back of a chair as the deck rolled beneath their feet.

"What was that?" Daaynal demanded.

"An explosion on the lower ring," Taavik said, his expression tight. "Th—"

A second blast rocked the ship, and the wall behind Daaynal split apart, a beam sheering through it to nearly impale the emperor. He leaped out of the way, just in time. The two of them looked at each other over it. It had nearly taken Daaynal's head off.

"The ship's coming apart!" Taavik shouted over the sound of another explosion. "We need to get out of here! Get back to the transports!"

Cameron's heart seized in his chest. "*No!* We need to find Lynara and Savaar. They're out there somewhere!"

He turned for the door but Daaynal grabbed his arm, holding him back. "There's no time!" he yelled over the sound of the ship groaning around them in metallic death throes. More explosions went off somewhere beneath their feet. "We have to evacuate now!"

"I'm not leaving without her!" Cameron snarled, trying to yank himself free.

Taavik got between him and the door, his face turned blue by the screen of his comp as he ran search queries.

"There's no other lifesigns on board, Murphy. Just us." He looked up. "They're gone."

The words hit Cameron like a grenade, leaving him stunned. His body went numb even as his heart shattered into a million jagged pieces.

“Dead... gone?” he managed.

Taavik shook his head. “No... I don’t think so. Scans of the ship indicate that we are the only group aboard. Which means whoever attacked you is—”

“No longer aboard,” he finished the sentence with a snarl. “And they’ve taken Lynara and Savaar with them.”

“Now we’ve established that,” Daaynal growled. “Can we get the *draanth* out of here? Before this thing breaks up completely?”

The floor tilted violently under their feet again, and as one they fled. The Elysium groaned like a wounded beast, metal screaming as entire sections tore free while they raced through the ship, heading for the loading hall on the side they’d entered through.

It was a race against time. Cameron glanced over his shoulder, his eyes widening in horror as a fissure opened in the deck behind them, swallowing everything in its path as they ran for the ragged hole in the side of the ship where the door had once been.

If they didn’t move now, the ship would become their icy tomb.

“Move!” Daaynal roared, already at the door urging everyone on.

The Lathar among the group helped the humans. Taavik reached out to help him, but Murphy shrugged him off with a snarl. He didn’t want the guy anywhere near him.

Instead, he hauled Dubois along with him, propelling the woman ahead of him as they raced across the ice to the shuttles while the storm kicked up around them in a desperate sprint to be clear of the ship before it went under completely.

Daaynal’s men were already piling into the shuttle, engines whining as they roared to life. Cameron stumbled up the ramp

with Dubois and then dropped into a seat, his chest heaving. Then he twisted to look out of the back loading ramp.

The icy storm raged around them, but his gaze was only for the *Elysium*. Even from here, he could see it was breaking up, the hull plates torn away and entire decks visible, wiring and infrastructure exposed like bones beneath flesh.

A roar shook the air around the shuttle. The remaining decks of the Elysium shuddered and then collapsed in a grinding avalanche of metal. The ancient ship slid gracefully into the embrace of the ice, visible for a few seconds more before vanishing completely.

Cameron stared in stunned disbelief. Gone. A ship that had lain for hundreds of thousands of years in the ice had been wiped out in an instant.

He sank into the seat, numbness spreading through his limbs as the shuttle accelerated away from the site. His mind reeled, and the images played over and over. The attack, the explosion, the ship coming down.

And under it all, the one simple fact that burned in his blood.

Someone had taken Lynara.

He *was* going to get her back...

Whatever it took.

CAMERON STORMED down the ramp of the transport shuttle, his boots clanging on the deck plates of Devan Station. The familiar sights and sounds of the bustling hangar bay did nothing to quell the fury burning in his gut.

Daaynal emerged from the other transporter, and Cam made a beeline for him, his stride predatory with Dubois on his heels. The big alien emperor stood talking with Taavik, their expressions grim.

Then they spotted him, and Daaynal lifted his hands in a placating gesture as Cameron approached. "Calm yourself, Mr. President."

“Calm myself? *Calm* myself? You want *calm*?” Cameron snarled. “After you lied to me to get access to that ship? After two of our team were taken right from under us, and you wouldn’t do anything about it?”

Okay, maybe that was a little unfair given the ship had been breaking up around them, but he wasn’t thinking straight at the moment.

“Where did they take her?” he demanded. “You knew that ship held some kind of weapon. Well done. Now it’s in the hands of purists, and Lynara’s a hostage. So where the hell are they?”

Daaynal’s expression darkened. “We had no knowledge any group had obtained access to that ship or its technology. We sent a team to investigate, nothing more.”

“You’re a liar!” Cameron spat. “You knew *exactly* what was on that ship, and you sent us in blind. Now an innocent woman is paying the price.” He took a step closer to the emperor, rage in every line of his body. “So I’ll ask you again. Where the fuck did they take her?”

His gaze slid to Taavik, but the warrior refused to meet his eyes. Fucking coward.

“The whereabouts of the weapon and Lynara Varaant, a citizen of the empire, are none of your concern,” Daaynal snapped back.

“Oh really? It certainly was our concern when you needed access to the Elysium,” he spat. “Now two people have been snatched, and suddenly it’s none of our concern?”

Daaynal’s eyes flashed, a low growl rumbling in his chest. “The human government has no jurisdiction here. Lynara is Latharian, and as such her rescue will be undertaken by the empire.”

“Bullshit! Don’t tell me you’re all of a sudden interested in Lynara. You’re more interested in getting that fucking weapon back.”

Cameron glared at Taavik, daring the coward to meet his eyes. Then Taavik sighed and turned to Daaynal.

“Your Majesty, I’m afraid you may be... incorrect. While Lynara Varaant is indeed a citizen of the empire, the president is the last of the K’Daar line.”

Daaynal fixed him with a hard look. “And?”

Taavik winced, just a little, before his stoic mask settled back into place. “There was a betrothal contract between the Varaant and the K’Daar—one that was never fulfilled due to the lack of both a K’Daar heir *and* a Varaant bearing the title of princess.”

“Get to the point,” Daaynal growled. “I assume you have one.”

“Indeed, Your Majesty.” Taavik inclined his head. “Now we *do* have both. The president here is acknowledged to be the K’Daar heir, which means he takes all rights and privileges as the last of his line... including the legal obligations of the betrothal contract between the two families. As Lynara’s contracted mate, our laws give him rights over her rescue.”

Daaynal growled, turning on Taavik. “You overreach yourself, warrior! President Murphy’s lineage changes nothing. Lynara is Latharian, so her rescue will be undertaken by the empire.”

“No. The law is the law.” Taavik stood firm, though he did swallow nervously. Cameron didn’t blame him. Facing down a warrior emperor with such a brutal reputation was either bravery or utter suicide. “As the last K’Daar heir, President Murphy *does* have claim. You know the law, Your Majesty. And what is the empire without the laws that govern it?”

Cameron remained silent, watching the interchange closely. His Latharian royal line had been kept a closely guarded secret. If the human population as a whole discovered that he had a higher percentage of Latharian DNA than the rest of the population, they would lose confidence in him. Some would accuse him of being in league with the Lathar, especially given the fury over the new Mate Program in some quarters. But right now, he didn’t care. If his heritage gave him leverage, he had a bargaining chip he fully intended to use to go after Lynara.

Daaynal growled, the sound low and menacing, but Taavik didn't back down. The warrior met Cameron's eyes, giving a small nod. An acknowledgment of his unspoken promise... and perhaps an apology for his part in the deception over the real reason for the Latharian mission to the *Elysium*?

He turned back to Daaynal.

"It seems you have a choice, Your Majesty. Accept my claim and let me find her...or deal with the consequences of breaking your own laws. Your move."

Daaynal's expression hardened.

"You would do well to remember who you are talking to, Mr. President." He shot a look at Taavik. "And the old laws do not apply. Lynara Varaant is the last pure-blooded female of Latharian blood. I cannot... will not just hand her over to a human."

Cameron's eyebrow winged up sharply.

"Oh?" His voice was like a whip in the air, chilling the temperature in the shuttle bay to "hell freezing over" level in a heartbeat. "So it's okay for us to hand over our women to you, but not the other way around?"

Daaynal froze for a second, his gaze boring into Cam's. He could practically see the cogs working in the emperor's mind as he tried to find a way out of the corner he'd backed himself into.

"It's not that," he ground out, his voice little more than a growl. "She is not just a Latharian woman, but a princess of the empire—"

Fury blazed through Cam with the force of a supernova. "What you're saying is that the Lathar really do see humanity as less than them?"

"No! Not at all—" Daaynal began, but Cam cut him off with a sharp slice of his hand.

"What else do you call it then? Because it looks like you only view humanity as a source of broodmares for the empire, after all."

He folded his arms, his eyes narrowing.

“You can help me find her, but I’d advise against trying to stop me,” he snarled, not caring at all that he might be about to plunge the entire human race into a war it could not win.

Daaynal’s expression set, not giving an inch. It was the most confrontational exchange they’d ever had, and Cam felt the power balance between them shift.

“You have no idea where she’d been taken.”

Cam shrugged. “Maybe not. But storming every purist stronghold I can find might just shake something loose.”

Daaynal snorted. “You don’t have the capacity to do that.”

Cameron just grinned. It wasn’t a nice expression.

“Yeah. Don’t count on it,” he snarled and walked away.

SLEEPING in a cell was never easy. Sleeping in a cell when an unstable weapon was on board proved even harder. Especially when that weapon had been unstable *before* it had spent over two hundred and fifty thousand years buried in the ice.

Lynara leaned her head back against the wall and tried not to think of her warm and cozy bed in her quarters on the Elysium or, given her quarters had *also* been buried under the ice for the same two hundred and fifty years, the bed she’d shared with Cameron only last night.

For a moment, she allowed herself to relax into the memory. She wasn’t inexperienced, and she’d had many lovers in the past. Good ones. But Cameron wasn’t just good... there was something about him. Something about the way he made her feel when he touched her went beyond mere sex. It was like their very souls touched, recognizing each other as the part that was missing.

Movement snapped her eyes open and she looked over at Savaar. He grunted as he sat up, wedging his broad shoulders into the corner where two walls of the cell met. She suspected it was so he didn’t fall over again. Their enemies had given

him a right working over yesterday, and he was black and blue now, moving stiffly.

“How you doing?” she asked in a low voice, mindful of the guards stationed by the door outside their cell. She’d glared at them long enough yesterday that they’d had the decency to turn around as she used the “facilities”... a bucket in the corner, but she kept her voice low just in case. She didn’t want them hearing whatever conversations she and Savaar had.

“I’m good,” he said, his lips compressing with the pain she knew he’d deny. “Awesome night’s sleep, best I’ve ever had.”

Her lips quirked. At least modern-day Varaants had kept their sense of humor. “Same. I must find out what make of mattress they’re using.”

Savaar cracked an eyelid, a multi-hued blue eye looking at her from a sea of bruised flesh. “That would be the metal floor mark four, with extra chequerplate for your comfort.”

She sniggered, the small banter buoying her up. “Very expensive, I’m sure.”

Silence fell for a moment, and then Savaar grunted and levered himself up. She watched him moving, struck again by the resemblance both he and Taavik had to her brother. It was stronger with Taavik in his facial features, but Savaar’s movements were Riaan through and through.

He dropped down next to her with a grunt, holding his arm across his gut. “What’s the plan?” he asked in an undertone. “Any ideas for getting out of here?”

She shrugged. “I figured you’d know more about these assholes. I’m just a visitor to this time.”

Even as the quip left her lips, she knew it was a lie. Much as she might hold out hope, there was no way back home for her. She was in the here and now, for good, whether she liked it or not. Cam’s handsome face filled her mind. And the here and now did have *some* advantages over her time. No Dariel for a start...

“Okay,” she murmured, “fill me in on this lot. These are purists. Right? The assholes into genetic purity? What clan are they?”

Savaar frowned as he looked toward the door. The same two uniformed guards were on as yesterday, one sleeping on a hard cot half the night while the other watched before they changed shifts. It wasn't hard to tell that they were the lowest ranked in the group; the only difference between them and her and Savaar was the side of the bars they were on.

“They're all different clans,” he said in an undertone. “The one on the left is a L'Barat, but the one on the right I can't really tell. He could be a O'Sann or a D'Raant, but without his combat leathers...” He shrugged. “The purists have feelers out throughout the empire, looking for the disaffected to prey on. They find them and draw them in with pretty words. Make them feel like they're the only ones who understand them, care about them...”

She nodded. “Sounds familiar. I've seen and broken up groups operating like that before. Small-scale cults and the like.”

Savaar grunted, closing his eyes to lean against the wall. “Taavik and I lost a cousin to the purists when we were kids,” he revealed. “He was injured in battle and out of action for a long time while healing. Then he just... disappeared. We later found out he was behind an attack on a healer's hall where a half-Lathar child had been born. The first in many years.”

She gasped, her hand flying up to cover her mouth. “Oh my gods. What happened?”

She didn't want to ask about his cousin. Savaar's grim expression said more than enough about what had happened.

“The hall was destroyed. The child and everyone in it were killed.” He opened his eyes to look at her. “I've had a soul-deep hatred for these draanthic since.”

She could understand that, especially given what she knew about modern-day Latharian struggles with offspring. “Well, let's see what we can do about this lot. Shall we?”

“Oh?” He looked at her with interest, but before she could reply, the door at the end of the hall slammed open and three higher-ranked purists walked in. Their gazes locked on to Savaar, and she shivered at the evil glint in them.

“Open the cell. Get him out,” the tallest ordered. “The lord wants to see him.”

Eameron stormed off with Dubois at his heels, the metal grating of the deck clanking underfoot as they marched forward.

The cavernous shuttle bay of Devan Station stretched out around them, filled with alien spacecraft of various shapes and sizes, mostly Latharian, but some had designs he didn't recognize.

Harsh overhead lights glinted off the metallic hulls, and the air was filled with the familiar scents of engine oil and recycled air. Massive exhaust vents lined the walls, ready to vent the fumes from the shuttles upon launch. Cranes and machinery for moving heavy equipment hung from the vaulted ceiling high above.

"Now that we've completely pissed our alien allies off, what are we going to do?" Dubois asked.

He slid her a sideways look. He'd always appreciated Dubois's level-headedness. Even now, when he'd virtually threatened—no, he *had* threatened the Latharian emperor—she didn't give him any hysterics. Just a calm, "What's the plan, boss?"

"Much as they'd like us to believe it, the Lathar aren't the only show in town," he said.

To illustrate his point, he nodded toward a tall, white-haired alien leaning against a wall in one of the huge doorways that led off the shuttlebay up ahead. Raalt, leader of the Izaean, was instantly recognizable.

“Cute,” was Dubois’s immediate assessment. “Looks like he might be an army all by himself, but cute.”

He couldn’t help it. Cam barked out a laugh and looked at the major again.

“Cute? You’re calling the man who gives the entire Latharian empire nightmares cute? You *really* don’t have a high opinion of men. Do you?”

She shrugged. “You know the saying. If you want a job done right...”

He snorted. He *really* felt sorry for Savaar if the guy was serious about pursuing a romance with Dubois. Of course, they had to actually *get* Savaar back first. And Lynara.

He expected Raalt to push off from the wall and disappear down the corridor to the main base before he and Dubois reached him, just like he’d always done before.

He knew who Raalt was, of course. They’d been introduced when he’d arrived, but the Izaean leader had quickly made himself scarce. Everything he knew about the Izaean and Raalt himself was as a result of Elise’s digging and then later information from her mate, Cade, and Jay Stephens.

Which meant that he knew the tall, heavily muscled warrior watching them with an implacable amber gaze really was the Lathar’s version of the grim reaper. An alien berserker who could go into Blood Rage at any second.

He’d read the reports of the mission to rescue Colonel Taylor. What the Izaean blood troop had done to Terra First had sent that group so far underground they’d probably evolve into mole people or something.

But Raalt didn’t move away. Instead, he locked eyes with Cam and lifted his chin in acknowledgment.

“Looks like we’re up,” he commented in an undertone to Dubois as they approached the alien warrior.

Like most Lathar, he wore combat leathers with heavy boots, the pants containing hooks and loops for weaponry, of which Raalt seemed to be carrying enough for a small army

even though there was a rule on base against personal weaponry. Cam couldn't see anyone trying to take them off him, though. And besides, what difference would it make? Raalt himself was a weapon.

Unlike most Lathar, though, Raalt's leathers were battered and worn. The sleeves had been ripped off his jacket, revealing scarred arms and the heavy wrist bracers he wore. The shoulder stitching that would have denoted his clan had been removed.

All in all, he looked like a space-age version of a disreputable biker. Not at all like the rest of the Lathar. Apart. Different.

"Looks like this one isn't into the hair plaiting slumber parties," Dubois murmured, nodding toward the long, silver locks devoid of braids that cascaded over his shoulders.

"Mr. President." Raalt inclined his head as they reached the doorway. His direct gaze would have been disconcerting to some, but not Cam. He just gave the alien guy a direct look right back. He'd been told he had a look that could give a rattlesnake a headache. "I've been waiting for an opportunity to speak with you."

"Oh?" Cam raised an eyebrow. "My door is always open, but I'm afraid I'm on a bit of a time crunch at the moment—"

Raalt cut him off by stepping in front of them, literally blocking their path.

Cam's eyebrow winged up further. A line like that would have indicated to most people that he needed to be somewhere else, like yesterday. He'd forgotten that Latharians were literal beings at the best of times.

"Then I will have to be quick," Raalt said. "Given that you have now seen through K'Saan's deception, I would like to discuss an alliance."

That stopped Cam in his tracks. "Blunt, aren't you?"

Raalt's face split into a grin that was far too predatory for comfort, but Cam didn't get the feeling he was trying to intimidate them.

“I am not like Daaynal. I do not hide my intentions behind pretty words or try to deceive with fancy turns of phrase.” His leonine gaze flicked to Dubois. “And no, I am not into slumber parties, of the hair plaiting, or any other kind.”

Dubois started in surprise and Cam hid his smile as Raalt winked. “Enhanced hearing. Comes in very useful at times.”

To her credit, the major recovered quickly. “I can imagine. Is that a genetic modification, and, if so, where can I get it?”

“I’m afraid not.” Raalt shook his head. “At least not in my case. It’s a result of my mutation. It expresses differently in all of us. But I’m sure if you asked the empire’s healers, they’d have a modification that would suit. That’s if you trust them to poke about in your DNA, anyway. That’s where we went wrong...”

“Went wrong? The Izaean?”

Raalt nodded. “Play god with DNA and things happen. Like mutations. Like *us*.”

Cam blinked. He’d known that the Izaean carried a genetic mutation that set them apart from the other Lathar—ostracized them—but he didn’t realize it had been as a result of the empire’s genetics programs.

He shook his head and brought himself back to the matter at hand.

“So, what can I do for you, Mr. Raalt?”

“Just Raalt,” the big berserker corrected him. “I have no honorific.”

Then he folded his arms over his massive chest and looked down at them. “I wish to negotiate for my kind to have access to human females.”

Dubois went still next to him. Cam kept his gaze locked with Raalt’s, his good humor fading rapidly.

“If you were listening to my conversation with Daaynal, you will be aware that I am losing patience with human women being considered a commodity to be handed over.”

“Not what I meant.” Raalt shook his head. “You mistake my meaning. All I wish to negotiate for is the chance to meet and interact with females. For the chance for them to get to know us and hopefully choose us of their own accord. Free will, not some soulless program that matches DNA.” He dipped his head, his deep voice even lower. “There is far more to a successful match than just DNA.”

“My god! An alien actually talking sense!” Dubois remarked, looking at Cam in expectation.

He folded his arms in a mirror of Raalt’s posture—not confrontational but mirroring the bigger man.

“And what are you prepared to offer for access to our women?” he asked, truly intrigued.

“The Izaean as allies... Against any enemy.” Raalt’s expression was unreadable.

“Even the Lathar?” The question was loaded, given that the Izaean had all been Lathar originally... until they expressed the Izaean mutation and had been cast out from everything they’d known. Often as children.

Raalt nodded. “Even the Lathar. For most of us... *especially* the Lathar.”

Murphy inclined his head. “Good enough for me. I have a situation I need to deal with, but we will sit down and talk this through when I get back.”

Raalt nodded and stepped back, allowing them to continue on their way. Dubois looked up at him as soon as they were alone.

“Boss, if we have a new ally... why aren’t we using them to track down who took Lynara and Savaar?”

He gave her a grin as wolfish as Raalt’s had been.

“Because why give away an advantage when I already have an ace up my sleeve?”

DUBOIS DIDN'T QUESTION him further, falling quiet as they reached the human embassy on the base.

"Mr. President, I didn't realize you were on the station!" the aide on the front desk squawked, bolting out from behind the desk to follow Cam as he stalked past and strode down the corridors toward the VIP offices. One was always set aside for the president's use in even the smallest embassy.

"No, my visit here is an impromptu one," he replied, grim-faced as he shoved the door open to the presidential office. It was as neat as a new pin and an identical layout to his office back on Earth—something he did on purpose so when he made an address, no one knew where he actually was. All they saw was the president in the same room.

"Get me the vice president on comms in ten minutes," he ordered as he strode across to the drink cabinet near the bookcase and poured both himself and Dubois a large measure. "Someone organize a change of clothes for the major and me, standard combat dress please."

"Yes, sir!" the aide snapped to attention so quickly Cam was surprised the guy didn't give himself whiplash before he rushed from the room.

Cam handed Dubois a glass and knocked his own back, hissing through his teeth as he headed for the door. The rest of the base might have been all high tech and fancy, but this section was built to resemble a wing in a building from Earth's distant past. So the door actually had a lock—one he threw before turning to stalk back to his desk.

"Good stuff this," Dubois commented, motioning for his glass as she helped herself to another drink. "So what are we doing?"

Cam dropped into the chair behind the desk and pulled the console toward him.

"I'm going to make a call," he replied, already tapping out a routing code on the keyboard from memory. Again, it was modern tech designed to look ancient so the keys felt a little

clunky under his fingers, but that didn't matter. What mattered was getting through to the guy he needed to speak to.

“Oh? This would be the ace up your sleeve?” the major asked and handed him a refilled glass.

He nodded, frowning at the screen as the comms route asked him for a verification code. It was nothing he wasn't expecting, and despite the fact he knew the B'Kaar would be monitoring the call, he typed it in. It was burning one of his aces in the hole, but right now he didn't care. He needed to find Lynara, and this was the absolute fastest way to do it. And... it also sent a message to Daaynal that humanity wasn't as helpless as the empire thought they were.

He sat back as the call routed, the screen black in front of him, and cradled the glass in his hand before taking a drink. The second drink went down as smoothly as the first, fire burning all the way down to his belly.

Then the screen sparked to life and the biggest alien Cam had ever seen appeared, blinking in surprise.

“Who the *draanth* are you?” he demanded and then tilted his head. “Which clan? And more importantly, how the fuck did you get this number?”

“My name is Cameron Murphy, Mr. Vorr. I'm president of Earth and her colonies,” Cam replied calmly, hiding his amusement at the big alien's stunned look when he used his name. “Would you be so kind as to get Tell on the comm please?”

“How'd you know my name?”

Cameron smiled. “I know an awful lot about you, Covak. My sister is mated to your cousin. You look a lot like him.”

That wasn't entirely true, not at first glance. Cade Vorr, Cam's brother-in-law, was younger with a rangy build and the hints of youth still about his movements whereas Covak Vorr was a mountain of a man covered in what seemed to be the Vorr equivalent of tattoos, long blond hair and a beard. But something about the set of his eyes would have made him

instantly recognizable, even if Cam hadn't already known who he was.

"You're human," Covak grunted, suspicion written on his face. His expression was so open that he was not a person who should ever play poker for serious money.

Cam inclined his head. "I am."

"Then how do you know Tell?"

Cam scrubbed at the back of his neck. "Why don't you just put Tell on the line? He'll explain it after."

With a grunt, the big guy leaned to the side, giving Cam and Dubois a glimpse of the view behind him. It looked like the bridge of a small starship, stars streaking by the window at the front.

"Telllllllll!" The ear-splitting yell was loud enough to silence a rock concert. *"Someone wants to talk to you!"*

Covak straightened up, the chair beneath him groaning in distress, and looked at them.

"Humans. Both of you?" His gaze flicked over Dubois. "Hey, beautiful. How you doing?" He smiled, showing a sharp set of fangs. Whereas Cade went to great measures to hide his non-Latharian attributes, it seemed Covak didn't bother.

Cam snorted. "Careful there. She's liable to hand you your balls on a plate if you're not careful."

Covak's grin grew wider. "Beautiful and dangerous, I'm in love already. Hey, babe, ever been with a Vorr?"

"Oh for god's sake, Covak, if you've got me out of bed for a fucking wind up, I'll—"

"Humans," Covak grunted, shooting finger guns at the screen. "One of them says he's president of Earth."

"Move," Tell ordered, a hand appearing in the corner of the screen to shove at Covak's shoulder. He rolled out of the seat with a groan of tortured metal, and a second later, another man dropped into it.

If he was surprised to see Cam, he didn't show it, his expression grim.

“Hey, boss, whatcha need?”

It had taken them a day aboard the *Relentless* to get to the edge of human space. Cam stood at the tiny airlock window, gazing out into the blackness of space.

Just a year ago, humanity had looked out into the same blackness and wondered if they were alone. Wondered if they were the only intelligent life in the system. As a species, they'd felt lonely, but they'd also felt superior. None of the life they'd come across in their explorations of the galaxy had come anywhere close to human intelligence. The arrival of the Lathar had changed human history in more ways than one.

But he couldn't think about that now. All he could think about was getting Lynara back. It consumed him. So much so that he'd handed operational control over to his vice president, Kristen Ortega, before he'd left Devan Station on the *Relentless*. He couldn't be the president at the moment, not with Lynara out there somewhere, scared and alone.

The ship they were waiting for, the mercenary ship *Lady's Dream*, came into view. It was smaller than any of the Latharian Imperial ships he'd seen and less brutal than the Izaean's gunships. The only way to describe the Reaper ship was elegant. It was long, with large engines making up the last third that flowed into four large exhaust vents. The weapons arrays and cannons bristling on every surface didn't mar the beauty of its sleek lines.

"Seems like we're always waiting around for aliens to turn up," Dubois commented in a low voice.

He snorted, nodding. “We do seem to be, yes. At least I actually trust this lot, though.”

“You *trust* a bunch of alien mercenaries?” She slid him a sideways look. “Are you going to tell me how you got a link into an alien mercenary unit?”

“Nope.”

“How about who this guy Tell really is?”

“Nope.”

“Is he the same as you?”

One thing could be said of Anya Dubois. She was not slow on the uptake. He gave her a look, and she lifted her hands in surrender.

“Hey, no judgment here. Honestly, I don’t care who or what you are or were or who Tell is to you. All I care about is that you’re the best president we’ve had at standing up to these aliens. Can you imagine Halland?”

She gave a grimace of disgust.

“He’d have rolled over and played dead immediately. Within a week, women would have been rounded up and herded off by the thousands.”

“True.”

Cam nodded as he faced forward. Halland, the president before him, had been an utter wet lettuce of a politician. No way would he have been able to stand up to the forceful emperor of the Lathar. Daaynal would only have had to frown, and the guy would have run for cover.

The *Dream* was almost in position now, the docking bridge extending like an insect’s questing proboscis toward the *Relentless*. They were side to side, which gave them an excellent view of the *Dream*’s side canon array.

Dubois whistled between her teeth. “Sends a message. Doesn’t it?”

“It does,” he agreed as he lifted his helmet to put it on. His breath roared in his ears for a second, fogging up the face plate

before the collar clicked into place and his suit's air supply normalized. They didn't need them for long, just the quick walk between the two ships across the boarding bridge.

"Although, from what I've heard..." he said when Dubois had her helmet on and could hear him again, "these guys aren't much into conversation anyway."

The boarding bridge thunked against the hull, the deck beneath their feet juddering.

"Boarding clamps locked," the calm tones of Ava Burton, *Relentless* captain, filled their ears. "Airlock cycle beginning."

"Thank you, Captain," Cam replied. "As soon as we're aboard and you're free of the boarding bridge, get the fuck out of here."

"Aye, sir," Burton replied. "We'll be on patrol in this sector if you should need us."

"Of course, Captain. Thank you."

He didn't expect to need the *Relentless* as backup. In fact, where they were going, the human ship *couldn't* back them up. Not without causing an intergalactic diplomatic crisis. Not for the first time did he wonder why the hell he'd hung up his rifle and put a suit on. Politics was not for the faint-hearted; wars were easier. But that didn't mean he was going to shove Earth into one.

He took a deep breath as the airlock door opened in front of them. The boarding bridge stretched out between them and the *Dream*, metallic caging them in for the short walk across to the other ship.

Ignoring the vastness of space that surrounded them and the fact the ships were only tenuously linked by what was essentially a thin strip of metal, he strode out across the bridge, the maglocks in his boots clicking against the metal with each step.

Dubois fell in step beside him, her shoulders back and chin up in a show of confidence. He could see the tension tightening the corners of her eyes, though. He didn't blame her for the reaction. This was so far out of her comfort zone as to

be unreal. But then again, she was a hostile environment specialist, and space was about the most hostile place a human could find themselves.

The *Dream's* airlock hissed open as soon as they were a quarter of the way across the bridge, revealing a tall, heavily muscled man with close-cropped hair. Davis Tell. One of Cameron's most trusted NOMAD agents. Tell greeted them with a nod and half-smile as they stepped through into the airlock, the distinctive pressure of a forcefield explaining why Tell wasn't wearing a suit.

"Tell. Good to see you," Cam said as he stepped aboard, offering his hand to the other man.

"Likewise, sir." Tell shook his hand and then stepped aside, gesturing for them to enter.

Cameron's boots clanked against the metal floor of the *Dream*.

The ship smelled of grease, sweat, and something sharp and alien. His gaze traveled over the narrow corridor, noting the differences in technology and design. Everything was harsh angles and exposed piping, as though form didn't matter to the Reapers. Only function.

A rumbling growl sounded behind Tell. Cameron looked around him to find a man mountain. Nearly seven feet of muscle and fangs glared down at them.

Cam smiled.

"Covak Vorr. It's a pleasure to meet you finally," he said as he offered his hand.

Covak glared down at Cameron's outstretched hand for a moment before grasping it in his massive paw-like one. Cameron squeezed, putting some of his considerable strength behind the handshake.

Covak's eyes narrowed, and he let out a surprised grunt.

"And here I was, thinking humans were puny." Covak's voice was a deep rumble. So deep Cam suspected he was only

hearing half of it, and the other half was beyond human hearing. “But you have strength.”

Tell snorted. “He’s stronger than he looks. We’re not all puny.”

Covak sniffed, dismissing Tell with a shrug of his broad shoulders. “You’re special. Definitely more Latharian than human. Perhaps some ship crashed, and the humans never found it because your father was obviously Lathar.” His dark eyes slid back to Cameron. “Like you, I think.”

Cameron’s lips quirked. “You’re half right. It turns out that some humans have a higher percentage of Latharian DNA.” His gaze flicked to Tell. “And honestly? Some of us are just plain crazy.”

“Sparky?” Tell guessed.

Cam nodded. “Sparky.”

“Have you heard from the crazy son of a bitch recently?” Tell asked and then slid a look at Covak to explain. “Sparky is the kind of crazy that *other* crazy sidles away from. I wouldn’t trust him with a spoon. Not even a blunt one. He’d find some way to blow it up.”

“Not in as many words.” Cam chuckled. “But I hear he’s in the same game as you are now.”

Tell’s mismatched gaze tightened on him. “Oh? How so?”

“My sources say he’s running with a mercenary team called the Warborne?”

“The Warborne?” Covak threw back his head and laughed, the sound reverberating through the narrow corridor. “Crazy can be good. Keeps enemies guessing. Reapers and Warborne need high levels of crazy.”

His gaze sharpened, appraising Cameron with new respect. “You are not what I expected, human. I think this will be an interesting trip.”

Cameron met the Vorratan’s piercing stare head-on. “I aim to keep things interesting, Covak. Now, shall we get down to business, gentlemen?”

Covak nodded, gesturing them down the corridor. “If you’ll follow me. Ryke wants to see you.”

The Vorratan turned and lumbered down the corridor, Tell falling in step behind him. Cameron glanced at Dubois, who was staring after Covak.

“Still think this was a good idea?” he asked her wryly.

She tore her gaze from the shifter’s broad back and sighed. “Ask me again when we get your girl back, sir.”

Cameron huffed a laugh. “Fair enough, Major. Fair enough.”

THERE WAS a *vaarking* bomb on board.

They were *vaarked*. Utterly *vaarked*.

Lynara paced back and forth, her breaths shallow and quick. She paused halfway and forced herself to take a deep breath, holding it for a few seconds.

The dim light flickered above, casting eerie shadows on the stark walls. She clenched her fists, and glared toward the bars at the front of the cell.

They’d taken Savaar a few hours ago and hadn’t brought him back yet.

She paused her pacing, pressing a hand over her heart as she closed her eyes, her stomach clenching at the thought of what could have happened to him. She couldn’t think of that now. She needed to find a way out of here. Even though more years than she wanted to think about had passed since her time, starship design didn’t seem to have changed *that* much.

Which meant that a shuttlebay would be somewhere, or failing that, escape pods. In other words, there were ways off this ship and she intended to find one.

“Come on,” she murmured under her breath as she traced her fingers along the seams of the wall plating. There had to be some weakness or flaw she could exploit.

The air in the cell was stagnant, heavy with the scent of rust, as though this area of the ship hadn't been used in a long time. That was good... for her. It meant something down here might not have been maintained correctly. She scanned the room, looking for anything she might have missed before. But as always, her gaze was drawn back to the ventilation grate high above her, taunting her with the promise of a way out. She gritted her teeth, frustration simmering as she eyed the bench and waste bucket; the only objects in this wretched place.

All she could do was try and use what she had. So she dragged the bench over to the wall beneath the grate. Balancing precariously on the cold metal, she reached up. Even if she could touch it, there was no guarantee her reduced strength would be enough to pry it loose. But she had to try. She strained and her fingers brushed the edges of the grate. Another burst of frustration rolled through her. If she'd been her normal height, this wouldn't have been a *vaarking* problem.

"Come on," she hissed through clenched teeth, every muscle quivering with exertion as she tried to twist the rusted bolts. They remained stubbornly in place, refusing to budge even a fraction.

"*Vaark* it!" she hissed, slamming her hand against the unforgiving metal.

"Struggling, are we?" The voice was smug, dripping with malice and satisfaction. She turned and dropped to sit on the bench. Opaas stood just beyond the bars, a sneer twisting his lips.

"I don't know why you bother. Nothing you do will make a difference," he gloated. "We've already cracked the code on the ancient weapon."

Lynara narrowed her eyes, rage boiling within her veins. "If that were true, Savaar and I would be dead already," she shot back, unwilling to bend to his posturing.

He laughed, the sound echoing through the cell. The sinister sound sent chills down her spine.

“Oh, you didn’t know? The mongrel cur is already dead.” He grinned, his eyes cold and cruel.

“Like *vaark*,” she threw back, denial stabbing at her heart like icy daggers. No, he was lying. Savaar was alive. He had to be alive.

“Believe what you will, but the truth remains.” He shrugged, his smile twisting wickedly. “As soon as we realized that the mongrel wasn’t the key to activating the weapon... well... it was a miscalculation on our part. One easily rectified.”

Her eyes widened. So they *had* known about the DNA lock, but they’d thought *Savaar* had the knowledge and DNA required to activate the ancient technology. But they were wrong. They needed Cameron, the descendant of the K’Daar prince who owned the weapon. She stared at the purist leader, her mind racing as she pieced together their plan.

“I see you understand now,” the leader said, his gaze locking on to hers with predatory intent. “You, on the other hand are from that era. *You* have the knowledge we seek. And your mate, the human president, has the DNA that will unlock the weapon.”

The truth hit her like a punch to the gut. They’d captured Savaar in error and killed him because of their mistake. Now they planned to use her to trap Cameron... to force him to activate the weapon for them.

She clenched her fists tightly, nails digging into her palms as she tried to contain her anger. How many more people would die because of these assholes?

“Go to hell,” she spat. She would not give this *vaarker* the satisfaction, nor would she help him, no matter how dire her situation.

“Your defiance is amusing but ultimately futile.” The purist leader sneered. “You will help us or suffer the same fate as your mongrel friend. Bring her.”

He motioned to the guards behind him.

She hissed and backed up into the corner as they entered the cell, rounding on her. They seized her roughly by the arms and dragged her toward the cell door. Their hands were like iron vises, merciless and unyielding.

“Move,” one of them growled when she dug her heels in, punctuating the command with a brutal shove.

They dragged her down the dimly lit corridor as her heart hammered in her chest. She noted everything about the route they took; each turn, how many steps, even the markers on the walls. Anything that might help her find a way out of this nightmare.

“*Abomination.*” One of the guards shoving her along sneered, tightening his grip on her arm. “You’re weak. Pathetic. Your precious president won’t stand a chance against us.”

“Shut up!” she spat back defiantly. Her captor only laughed, a cruel sound devoid of humanity.

“Keep moving!” the other guard barked.

They dragged her around a sharp corner, and suddenly the corridor opened up into a vast chamber. She was pushed through the door. A group of people stood up ahead, and she was shoved toward them. They parted in front of her, and her eyes widened as she saw who was in the middle of them...

Cameron stood in the *Dream's* airlock again, but this time was very different from when he and Dubois had arrived. For a start, this was not the normal boarding airlock of the mercenary ship but a combat one on the dorsal side of the ship instead.

He was dressed in one of Tell's spare combat uniforms—fortunately the two of them were a similar height and build—with an alien combat rifle in his hands.

“Are you sure about this?” Dubois asked in a low voice, watching him as he checked the weapon over. “Going in there alone. That's...”

Cam's lips quirked. “Insane? Suicidal?”

“Both?” She shook her head. “There are rumors...”

He arched his eyebrow, waiting for her to finish her thought.

“About you.”

He rather thought that was what she'd meant, but he kept silent, knowing what was coming.

“You weren't just a politician before. Were you?” she asked, blunt as ever.

He looked up, caught her gaze, and shook his head. “Let's say I've had to be a lot of things in my career. Mostly as a cover to get to another objective. Being a politician... let's just say that's one of them.”

She nodded. “So this... kicking ass, this is what you are really?”

He inclined his head. She deserved to know, especially since Savaar’s life was on the line as well. Plus... it was the only way he’d convinced her to stay back and come in with the Reaper team.

“This is what I do. This is what I’m good at,” he said in a low voice, his words almost drowned out by the sound of the cutting arcs just beyond the airlock door above their head carving through the hull of the enemy ship. “This is what I was born to do.”

She nodded. “Just don’t get killed.”

He chuckled and tilted his head so the light caught the scars across the side of his face. “Someone tried that once. It didn’t take.”

She gave a small grunt. “Yeah, well make sure you don’t. I don’t want to have to explain to Ortega why I didn’t bring you back. She’s one scary lady.”

He grinned. “Yeah, she is. Isn’t she? At least Earth is in safe hands while we’re out here, though. Can you see her dealing with the emperor?”

A small bark of laughter escaped Dubois, her eyes twinkling with amusement. “Oh god, I’d pay good money to see that.”

“We could sell popcorn,” he suggested.

“Televise it.” She nodded, still grinning. “Could be a whole new career after all this is over.”

“We’re about all the way through their hull now,” Ryke, the Reaper leader, said, interrupting their conversation.

“And you’re sure they don’t know we’re here?” Cam asked.

It seemed amazing to him that not only had the mercenaries tracked down the purist ship that had taken Lynara and Savaar so quickly, but they also had been able to sneak up on them without the purists realizing.

Ryke gave him a look that suggested Cam had just insulted his parentage. “There’s no way they could. These assholes aren’t well-funded, so they’re running a Mark 4 sensor array.”

Cameron raised an eyebrow in question and Ryke grinned. “The *Dream* can fool even a Mark 11 array. As far as they’re concerned we’re just space rocks and dust.”

“I can see where that would come in handy, especially in your line of work.” Cam nodded, impressed, and checked the charge on the alien rifle again. It was bigger and heavier than the ones he’d carried before, but he wasn’t complaining. He’d seen the impact these things could have.

Ryke shrugged a shoulder. “Until something bigger and better comes along. It’s a dog-eat-dog universe out there.”

Cameron blinked, and Tell, leaning in the doorway, smirked.

“Their translation matrixes,” he explained, tapping the skin just behind his ear. “They sometimes have issues with the way humans phrase things.”

“What he said,” Ryke shot a look in Tell’s direction. “And I haven’t forgotten exactly how you know so much about humans, Tell.”

The nomad snorted. “As I recall, when I joined, I offered to tell you about my background and experience. You said, and I quote, ‘Can you shoot?’ And that was that.”

“Yeah, well... I didn’t realize you were human!” Ryke shot back, frowning as he concentrated on the cutter controls in front of him. “I just thought you had like a birth defect or something with your weird eyes. I wanted to make sure you weren’t blind.”

In response, Tell flicked Ryke the bird behind his back.

“I saw that!”

“Just checking you’re not blind, boss.”

“Fuck you.”

The banter was so familiar that Cam was forced to hide his grin. He'd been a little concerned when he'd sent Tell out here on his own with the order to infiltrate an alien paramilitary organization. But now he could see that Tell was at home here in a way he had never been among humans.

"Okay," Ryke said in satisfaction, folding the cutter controls away. "We're through."

"Go gett'um," Dubois murmured, touching his arm once before stepping back next to Tell. He could tell by her expression that she wasn't happy about him going in on his own like this, and he had to admit, it was a crazy plan.

Board. Get captured. Get taken to the purists' leader. Find Lynara and Savaar that way.

Yeah, put like that, it really *was* a crazy as fuck plan. For a normal person...

He wasn't a normal person.

He had been many people in his life, and Cameron Murphy was just the latest iteration. The people he'd had to be before... well, he'd been whoever he needed to be from that first night on the street when he and his sister had escaped the kids' home. He'd been a killer long before he'd had any kind of combat training.

He gripped the rifle and looked at Ryke. "You wait for my signal. Understand?"

The big mercenary nodded. "Of course. This is your show. You're paying us enough."

With that, he pressed a button, and the airlock door above Cam's head rolled away, the platform under his feet lifting him up through the damaged hull and into the corridor above.

He pivoted, the alien rifle in his shoulder, checking both directions. It was clear, so he moved away from the boarding point quickly, his path taking him deeper into the unfamiliar ship. Fortunately this ship design was Imperial originally and one the Reapers were familiar with, so Covak had been able to supply him with a deck layout. He'd memorized it and now

worked his way quickly to one of the more populated areas of the ship.

He didn't think. Didn't allow himself to think. But somehow, Lynara managed to find her way into his thoughts anyway. Grim determination filled him. He'd been through countless combat scenarios, defied death more times than anyone could count, and emerged unbroken from the ashes of battles. This mission was just another battle, standing between him and what he needed to protect. There was no room for error.

He emerged onto a new corridor and exhaled slowly, tamping down the grim smile. The game was about to begin. Between one heartbeat and the next, his lethally silent, predatory movements disappeared. Footsteps that had been silent before, whispering over the deck plating and leaving nothing more than a movement of air in their wake, became heavy and clunky.

He brushed a pocket with his arm, and the bits of metal he'd shoved in there rattled. He'd become a caricature of a commando, the president playing hero to rescue the woman he loved on an ill-fated mission. His thoughts caught on that for a moment. He loved Lynara. The stark truth hit him broadside at the same time as he heard shouts up ahead along with the sound of footsteps running toward him.

"You either got lost or you're really *draanthing* stupid, human." A voice growled behind him, and he turned, comically slowly, a look of surprise on his face at the armed guards behind him.

"Just passing through," he retorted casually, playing up the act. "Thought I'd drop in."

"Find the rest of them!" The troop leader snarled, sending three of his men running back off down the corridor. Cam hid his grin. They were delusional if they thought they'd find the Reapers that way.

"Move!" the purist ordered, as two of them rounded on Cameron. He gave *the* worst possible playact of a fight against

them and then relinquished control of his limbs with a lack of grace that betrayed no signs of his prior combat experience.

He allowed his rifle to be yanked from him, letting them grab his arms. The look of cocky confidence on his face dissolved into a look of sudden fear—an act worthy of the stage.

“Our lord wants a chat,” snapped one of his captors, yanking him hard enough for him to wince convincingly.

Cameron cringed noticeably, a pitiful expression etched sharply onto his features as they manhandled him down the sickly luminescent corridors and toward the heart of the purist ship.

He hid his grin as one of them shoved him, sending him half stumbling to the floor before he picked himself up.

Things were going perfectly to plan.

THE GUARDS KEPT GOING, shoving Cameron through the myriad of corridors and finally through a towering archway into a grand main hall. The cavernous inferno was typical of the interior of Latharian ships, but instead of the soft, ambient lighting he'd seen before, overhanging lights were strung lower to create a net of harsh light for them to walk under. It threw twisted shadows over the hostile faces of those present.

He scanned the assembled crowd and dismissed them. Soldiers assembled for their leader to show off. They were of no interest to him. Instead, the two figures on their knees at the other end of the hall hijacked every ounce of his attention.

Lynara and Savaar.

Even in chains, they weren't defeated, defiance written into every line of their bodies. Lynara turned her head, and her gaze connected with his, fire flashing in her eyes. He scanned over them both, relief punching through him that they were alive and relatively unharmed.

Savaar listed slightly to the side, one of his arms pulled tightly into his side, and the bruises across his skin told of

brutal handling by the purists. Lynara looked better off, her skin clear, but the sight of her with heavy manacles around her slender wrists fed the inferno of fury within him.

He beat it down. He couldn't let that rage free yet. He stumbled along, his shoulders bowed as though defeated, even though all of his instincts recoiled at his playacting and the charade of surrender.

He glanced around the room as rough hands shoved his shoulder, pushing him forward. His body swayed with feigned subjugation as he tripped clumsily over his own feet, much to the amusement of surrounding purists.

“Dumb human!” the one behind him jeered and shoved him to the deck again, forcing him to catch himself on his hands. “Did you really think we wouldn't notice you trying to sneak aboard the ship?”

Pain blossomed where his palm struck the cold deck plating, and he played it up, hissing in pain. He cradled his “hurt” hand with the other, which brought another bout of cruel laughter from the gathered purists as he got to his feet again.

He was paraded the length of the hall, growls and threats from the guards behind him barely heard as he was shoved toward his friends, toward the woman he loved, and forced to his knees.

Lynara looked at him again, her eyes glistening with defiance, but beyond that... relief. It was there and gone in the blink of an eye, but he saw it. She was pleased to see him even though he knew the captain in her would ream him out later for putting himself in danger.

Then she inclined her head, blinking and blanking her expression. He looked toward the front, biting back his grin. She'd seen what every purist in the room hadn't.

She knew he wouldn't be here without a plan—a *hell* of a plan. He wasn't just a single crazy human with a death wish on a suicide mission. Well, he *was* crazy... in a very specific sort

of way, and these purist assholes were about to find that out to their cost.

Savaar knelt on the other side of her, his back straight and shoulders drawn back despite his injuries. From the corner of his eye, Cam saw his muscled arms tense, as if he fought the need to try and tear through the restraints there and then.

Cam settled back on his heels, giving what he hoped looked like a scared glance around the room as his fingers brushed the underside of the new bracelet on his wrist.

It wasn't time to spring the trap. Not yet. The major player wasn't here. Oh, the stage was set for sure. The big hall, the prisoners in chains, and the audience behind them... it was all worthy of a high-stakes, high-budget holo-movie. And they were almost at the point where the villain of the piece made his grand entrance. A sense of anticipation hung in the hall, the assembled crowd talking among themselves and sending hate-filled glares toward the captives in chains. He'd heard stories from the Lathar about the purists, but this was the first time he'd actually come face to face with them. Their xenophobic hatred was... unsettling.

Then a sound rang through the hall, like a bell, and the crowd straightened up, all looking toward the three captives and the end of the hall. The air crackled with anticipation.

"Now all your nightmares become reality, *human*." The guard behind Cameron sneered as the wall at the end of the hall began to move, a section revolving as another began to extend, creating a dais. He almost rolled his eyes as a shadowy figure in a cloak was revealed, backlit for drama.

"*Our leader!*" the male behind Cameron and his fellow captives bellowed, to be met with an answering roar from the crowd.

Cam's eyes narrowed as he studied the figure on the dais. The purist leader's head was down, but something about the way he held himself just seemed familiar. The crowd in the hall chanted, stomping their feet. The sound reached a crescendo, and he turned with a dramatic flourish of his cape, unseen spotlights picking him out.

Taavik.

Cam's eyes widened and Lynara's gasp was echoed by Savaar's growl.

But this was not the colleague who had explored the *Elysium* with them, the historian filled with awe and delight at uncovering secrets from the past. Instead, the man who strode toward them was as different from that Taavik as night was to day. His expression was hard, and a cruel smile curved his lips as he strutted down the steps of the dais, the embroidered cloak that fell from his shoulders swishing behind him.

He preened, visibly preened, as his men cheered, whooping and hollering their approval. He held his hand up, and they stopped. The change was so abrupt, Cameron's ears rang.

"Welcome, faithful!" Taavik roared, his hands held out as if to encompass the crowd. "I have good news! The time of our victory is nigh!"

Cameron assessed him as he took bold strides across the metallic floor. Up close, Taavik's face was stonelike—no hint of remorse, only smug satisfaction. His icy stare bore into Cameron. From ally to enemy, the transition should have been shocking, but it made sense, a cruel final piece completing the puzzle. How the storm had quietened down at *just* the right time... how the enemy squad had found them so easily in the ruined corridors of the *Elysium*. It was because they'd had someone working with them from the inside.

"You *draanthing liiraas* in the grass!" Savaar hissed, throwing himself forward as if to rend Taavik limb from limb. But the guards got to him before he could get more than a couple of feet, wrestling him to the floor, five on one. "How could you?" Savaar seethed, glaring up at his kinsman. "How could you betray your own blood?"

Taavik looked down at him, his lip curled. "As if I could ever consider a creature like you kin?" He sneered. "You were born from an unclean creature. *Oonat*-born!" he bellowed, pointing at Savaar, and the hall erupted into jeers and insults. "You are no kin of mine. You are an abomination. You are *all*

abominations!” He swept a hand to encompass the three of them.

Cameron snorted. “I think you have a gap in your logic. Lynara is more Latharian than you will *ever* be.”

Taavik turned in a sweep of his cape to fix them with a glare. “She ceased to be pure the instant she allowed her DNA to be altered. She became... *less*.” He swept a look down at her. “Which is a pity. Had you managed to retain your true Latharian form,” he told her, “we could have started a new pure version of our species. Born from the last true-blooded female of our kind.”

She spat on the floor in front of him. “I would rather die than have any of you assholes touch me!”

“That can be arranged,” Taavik replied coldly, his gaze sliding to Cam. “And, Mr. President... Humans. So delightfully naïve. How easily you fell into my little trap.”

He didn’t reply, his hands held in front of him by the manacles, his fingertips pressing against the grooves of the bracelet the Reaper leader had given him before he’d left the *Dream*.

“Awww... nothing to say, Mr. President?” Taavik goaded, obviously looking to get a rise out of him.

Cameron gritted his teeth, holding back a retort.

“No... I didn’t think so. I should imagine it’s humbling to realize that you have been outmaneuvered so easily.” Taavik smiled maliciously.

Cameron watched in silence as his former friend indulged in his victory. Taavik strode to the center of the hall.

“Finally, my faithful!” he drawled, his voice booming against the steel echo chamber they were all trapped in, “a new *perfect* age is within our grasp! And all because of a gift from the past!”

He elegantly spun around, a flourish underlining his airs of control and dominance as he held his hands up. The dais turned again, revealing a squat, heavy-looking device. “Behold

the instrument of our enemies' destruction! The thermo-neytriton bomb!"

He savored the gasps that rolled around the hall before erupting into triumphant laughter, a sound that spread through the air like waves of a cruel symphony. His words echoed ominously throughout the cavernous hall as he turned.

"And now we have the key for it!" he all but screamed, turning to point at Cameron. "One of the abominations holds enough DNA for us to take our victory!"

Cameron blinked. Okay, *that* he hadn't seen coming. He was human... with K'Daar DNA. His gaze flicked to the logo on the side of the weapon and Taavik laughed.

"I see you finally realize," he gloated smugly as Cam's gaze sliced back to him.

"You didn't want Lynara and Savaar at all. Did you?"

Taavik shook his head. "I am cursed to be surrounded by incompetence. My troops were meant to pick you and Lynara up, but in the darkness, they took the wrong male. But no matter. With the female in my grasp, you were easy to manipulate into following her."

Cameron groaned. "Which is why you backed me against Daaynal."

Taavik's lips curled back in a sneer at the emperor's name. "Yesssss... K'Saan is an idiot. His days on the throne are numbered."

He sauntered back toward the center of the hall, playing up to the crowd again with an arrogant spark in his cold eyes. "Maybe you wonder what lies behind this magnificent betrayal?"

"Not really." Cameron shrugged. "I just think you're an asshole."

Taavik's eyes narrowed, but his sneer only grew wider. "That's because you fail to see the elegance and beauty in my plan. In one fell swoop I will eliminate those who oppose us and set a new Latharian order in place."

“Said by every self-obsessed tyrant throughout history,” Cam drawled. “Did you practice that speech in the mirror?”

“*Silence!*” Taavik roared. “You are not worthy to even speak to me!”

“Quite the charmer. Aren’t you?” Cameron snorted. “It’s a pity you’re a few marbles short of a picnic.”

Taavik laughed again. Sharp. Pompous. Arrogant. “*Purlease*, Murphy. My plan is utter genius. The emperor and his allies will never see it coming.”

“Let me guess,” Cameron said in a bored tone. “You’re going to destroy all our planets with your new toy?”

Taavik’s grin morphed into a sneer at his question, twisting into something congruous with the cold, metallic ambiance of the ship. “And why not? You’re abominations, sub-Latharian experiments who should never have been. I’m simply repairing the natural order of things and correcting the mistake of your existence.”

“Is that so?” Murphy grinned.

“Humans are so strange,” Taavik mused, tilting his head to one side. “I have you at my mercy, but you’re smiling. Perhaps humans really are as unintelligent as we thought them to be.”

“You want to know why I’m smiling?” Cam’s lips quirked. “I’m smiling because you’re stupid enough to think I came alone.”

The cavernous hall of the purist ship ruptured into turmoil as warriors poured through every door to engage Taavik's forces. Lynara gasped as Savaar dragged her backward out of harm's way, felling the guard behind them as two heavily armored men cut down the other two without mercy.

"Cameron!" she gasped, trying to twist in Savaar's hold. "We have to help him!"

"Believe me. That one doesn't need any help," Savaar growled, grabbing one of the fallen guards and hauling the body to the side of the hall to pat him down, looking for the key to their chains.

She spotted Cameron, just in time to see him charge across the hall, holding out a hand for a blade a—*vaark*, that was a Vorrtan?—threw to him. As though he felt her gaze on him, he turned for a second and their gazes clashed. He winked and then was gone, charging toward Taavik. Her breathing caught—stuck between admiration and dread for the magnetic man who attracted danger like a moth to flame.

"He's crazy," she murmured, dropping to her knees and helping Savaar look for some way to get them out of their bonds. She needed to join the fight. To help. She was an Imperial Navy captain, after all. The only one left. No way could she sit helpless on the sidelines like some kind of damsel in distress as she waited for rescue.

“Who are these people?” she asked, nodding toward the group at the back of the hall, taking on the purists. There was only six of them, but they might as well have been a small army, cutting their way through the purist forces.

Savaar looked up for a second, his eyes narrowing. “Mercenaries,” he grunted, carrying on his search. “The Reapers or the Warborne, for a guess. They’re the only crews crazy enough to take on a job like this.”

A second wave of warriors poured through the starboard bulkhead doors, and their feral bellows stopped her dead in her tracks. She recognized the Vorrta and heard him again, letting loose with their distinctive howl that announced battle was joined. It was answered by the newcomers, the first pausing in their charge to throw their heads back and roar in response. But she didn’t recognize them or the sigil they wore, even as a corruption of the clan insignia’s she’d known. It was completely different, even if they looked like some kind of Lathar.

Savaar intercepted her stare toward the leader of the new group, curtly nodding to report his findings.

“The Izaean have joined Murphy’s push,” he drawled, grabbing her hands to undo her cuffs with the key he’d liberated from the pocket of the dead guard.

She watched them as they cut a swathe across the battle in the hall, leaving purists dead in their wake. They were brutal and ruthless, and she saw fear in the purists’ eyes when they saw them. She squinted at Savaar. “Izaean?”

“Berserkers.” Savaar’s expression was filled with wary respect. “Lethal. Effective. Probably the best allies in a rescue mission.”

“Awesome,” she retorted, rubbing her wrists as the manacles fell free, her attention snagged by the spectacle unfolding at the heart of the mayhem.

In the middle of the hall Cameron exchanged blows with Taavik, their hand-to-hand combat a brutal ballet of violence. Every riposte, every hooked punch was a testament to

Cameron's ferocity paired with graceful meticulousness as he fought the traitorous purist leader. His expression was a mask of hard fury, his eyes cold as he ruthlessly laid into the bigger Latharian. But none of the advantages of his "pure" blood seemed to be helping Taavik. Cameron was that little bit shorter, but he was wider in the shoulder and packed with solid muscle. And as he worked at Taavik's guard with relentless brutality, she could see he was better trained.

Not just that... there was a wildness and rage in Cameron she'd never seen before. Like he belonged on a battlefield. Like this was where he truly lived and the man she knew was a mask he pulled on when needed.

She couldn't look away, all her attention on the man she loved. Her *mate*... That single truth rang within her with a rightness she felt all the way down to her soul.

She loved Cameron Murphy.

With all her heart, mind, and soul.

Tingles washed over her skin, and she rubbed at her wrists again. She loved Cameron.

But she turned away, her expression grim as her gaze fixed on the weapon on the dais. As long as it existed, neither Cameron or Earth would be safe.

They had to destroy it.

Now.

"Savaar," she elbowed him in the side, jolting him from his scrutiny of the battleground. "The weapon."

He didn't need further explanation, his nod immediate as he saw where she indicated. Casting off his own chains, he grabbed weapons from the fallen guards, throwing her a rifle. They moved together, Savaar protecting her flank as they picked their way through fallen purists toward the dais.

The weapon towered ominously among the chaos, two devout purists standing sentry. Their attention was on the battle in the middle of the hall, and they weren't paying

attention to Lynara creeping up the steps at the side. She shook her head. Rookie mistake.

As Cameron and his allies turned up the heat, she chose her moment, lifting her rifle into her shoulder. Two shots later, both guards clattered against the cold metal of the steps, dead before they fell. She slung her rifle across her back as she ran forward toward the bomb.

She glanced over the control panel, determination humming through her veins. Deactivation would take hours, even if she *could* deactivate it. Somehow Taavik had gotten around her lockout, and she had no doubt, if he could do that, he'd figured a way to lock her out.

But... she didn't need to deactivate it. Triton bombs were notoriously unstable, so triggering it to self-destruct should be child's play.

She stepped back a few steps and squared herself, grabbing her rifle and taking aim with a shaky breath. There wasn't time to hesitate or weigh the consequences. Trusting that these modern weapons could puncture the bomb's now-ancient shell, she squeezed the trigger.

The bolt hit dead center, leaving a neat little hole.

She squinted at it. Okay, not dead yet then.

But in the next second, a hollow resonance echoed through the air—an ominous precursor to something uncontrollable. She'd just released chaos and now had to face the maelstrom that followed.

“Come on! We have to get out of here!” Savaar grabbed her, his eyes wild as he dragged her down the steps away from the dais.

THE SECOND CHAOS erupted in the hall, Cam turned and slammed his elbow back into the guts of the guard behind him, the one who'd reveled in taunting and goading him as they'd dragged him here to the hall. His breath punched out of his lungs as he folded over Cameron's arm, but he wasn't done

there. He stamped backward on the guy's foot, feeling bones crunch under his heel and a satisfying wheeze of pain as he tried to grapple with Cam.

With a grunt, he turned, spinning his former tormentor around in his hold. Wrapping his arms around the alien's neck, he twisted and wrenched, snapping his neck in a practiced motion. The whole movement took less than a few seconds, and he dropped the body at his feet and stepped over it.

He scanned the hall, his world narrowing down to his enemy. Taavik stood in front of the dais, the malicious smirk slipping from his face as he looked around. The Reapers had crashed the party, erupting through the doors at the side of the hall to engage the assembled purist crowds in a storm of chaos and fury. Barely had the purists managed to react to the attack from one side before he heard a roar as a horde of Izaean poured in through the doors on the other side of the hall.

Cam grinned at the look of surprise and then sudden fear on the faces of the purist warriors as they found themselves fighting on two fronts. One thing was for sure... they'd never underestimate a human again.

That was *if* they survived today, and he had to be honest; their chances weren't looking good, not with the speed and fury the Izaean and the Reapers attacked. Dubois, in the center of them, was doing almost as much damage as Tell, a big combat rifle in her hands next to him.

He glanced around. He'd been separated from Lynara and Savaar when the Izaean had charged into the room, Raalt in the lead. Cam turned, his heart in his throat until he saw Lynara and Savaar tucked away at the side of the hall. The big Lathar had dragged one of the dead guards away and searched his pockets, looking for the keys to their chains. Lynara already had a blade in her hand.

Satisfied that she was safe, he locked gazes with her long enough to wink, and then he was gone, pushing his way through the fight to get to Taavik.

"*Covak!*" he bellowed, catching the big mercenary's attention. "*I need a weapon!*"

The Reaper glanced at him and nodded, his expression grim as he cut down the two purists in front of him with the blade in his hand. A second later, he flipped it, and it came sailing through the air to Cameron. He caught it neatly as the Reaper roared, the sound animalistic, and headed back into the fray, vicious claws extended.

Cameron followed suit, diving through the crowds and heading for the asshole who had brought them all here. He stalked forward like a hunter after his prey.

“Taavik!” he bellowed, shoving purists out of the way. “Stop hiding and face me like a man!”

The crowds parted, and he finally saw his adversary, standing on the steps of the dais, his chest heaving and the blade in his hand covered in blood.

“Finally.” He sneered. “Do you really think a *human* like you can stand against a pure-blood warrior like me?”

Cameron grinned, the expression deadly. “Oh, I’ll take my chances.”

“You’re an abomination! A parasite.” Taavik snarled, dancing back, his weapon spinning impressively between his fingers as Cameron reached the front of the steps. “You and every other pathetic sub-Lathar cross-breed out there.”

“You’re fucking crazy.” Cameron snarled, attacking with renewed vehemence.

“Oh no,” Taavik chuckled and shook his head. “Focused. Ordained by the gods in this sacred duty to purge the galaxy of the impure.”

“People in glass houses shouldn’t throw stones,” Cameron snorted. “Your bloodlines weren’t pure from the beginning, and you know it.”

“*Lies!*” Taavik hissed. “The bitch knows nothing! Our ancestors were *pure* when they were brought to Lathar Prime by the gods!”

Their blades collided, Taavik pushing him back. But Cameron surged forward. “Afraid to mix your pure blood,

Taavik?”

“Our blood is sacred. It is divine heritage. Not to be sullied by...” Taavik glared, his blade slicing through the air toward Cameron’s head. “...inferior species.”

Their violence waltzed around the room, and they traded blows that mirrored their harsh banter.

“You were one of our team!” Cameron accused. “You’re a V’aant! Savaar’s your *family!*”

Taavik parried, sweat beading on his brow.

“Kin? With an *oonat-born?*” The derision was clear as pane glass and twice as sharp. “Never!”

“And you believe killing us off makes you superior?” Cameron spat between parries. They went back and forth in front of the steps, gaining ground and then losing it.

“I don’t believe it,” Taavik retorted, his voice punctuated with grunts. “I *know* it. Our cause is just and ordained by the gods.”

Cameron lunged, pushing the purist leader back again. His determination heightened when he caught sight of Lynara near the ancient weapon. He couldn’t afford for Taavik to get past him to her.

Cameron fought like he always had—fiercely driven by duty and dedication. But this time it was different. *Something* different crackled under his skin, boosting his strength with every thrust and parry. The fear of loss... The fear of losing *her*.

Lynara. Sharp-minded, braver-than-brave Lynara.

Who was risking her own life to reach the ancient weapon.

His heart thudded in his chest, a heavy tattoo as his moves synchronized with it, love and determination breathing fire into his blood and steel into his bones.

Ducking low, he combated Taavik’s sweeping strike with gritted teeth. Responding with a slash toward the man’s torso,

he forced the purist to retreat. Briefly distracted, Taavik glanced at the stage, catching sight of Lynara.

The distraction cost him.

Cameron pounced. With a roar, he plunged his blade into the center of Taavik's chest. Adrenaline and rage gave him strength, and the blade sank past the armor the asshole wore and deep into Taavik's heart.

He gasped, staggering backward across the steps. Surprise on his face, he touched the blade buried in his chest and then looked up, blinking at Cameron.

"You lost the moment you took her," Cameron snarled and wrenched his blade free.

Taavik crumpled to the floor, a surprised expression still imprinted on his pallid face as his lifeblood flowed in a crimson cascade down his abdomen to drip onto the embroidery of his cape, crushed beneath him.

Cameron watched him with an impassive face. The aorta was in the same place in the Lathar as humans then. Good to know.

A deafening silence blanketed the hall. Cameron dropped to his haunches in front of Taavik's cooling body, his breath ragged. Weren't egomaniacal villains supposed to be unfit, bad fighters? The fight had been a hard one, but he'd done it.

The hushed silence cloaked the hall thick enough to taste, and he stood, turning to look around the room. Purist after purist faltered and stopped fighting, staggering back as they saw their leader dead on the steps at their enemy's feet.

But above the adrenaline-fueled drumbeat of his heart came another sound. Or not a sound, exactly. It was more the silence after an explosion. A moment of pure nothingness that pressed a pause button on the world. He looked around and saw Lynara on the dais, rifle in her shoulder.

His eyes cut to the ancient weapon. There was a single, neat hole in the side, and a control pad on the side was counting down.

Cam's eyes widened.

She'd triggered the self-destruct.

"Time to leave," he bellowed as Lynara turned and ran toward him, shoving Savaar ahead of her.

"C'mon! Everyone out!" he shouted, turning on his heel and making for the sortie points. The hall cleared as the purists scattered and the combined Reaper-Izaean force beat feet for their ships.

Lynara, Savaar, and Dubois ran alongside him, their harsh breaths echoing the final drumbeat of the countdown as they raced down corridors to the boarding points.

The explosion consumed the purist ship in a fiery inferno that blasted through the void of space, a dazzling outburst of white heat that scorched Cameron's vision even behind the reinforced glass window. The silent spectacle rippled through the stars, casting an eerie and beautiful glow on the faces of everyone crammed into the boarding airlock. The shockwave rocked the *Dream*, slamming him against the reinforced walls with bone-jarring force. He clenched his teeth, holding Lynara securely at his side so she didn't rattle around like a pea in a can.

"Look at that..." someone breathed.

They watched in silence as fragments of the destroyed purist ship tumbled over each other through space. Lynara leaned against him, a warm weight at his side.

"We really lit up the sky. Didn't we?" Her voice was shaky, and she trembled against him. He glanced down, his smile faltering at the dark stain spreading rapidly across the side of her uniform.

"Oh shit..."

She nodded, forcing a smile onto her face that failed to reach the depths of her eyes.

"I seem to... have a parting gift from our friends," she whispered through gritted teeth.

"Hold on, sweetheart. I've got you."

He scooped her into his arms and sprinted toward the *Dream's* medical bay, clutching her close to his chest. Every instinct he had screamed for him to run faster, run harder. He had to save her. They'd won, but it meant nothing if he lost her.

"Medic! We need a medic!" His voice echoed through the gunmetal grey corridors of the Reaper's ship as he ran.

He made it to the ship's medbay at record speed and burst through the door. He cradled Lynara gently, her form pale and limp against his chest as he looked around. The confined space was packed with injured Izaean, lying on stretchers or sitting in chairs as they waited for the healers to attend to them. Covak and other medics moved between the tightly packed beds, sorting through the wounded to deal with the worst injured first.

A Latharian male with a scarred face looked up from treating an Izaean nearby. His gaze dropped to the woman in Cameron's arms, and he jerked his head toward the back of the medical bay, handing off his patient to another medic.

"Follow me," he ordered, walking through the crowded medbay and leaving Cam to follow. He didn't argue. It had taken him a while to realize that Latharian healers all looked like they'd been in a bad accident with a chainsaw, but now the man's scars, faded but still there, gave him a measure of comfort. The amount of scarring a Latharian healer had was a direct indicator of how talented a healer he was. And this guy...

Cameron had never seen a healer so scarred apart from the Izaean leader's son, Isan.

"Put her down on the table," the healer said as they walked through a door at the back of the medbay, which turned out to be an operating theater.

As Cameron did as he was told, laying Lynara onto the medical bed in the middle of the room, the stranger stood back for a moment, studying the woman on the bed with cool, clinical detachment before turning his gaze onto Cameron.

“She was hit during the battle?” he asked as he moved to the console nearby and activated the surgical bed.

Cameron nodded. “I believe so, yes.”

He didn’t know who this guy was, but it didn’t matter. What mattered was the intent in his eyes... a firm vow to do everything possible to save Lynara.

At that moment, Covak rushed into the room, stopping at the sight of the gravely injured Lynara and the healer. Sparing a nod to Cameron, the big Vorrtaan moved across the room and took position behind the secondary console. Latharian healers worked with teams to operate. The healer was the surgeon while technicians monitored the surgical bed and readouts, giving him constant updates.

“You have to be careful,” he told them. “She’s not human. She’s Latharian, genetically adapted during stasis, but she wasn’t supposed to be. It made her ill. Really ill.”

The healer looked at him as he drew on medical gauntlets.

“I am aware, Mr. Murphy,” he said calmly. “Just let me do my work.”

His attention focused back onto Lynara while Cameron watched helplessly from the sidelines. The bed initiated and scanned her body systematically, overlapping circles of blue light streaming over her from head to toe in a constant cycle.

The healer rolled his shoulder as the lights in strips on the back of the gauntlets lit up.

“Neural interface ready, surgical unit online,” Covak said from the corner, his alien gaze intent on the screens in front of him. “Ready when you are, Kaas.”

“Do it,” the healer replied. “Initiate link.”

“Link initiated... Transferring.”

The healer grunted as the lights on the gauntlets flared. With nothing he could do but watch, Cameron leaned against the wall next to Covak, his eyes on the screens the Vorrtaan watched with hawklike intensity. With precise focus, the

healer manipulated the surgical bed and its instruments, operating to save Lynara's life.

"Shrapnel's positioned next to her primary blood vessel," he announced. "Keep an eye on her vitals."

Beads of sweat trickled down the healer's neck. Cameron remembered how to pray, but if asked, he couldn't have said who he was praying to. He was just praying to anyone who would listen. Promising anything if they would just save her.

He couldn't bear to look as Kaas operated, but he also couldn't look away. The bed restrained her and turned her to her side so Kaas could see the operating site better. Cam flinched as a beam of energy sliced through her flesh, the area Kaas was working on magnified in the holo-panel above the circling rings of the bed. He winced at the debris dangerously close to the major artery and held his breath as Kaas worked. Just a millimeter or so to the left, and she'd be dead. He gasped as Kaas carefully extracted the shrapnel, but then everything was washed away by a torrent of blood spewing from deeper within.

A curse escaped Kaas's lips as he worked quickly to stem the tide of blood. Cam held his breath, an agonizing lap on the edges of eternity until, finally, the blood slowed and stopped. A minute later the pulses of blue circling the bed slowed, steadying themselves in tandem with Lynara's breathing.

"Okay," Kaas murmured. "I think I got it all. Closing up now."

A sigh of relief punched from Cam's lungs, echoed in Covak's expression as the big Vorratan turned to look at Cam over his shoulder.

"She's going to be fine," he rumbled, his deep voice like a landslide. "You're lucky V'aant was onboard and that he remembers how to be a healer."

Cameron blinked and looked at the scarred Latharian again. "Remembers how to be a healer? What do you mean?"

"He gave it up years ago," Covak replied in a low voice, moving back from the console to join Cameron leaning against

the wall.

“Why?”

Covak’s eyes were grim. “With a past as bloody as his, it’s either you keep hands off death completely, or you court her every day.”

“What the fuck is that supposed to mean?” Cam slid him a sideways look. “I thought Latharians were blunt and to the point?”

Covak gave him a broad, fanged grin. “Yeah. I ain’t Lathar, though. I’m Vorrtaan.”

“I don’t give a flying fuck if you’re the tooth fairy. Why did he give up healing, and why come back to it now? Shit, is he any good?”

“Oh, he was one of the best. Was tipped to be lord healer at one point.” A smile played over Covak’s lips before he added, “And why? Because we don’t get to choose who our ancestors are.”

“What do you mean?”

“Kaas... he’s a V’aant.”

His words hovered in the silence. Cam blinked.

“A V’aant? Does that mean... he’s one of her brother’s descendants?”

Covak nodded but before he could say more, Kaas sighed and withdrew from the neural link. The lights on his gauntlet and his link band went dark as he turned to them.

“I’ve done all I can,” he said in a deep voice. “If she survives the night, she will live.”

EXHAUSTION OVERCAME CAM—BOTH physically from the desperate chase to find Lynara and the fight against the purists and emotionally from thinking he’d lost her—and he fell asleep at Lynara’s bedside.

But his sleep was restless. Explosions and blood haunted his dreams, losing colleagues and the two women he loved—Lynara and his sister. It all blurred into a dizzying sequence of desperate combat as he fought through battle after battle to find them. A rhythmic beeping punctuated his dreams, creating a disjointed symphony as he desperately searched. Then the dreams changed focus, and the only person he was looking for was Lynara.

The sound of a scream tearing through his dreams finally snapped him awake. He jolted upright from the chair he'd slouched into, looking around for the threat. But it wasn't a scream that had yanked him from sleep. Instead, it was a soft sigh from the bed in front of him.

"Lynara?" He was at her side instantly, reaching out to take her hand. It was so tiny and delicate in a way that belied the strength of her spirit and determination.

"Hey, sweetheart," he murmured in a low voice. "How are you feeling?"

She blinked up at him slowly. A frown of confusion creased her brow.

"You're in the medbay on the *Dream*, sweetheart. You're safe," he told her softly, answering her unasked question.

Reaching out again, he brushed a few stray strands of her hair from her forehead. It was just an excuse to touch her, but right now he didn't care. She was here, alive, and that was all that mattered.

She gave him a small smile, the corners of her mouth barely lifting. Her skin was still pale, reminding him how close to death she'd come. As if he needed one with her surrounded by the high-tech alien medical equipment.

"Did... did we do it? Did we destroy the ship?"

"We did," he assured her. His grip on her hand tightened as he entwined his fingers with hers. The silent gesture said more than he could manage at the moment.

She looked up at him, her expression tortured.

“I...the weapon...” She started and then faltered, struggling against the fatigue tugging at her eyelids. “I’m sorry. I couldn’t let them have it. Even if—”

His heart clenched, recognizing the guilt marring her face. It was an echo of his own when he’d carried her, injured, through the ship corridors.

“Shhh,” he said gently, placing a finger against her lips. “You don’t have anything to apologize for. You did what you had to do. That weapon...it was dangerous, uncontrollable. We couldn’t risk it falling into the wrong hands.”

“But I could’ve killed everyone,” she murmured.

“I’d have done the same,” he told her.

“But I could have killed *you*.”

The tears sparkling in her eyes pulled at his heartstrings.

“Hey.” He caught her face between his hands gently. “You could have killed *you*. And if you’re gone, there’s nothing left here for me.”

Before she could reply, he silenced her with a kiss. She froze and then relaxed, her hands coming up to cover his on her face. He lingered a moment longer before pulling back, and his gaze locked on hers.

“I love you,” he whispered.

“Say that again,” she demanded, her grip on his hands tightening.

He’d stopped taking orders from anyone years ago, but this one he obeyed without hesitation.

“I love you, Lynara Varaant. I have from the moment I saw you in that damn pod.”

Her eyes shimmered with unshed tears as she returned his gaze.

“Ever since I first saw you... I think I fell for you,” she admitted softly.

A smile spread across his lips. “That’s unexpected, considering your first reaction was to punch me.”

Amusement sparkled in her eyes. She chuckled and then winced slightly. “Well, when I first saw you, I thought you were Dariel... And I loathed him to my core.”

His laughter dwindled into a softer smile.

“You’ve got to admit, there is an uncanny resemblance.” He chuckled, his free hand rubbing self-consciously at his chin. Savaar had shown him a portrait of one of the K’Daar princes drawn from the Latharian’s ancient archives. He couldn’t deny the uncanny resemblance.

“I did worry,” he admitted, “that your hatred of him would cause a problem for us.”

“You mean because you look like him?” She shook her head. “I stopped thinking of you as a copy of him not long after we met. You might look like him physically, but you... your personality, your morals, and ethics? You’re *nothing* alike.”

Her gaze held him captive as his thumb stroked gently on the inside of her wrists.

“Say it,” he demanded softly. “Please. I need to hear the words.”

“I love you,” she said with a soft smile, sincerity in her soft proclamation. “From the moment I tried to punch you... I love you now... and I will love you beyond my last breath.”

“SHE SHOULDN’T BE MOVED.”

Kaas V’aant blocked the doorway to the medbay, a fierce expression on his face and his arms crossed over his broad chest. To anyone who wasn’t used to dealing with Latharian warriors, he would have been a fearsome sight.

Cam, however, *was* used to dealing with Latharian warriors. More than that, he was used to dealing with the Latharian emperor, Daaynal, possibly *the* most infuriating and stubborn man Cam had ever met... of any species.

“You healed her,” Cam argued, cradling Lynara gently. Her arms looped around his neck, watching the head-butting between him and the healer with a small smile. “Covak checked her readings. She just needs rest now.”

Kaas grunted. “She can get that rest here. Where I can monitor her.”

Lynara cleared her throat. “While I appreciate your concern, Kaas. I’m fine. As Cam said, my readouts are all exactly where they should be. You did a good job. Thank you for saving my life.”

At Lynara’s soft smile, Kaas’s face softened from its stern expression, and he begrudgingly nodded.

“Very well,” he said gruffly. “But if you start feeling any ill effects, you must come back to me immediately.”

Cam bowed his head in acknowledgment. “Thank you,” he said, gratitude a warm weight in the center of his chest. The healer had gone above and beyond to save Lynara, and Cam would be forever thankful for that.

Cam walked slowly down the cramped corridor of the mercenary ship, Lynara securely in his arms. Her color was coming back, though she still seemed a little weak. He looked down at her as they navigated the narrow halls.

The ship itself was no luxury cruiser, all exposed pipes and patched metal, but Cam didn’t give a damn about his surroundings. Lynara was here with him, her breath warm on his neck, her heartbeat thrumming against his chest. That was everything.

They reached the door to their quarters. Cam shouldered it open and carried Lynara inside, gently laying her down on the lumpy mattress that passed for a bed.

“How’re you feeling?” he asked.

“Like I got trampled by a pack of rampaging *vulkars*,” Lynara said wryly. “But better now that I’m off my feet.”

Cam huffed a laugh as he straightened up. “I’ll get you something to eat. You must be starving.”

Lynara made a face. “Ugh, no. My stomach’s still dancing a jig.”

“Okay, no food then.” Cam sat down beside her. “But you should drink something. Stay hydrated.”

“Yes, Doctor Cam,” Lynara teased.

He rolled his eyes but couldn’t stop a smile from tugging at his lips. Her sense of humor was intact, which was a damn good sign.

Lynara reached for his hand, her touch light but full of meaning. “Thank you,” she said softly.

Cam’s throat tightened. He turned his palm up to twine their fingers together.

“Always,” he rasped. Because she was his whole heart, walking around outside his body. There was nowhere in the galaxy he wouldn’t go to find her.

Lynara gently squeezed his hand, her eyes shining. Cam reached out to tuck a stray lock of hair behind her ear, his fingers trailing over the delicate ridge of her cheekbone. She leaned into his touch, her lips parting slightly.

Cam’s heart stuttered. Even bruised and exhausted, she was the most beautiful thing he’d ever seen. He cradled her face between his hands, searching her gaze for any hesitation or uncertainty. But all he saw reflected back was warmth, affection, and desire.

Slowly, giving her time to pull away, he leaned in. Their noses bumped, breaths mingling. She closed her eyes with a sigh. Cam brushed his lips over hers, a feather-light caress. When she made a soft sound low in her throat, he deepened the kiss, his mouth slanting over hers.

The feel of her lips under his sent a spark through his veins. Her hands gripped his shirt, tugging him closer. He went willingly, desire burning hot and hungry inside him. She tasted like heaven and coming home—everything he’d never known he’d needed.

He slid his tongue along the seam of her lips, and she opened for him eagerly. He swallowed her gasp, kissing her thoroughly and trying to convey everything he felt through touch alone. One hand slid around to cradle the back of her head while the other arm banded around her back, supporting her weight as he eased them both down to the bed.

She arched into him, her nails raking down his back. He groaned, the sound deep and nearly feral as he kissed across her jaw and down the slender column of her throat. Her pulse jumped under his lips, and he smiled against her skin.

“Cam,” she breathed and tugged at his hair, bringing him back to where she wanted him. He let her, losing himself in her kiss and the sweet slide of her tongue against his.

Arousal sang in his blood, throbbing through his veins as he pulled her close to kiss her back.

By the time he broke the kiss, their breathing was ragged. Leaning his forehead against hers, he tried to catch his breath.

“Wow,” she murmured.

He let out a short chuckle. “Wow works for me.”

She opened her eyes, and he lifted his head as she brushed her fingers over his cheek.

“What happens now?” she asked, a mischievous smile on her lips.

The look he gave her was loaded with dark intent as he braced himself over her. His cock was hard and heavy in his pants, throbbing to be free.

“Well, that all depends on how well you feel,” he said, his voice a deep growl of need.

Her breath caught, and she surged up to capture his mouth in a fierce kiss. He didn't need to ask again how she felt. It was all there in her kiss. In the need as she nipped at his lower lip, demanding entry. He let her in, the kiss heated as their tongues slid against each other.

She moaned, the sound lost in his mouth as he gathered her close. He felt every kiss, every caress, right down to his soul.

Touch became need, and he rolled to the side, carefully stripping her clothes from her slender form. She'd been healed. He knew that, but he was still careful with her, treating her like she was made of spun glass.

Until she broke from the kiss to growl against his lips. "For *vaark's* sake, Cam... I won't break."

And that was it. Those three words, that demand in her eyes, broke the floodgates. With a growl, he yanked the rest of her clothes from her, reveling in her delighted gasp as the strings of her underwear snapped when he tore them off. He needed her with a force, a depth, he'd never felt before. Like if he didn't touch her, claim her, *right now*, he would cease to exist.

She was naked beneath him within seconds, and his jaw tightened as he looked down at her and drank in her beauty. She'd crossed the galaxy and slept for years for them to meet, to come to him... and his hand shook as he swept it down her side.

"I'm sorry," he groaned. "This won't be slow. I can't do slow. I need you too much."

She smiled up at him, her eyes warm with love.

"Slow and gentle next time," she agreed and slid her hand down his stomach. He'd lost his shirt somewhere as they'd kissed and explored each other, and he caught his breath at the feel of her hand over his skin.

His abs bunched as she went further, a groan rumbling in the back of his throat as she dipped her fingertips under his waistband, teasing the sensitive skin there. His cock throbbed in response, so hard it ached.

"Dangerous games, Princess," he said, his hand snapping out to cover hers, stopping her touching him until he could get control of himself. The last thing he needed was to go off half-cocked and come, like some green youth, before he even got inside her.

She surged upward, balancing on her elbow to kiss along his jaw and nipping at his chin. "They're the only kind I like."

He managed a shuddering laugh and let her pull her hand free. Within a heartbeat, she was undoing his fly, and he groaned as his cock sprang free, eager for her touch.

And touch him she did, wrapping her little hand around him and stroking. Hard. He lost his soul to her there and then, trembling as he braced himself over her. Letting her do as she wished with him.

“Off,” she ordered, pushing at his pants with impatience.

He was only too happy to comply, rolling to the side of the bed and shucking off everything in record time. Seconds later he was back, wedging a hard knee between hers. She parted her thighs instantly, her hand back around his cock. She stroked and teased... sweeping her finger over the head of his cock to collect the bead of pre-cum and smooth it down over the thick shaft.

He groaned, his fists bunched in the bedding by her head as she tormented him. Then he was done. Before she could unman him, he moved, capturing her hands in his. Drawing them above her head, he pinned them in place, silencing her with a hard kiss. Parting her lips with a sweep of his tongue, he slid his hand down her body, caressing every curve and hollow as he went. She moaned into his mouth, arching up against him as he slipped a hand between her thighs.

A rough groan escaped his lips as he found her hot and wet for him. Rubbing his thumb against her clit, he slid a finger deep, checking that she was ready for him. She whimpered and rocked her hips against him, a silent plea for more. And more he gave her, adding another finger and stroking her clit as he pumped his fingers, scissoring and stretching to make sure she could take him. She was so small and delicate he didn't want to do anything to hurt her. Ever. It would break his heart.

“Oh gods, *Cam*,” she begged, her hands twisting in his grip above her head. “Please, *Cam*...”

He grinned, giving her no quarter as he drove her higher and higher toward her peak. She arched under him, hips rocking as her breath came in pants. Her eyes were dark and

unfocused as she looked up at him and, just as he felt her body start to tighten, he pulled his fingers free.

She gasped, pouting in disappointment, but in the next breath he was there, fitting himself against the slick entrance to her body. Biting back his own groan, he braced himself over her and pressed forward. She was tight, so tight, as he sank deeper into her wet heat. Rocking his hips, he worked himself deeper until he was seated to the hilt, his hips against hers.

Looking down, he made sure she was okay... finding her eyes dark with need as she looked up at him. The sight made his cock jerk deep within her and his heart warm in his chest.

“I love you,” he murmured and began to move.

It wasn't going to take long. He knew that as soon as he pulled his hips back. He surged into her again and again, every inch of his powerful body dedicated to one purpose, bringing her to pleasure. He thrust and then rocked his hips against her. Ground against her clit until she gasped and thrashed her head against the sheets.

“I... Cam, I'm going to—” She cut off with a gasp, her eyes fluttering closed as she shattered apart around him. He groaned as she clamped down on him, the strong internal muscles of her pussy milking his cock.

He managed two more thrusts and then a third, but then his release hit him like a shuttle at light speed. Fire raced down his spine, circling his balls before yanking tightly.

Throwing his head back, he gritted his teeth as he groaned, coming hard in hot pulses of liquid fire. He thrust forward, instinct making him bury himself as deeply as he could in the tight embrace of her body, every muscle in his body locking into place.

Long seconds later, he came back to with Lynara's soft hands smoothing over his chest and neck. With a groan, he rolled over, bringing her with him to sprawl across his broad chest. The movement, with him still inside her, made them both groan.

“That was...” she whispered, nestling against him happily.

“Just the beginning,” he warned her, pressing a soft kiss to her temple. “I hope you ancient Lathar have some stamina thing going on because I intend to keep you up all night...”

The imposing grandeur of the Latharian emperor's "throne room" on Devan Station was enough to make anyone feel insignificant, even if it was one of the main halls in the Latharian section of the base that had been pressed into service.

Ivory-white pillars towered above them. The space was crisscrossed by walkways crowded with people, all looking at her, the last full-blooded Latharian woman alive.

Lynara sucked a breath in, not allowing their interest to intimidate her. She'd caught up on the history of both her people on the journey back to Earth, so she knew all about the plague that had killed all the Latharian women, *and* the fact that she still had the intact genetic sequence that protected her from it. She'd also made sure that Covak, the Reaper's medic, had taken samples from her so that Lathar who weren't part of the empire could also receive treatment to replace the missing genetic information.

Right now, though, she couldn't think of that. Not when the emperor stood on the dais at the end of the hall, waiting to welcome her back to the empire formally. Her eyes widened a little as she took in his towering figure. He loomed almost ominously from his raised dais, making Lynara feel the weight of his authority even more.

Vaark, she was used to big men, but Emperor Daaynal K'Saan was huge and then some. He was nearly as big as Covak, the Reaper Vorratan in the little group behind her.

Cameron was at her side as she walked down the hall, solid and reassuring. His presence comforted her in a way she couldn't describe but needed. They'd spent the journey on board the Reaper's ship, the *Dream*, firmly holed up in Cameron's quarters. They'd barely gotten out of bed in all that time.

They approached the end of the hall, and Cameron paused, the group behind them stopping as she stepped forward a few steps. She cleared her throat, breaking the somber silence in the air. Her words echoed up to the great domed ceiling—strong, clear, and precise.

“Emperor Daaynal, Supreme Emperor of the Lathar,” she said formally. Her voice was steady and clear, echoing off the marbled columns. “As captain of the Imperial Navy starship *Elysium*, I come bearing the conclusion of our expedition.”

She produced an old silver disc from her pocket—the traditional symbol of a completed mission report—studded with the markings of the Imperial Navy, that Savaar had helped her produce with information from the archives.

“My apologies for the delay, Your Majesty,” she added, a slight curve in her lips as she closed the gap between them and offered the disc. “We ran into a few... complications during the mission.”

Daaynal's fierce gaze homed in on her face. She didn't recall the K'Saan family from her time, but his manner and bearing all screamed he was a warrior emperor born and bred. One as dangerous and cunning as the emperor she remembered, Kayan Vorr.

“Captain Lynara Varaant,” he replied, his deep voice equally formal as he reached out and took the disc from her. “Your report was indeed a long time coming but happily received nonetheless. Welcome back to the empire from your *long* travels.”

He grinned suddenly, the expression both charming and dangerously feral at the same time.

“There was some scrambling among the court historians,” he confessed, humor in his eyes. “Finding the correct response to such a delayed mission completion report needed significant dusting off in the record halls.”

A ripple of laughter echoed around the court walls. She smiled, allowing the laughter to subside before she carried on.

“Thank you, Your Majesty.” Her voice carried a hint of grimness that silenced the remaining chuckles. “However, not all the news I bear is good. Unknown to me, the ship’s captain, our expedition commander had secreted an experimental and highly dangerous weapon aboard the Elysium. One that had been previously banned within the empire.”

A deadly stillness settled in the room as the meaning of her words sank in. Daaynal’s countenance seemed frozen, his dark eyes boring into Lynara’s with an intensity that bordered on savage.

“The ancient weapon no longer exists,” she carried on. “It was unstable and posed an immediate threat to all life on board any ship that attempted to harness its power. As captain of the ship that brought such a threat to this time, I ensured its destruction. It no longer poses a threat.”

For a moment, there was silence. She straightened her spine as she kept going.

“Unfortunately, there is more, Your Majesty. We discovered a traitor during the mission to track down and destroy the weapon. Taavik V’aant, one of my brother’s descendants, was leading a dissident group I believe you call purists. He did not survive his treason.”

The court gasped at the revelation as she kept her gaze on Daaynal firmly. From what Savaar had said, Taavik had been respected, even liked, among the court. His betrayal cut deep. Cold fury flashed across Daaynal’s features, and like a lightning bolt ripping through storm clouds, his gaze cut sharply to Savaar. The big warrior met the emperor’s gaze without flinching.

“Your Majesty.” He inclined his head in respect. “It is true. Taavik betrayed us all.”

At his side, Major Dubois reached out to rest her hand on his arm—a reassuring touch that made the marks on Savaar’s wrists make sense. The two had bonded on the way back to Earth.

“The weapon was destroyed?” Daaynal asked, his tone hard. “It should have been brought back for analysis and study.”

Lynara’s gaze met Daaynal’s squarely, refusing to back down.

“As captain of the Elysium,” she spoke up, her voice echoing in the hall, “my responsibility extends to the safety of my crew and everything on board. Including an ancient weapon steeped with volatility and the imminent risk of detonation.”

Realization dawned on Daaynal’s face, his anger visibly receding at the prospect of a catastrophe narrowly avoided. His pale green eyes held hers, the tension between them nearly tangible.

“And why weren’t we notified when this instability was discovered?”

“I didn’t learn of its instability until it was too late. It’s common knowledge that those weapons were always unstable, Emperor.” Lynara countered firmly, her tone leaving no room for argument. “It could have wiped us all off the star map at any time.”

Silence followed her declaration, an almost oppressive weight of its own in the huge throne room. She held her chin high through it all, her gaze never wavering from Daaynal’s. She challenged him to argue with her or her assessment of the situation. Her hard look told him clearly... he might be emperor, but he was not *her* emperor.

“More than that. Taavik and his forces were after that weapon. They *knew* it was there. And we discovered that they intended to use it against Earth.”

She held his gaze steadily as a shockwave rippled across Daaynal's face. "They planned to turn the ancient device into an instrument of war, targeted against innocent lives. Your ships would have been able to get to a safe distance while my planet and my people turned to dust."

"*Your* planet? *Your* people?" Daaynal echoed her words, his gaze boring holes into hers. "You are Latharian, Lynara. You swore your allegiance to our race."

She remained unflinching under his scrutiny.

"Considering I have been on Earth for over two hundred and fifty thousand years," she said. "By our own laws, I could lay claim to being its regent. These are my people. This is *my* planet."

A murmur rumbled through the hall, cut short by Daaynal's stern glance flashing across them. He turned back to her, a frown creasing his brow.

"But... I am not seeking dominion over anything. I simply want to be acknowledged as what I am... both human and Lathar."

"As a captain of the Imperial Navy and an oath-sworn Latharian, your loyalty should lie with your *kin*, not humanity," the emperor bit out.

"And as an oath-sworn captain of the Imperial Navy," she corrected him, "my loyalty goes first and foremost to the welfare of my *crew*."

"You have no crew left!" he all but shouted, his eyes flashing in frustration and his voice loud in the hall. "They *died*, hundreds of thousands of years ago!"

"My mission has only just completed," she argued, nodding to the disc in his hand.

"And while I spent long years in the ice, my crew *became* humanity. They are the face of Earth now, representative of the diversity and resilience that defines, well, *us*." She gestured to indicate herself and Cameron.

“And as the captain of the *Elysium*, I extend my protection to them by extension. So, by arguing for human welfare, I am not deflecting from my responsibilities, I am merely fulfilling them. Plus...” She glanced at Cameron. “I have reasons of my own to want to protect Earth.”

The words hung between them like a gauntlet thrown. Daaynal’s glare was as chilling as marble beneath their feet.

“You’re treading dangerous ground, Captain,” he growled. “Personal matters have no place affecting one’s loyalty. This human...” His hard gaze moved Cameron next to her. “...is complicating your allegiances. You are the last female of our kind. You should choose a more suitable mate to help continue our species.”

Anger rolled through her veins. She straightened her shoulders and matched him glare for glare.

“A Lathar is entitled to choose their life-mate, Your Majesty... It is my choice to make, not yours to dictate. Or has the empire now become the dictatorship your history claims *my* emperor’s rule was?”

“Plus...” Cameron broke into the tense silence. “I seem to have contracted some kind of alien rash. Covak... you’re a medic. Do you think I should see a doctor?”

He held his hands up for all to see his wrists. Dark marks, like *trevanaas* ivy wound around them, drawing gasps from the assembled warriors.

She knew what they were. Mating marks. They’d started to appear among couples before she’d left on the *Elysium*, but she knew here in this time they were far more significant—a sign that a union was approved by the gods. She’d never been that religious, but she’d take whatever advantage she could get.

Just as Lynara braced herself for Daaynal’s reaction, the emperor’s stern mask cracked. The corner of his mouth twitched and was promptly followed by a loud bellow of laughter that echoed in the grand hall. The sound was so surprisingly hearty that it was nearly infectious. His fierce

gaze softened as he glanced at Cameron and Lynara, a grin spreading across his face.

“Now, this really is something,” he declared. His previously hostile demeanor evaporated into thin air as he beamed at them. “I never thought I’d see the day when a human would bear mating marks.”

“We’re all friends here!” he announced to the assembly in a joyful roar. Laughter echoed around the throne room—awkward at first but then gradually warming, thawing the ice from their altercation just moments ago.

Daaynal extended his hand to them. “Congratulations to you both on your new mate-bond.” Then, turning on his heel, he called out orders to his stewards. “Bring in the feast! We eat, drink, and celebrate tonight!”

A WEEK LATER, Lynara returned to the grandeur of the emperor’s throne room on Devan Station. Like before, when she’d reported in at the end of her *very* long mission, she wore her uniform. Not her original one but a new version created from the ancient Latharian archives Savaar was now guardian of and her own memories.

Her service to the empire might have started before human history began, but the royal insignia on her collar and her mother’s badge pinned just below it forged a connection back. She lifted a finger to her collar, brushing over the familiar emblems.

Gathering herself, she walked alone into the throne room, this time not intimidated by the huge gathering that awaited her. Her chin came up and she pulled her shoulders back. She was a princess of the empire, and more than that, she was an imperial captain. The *last* imperial captain.

Walking toward the dais where the emperor awaited her, she spotted familiar faces in the crowd... the hardened mercenary group, the Reapers, stood next to the Izaean wearing their trademark battered leathers. They gave her

smiles and salutes of encouragement, grins from the Reapers and clenched fists held over hearts from the berserkers.

She replied in kind, her fist clenched over her heart as she paused to acknowledge them. Then she walked forward, approaching the dais to stand before it, and the warrior emperor of the Lathar.

Daaynal K'Saan possessed an aura of command that brought simultaneous silence and admiration. Like her emperor, he didn't wear robes of state but warrior's leathers instead of the Imperial Navy uniform Kayan had worn.

A muted hush fell over the vibrant throng as Daaynal held his hands out for silence. A faint smile touched his battle-hardened face as he looked down at her.

She took that as a cue and stepped forward, her footsteps echoing her ascent to a few steps below the formidable emperor.

"Your Majesty," she said. "I am summoned to your presence."

He inclined his head, the simple band of his crown on his brow. "As I have summoned you."

He reached for a small box on the cushion an aide standing next to him held and snapped it open. Within lay a rank strip, resplendent on its velvet bed.

"Captain Lynara Varaant," the emperor said, his deep voice ringing through the hall. "Today marks not an end but the beginning of another journey. In recognition of your exceptional valor, fortitude, and dedication to the survival of the Latharian empire, I hereby promote you to the rank of commodore."

The applause as Daaynal reached forward to unclip her captain's bar and replace it with her new rank was thunderous. She smiled up at him, her throat thick with emotion. She'd done it, made commodore. A couple hundred thousand years late, but she'd done it...

As the applause eased and the crowd dispersed to join their own conversations, Daaynal turned to Lynara, giving her a

look she had come to recognize. It was the same expression that had been on the admirals' faces when they'd offered her command of the *Elysium*.

"Commodore Varaant, I assume you know our need to rebuild the Imperial Academy?"

She swallowed, memories of attending the now long-gone academy and the friends she'd made there filling her mind.

"I didn't, but please go on."

"We've decided to resurrect it," Daaynal said, "And we need someone capable at the helm. Someone with firsthand experience." His gaze held hers intently. "We want you to lead the project. Given that you are actually the only living person who attended an Imperial Academy."

"Well, yeah... that would make sense." She blinked in surprise. She should have *known* that promotion would come with a price. "Honestly, I'm honored by your faith in me."

"But?" Daaynal demanded, his head tilted to the side curiously. "I sense a but," he added at her look.

"I'll do it," she said, holding up her hand before he could speak again. "But only if this academy becomes an institution that accepts and nurtures both Latharian and human training cadets. The teachings must be applicable for both species, reflecting unity rather than segregation."

Daaynal stared at her for a moment, his face carefully neutral. For an instant, Lynara wondered if she had pushed too hard, but then he nodded. His eyes held respect, and then he grinned.

"Agreed."

The familiar scent of Cameron's presence wafted through Lynara's senses even before he moved to her side. His fingers brushed against hers, their hands linking into a silent understanding as he tilted his head toward Daaynal.

"I believe congratulations are in order for you both," Daaynal announced, amusement creasing at the corners of his eyes as he nodded down to the ring on her finger. Heat tinged

her cheeks, and she twisted the ring—a silver band dotted with sapphires—that Cameron had given her, placing it on the third finger of her left hand. It was a promise of their future together.

“Indeed, we’re engaged,” Cameron responded with a shrug and a smirk, a twinkle of mischief flashing in his eyes. “Finally got her to say yes last night.”

His words were casual, but her heart fluttered, her smile skating dangerously close to girlish glee.

“That was only because I realized you wanted something formal!” She slapped his shoulder and then slid her hand down to trace the marks around his wrists.

“I couldn’t be happier to hear that. Who better than our commodore and Earth’s president?” Daaynal announced. “I would be honored to perform your bonding ceremony.”

“We appreciate the offer, Your Majesty,” she said, smiling up at Cameron, “but we’ve decided to follow my own ancestry. We’ll have a human ceremony. It’s closer to the traditions from my original time than the modern Latharian rites.”

To her relief, the emperor accepted her decision with grace, nodding approvingly. “As you wish, Commodore. Respect for each other’s traditions is vital for strengthening our allied bond. May your union be blessed with strength and prosperity. And many children.”

Cameron wound his arm around her shoulders and pulled her into his side, looking down at her like she was his sun, moon, and stars combined.

“Oh, don’t worry about that. I intend to keep her very, very busy.”

EPILOGUE

The promotion ceremony had just drawn to a close. A collective sigh of relief filled the vast space, mingling with the hum of countless conversations. The air was thick with pride and accomplishment as the new commodore moved among them, a newly forged celebrity in the empire.

At the back of the hall, Raalt leaned against the wall with his arms crossed over his chest. He studied the scene, detached amusement rolling through him. Though an outsider might marvel at the regality of the occasion, Raalt saw the theater of it all for what it was—a masterstroke.

Daaynal's decision to promote Lynara after the debacle with the Elysium's hidden weapon had been nothing short of genius. The emperor had transformed a potential scandal into a public relations triumph in one fell swoop. To Raalt, it was always hilarious when the high and mighty played their games of chess—funny because most of them couldn't strategize their way out of a wet paper bag. But Daaynal was different. Despite his reputation as a warrior, he was even more lethal with his sharp mind and charisma.

As he watched the emperor congratulate Lynara, Raalt knew that behind those gracious words lay an intricate web of manipulation and shrewd political calculation. The man was ruthless, but the empire adored him for it. This combination of charm and cunning made Daaynal not just a survivor but a ruler.

A soft glow materialized before Raalt, shaping itself into a familiar form he dreaded to see. *Miisan*. Her holographic form hovered just above the ground, the flickering light failing to soften the stark pull of her emerald eyes.

His jaw clenched. She was the AI version of his former love, Isan's mother, and a long time ago she'd shattered his heart. But until now, she'd never shown herself to him.

"Raalt," she began, her voice as soft as the desert wind as she looked at him, her heart in her eyes. But AIs had no heart. "I wanted to ta—"

"Don't," he snarled. "Whatever we had, it died with you."

He didn't wait to hear her response. Her phantom presence dredged up bitter memories—ones he had buried deep within his soul and refused to revisit.

The bracer on his wrist vibrated subtly. His eyes flickered to the offending device. It was an alert from one of the Izaean listening stations.

Perimeter buoy alert.

He gave it a dismissive glance. Probably space rocks pinging the perimeter alert. Had to be. No one willingly went to Parac'Norr.

Celebratory banners fringed in gold and silver swayed lazily overhead in the conditioned air, and a banquet was laid out. One with enough alcohol that even an Izaean had a better than fair chance of getting drunk.

His comm unit buzzed again, more urgently. He looked down with irritation.

Urgent—Ship crashed...Parac'Norr.

That single phrase stopped Raalt dead in his tracks. Parac'Norr was inhospitable, and the native lifeforms were viciously territorial. It was a death knell for any who dared venture there. That someone had ignored their planetary safeguards to hammer into that wilderness was either due to foolhardy courage or utter stupidity.

“Find me a comms console,” he growled abruptly to the station’s AI, already moving to one of the hall’s exits. It didn’t take him long to find a comms unit in a side corridor.

His fingers moved deftly over the console as he typed in his access code to open up a secure channel. On the holo-screen, a harried Izaean blinked into sight.

“My lord.” He saluted.

“Report,” Raalt ordered.

Taking a deep breath, the Izaean didn’t bother sugar-coating anything. “An unknown craft has landed on Parac’Norr. The northern continent.”

Raalt grunted at the news, scrolling through the preliminary reports on another part of the screen. “Were our warning buoys active?”

“Yes, sir,” came the reply. “Every single one of them.”

A derisive snort escaped him. “Then either they’re plain stupid or else have a suicide wish. The locals will deal with this.”

“Raalt?” Miisan’s voice sounded at his elbow, ratcheting his tension up into orbit. He flicked a glance sideways. Her holographic image was heart-stoppingly beautiful—a shock to his senses, but not in a sweet, endearing way. More like drinking a gallon of adrenaline. It called to the beast within him, adding another layer of tension to an already taut situation.

“Can I help?” she asked, her voice resounding in his earpiece, syrupy sweet. But to him, it was the arching screech of rusted metal ripping through his composure.

“Not now,” was all he could grit out, averting his gaze from her pleading eyes. He felt the stirring again—the blood rage. A primal rage shook him to the core, threatening to tear apart anything that moved.

He gritted his teeth. He couldn’t let loose. People would die. He had to get out of here.

“Wait, Commander!” The Izaean’s voice caught Raalt just as he was disconnecting.

Raalt clenched his hand into a hard fist, digging his nails into his palms to try and distract the blood rage with pain.

“Spit it out,” he ordered sharply.

“A distress call, sir,” came the response. “Before it crashed, the ship transmitted a distress call.”

He tensed at the news; an unseen cord within him tugged taut. His answer slipped through gritted teeth, “Play it.”

A new voice flowed through the console, filling the air around them. Female. It was wrought with fear but laced with an underlying calm, like someone used to being in high-stress situations.

“Mayday, mayday... to anyone who can hear me. We’ve lost engines and any maneuvering capability. I’m trying to bring us down safely, but—”

The transmission cut off.

Every fiber of his being had stilled, silent against the rush of his blood in his ears. His heart echoed her voice like a haunting serenade, calming the storm within him. The woman’s voice struck something primeval within him. He *knew* her. A different kind of rage rose within him...

“Find out which ship,” he ordered, barely recognizing his voice. Compulsion hit him hard and fast. He had to find her. Claim her.

He turned on his heel, pivoting away from the console and stalking away. His course was set—toward Parac’Norr, toward danger.

And toward her.

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- Pursued by the Alien Lord (Warriors of the Lathar Book 16),
- An Alien Berserker for Christmas (Warriors of the Lathar Book 17),
- The President's Alien Princess (Warriors of the Lathar Book 18).

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